

Grizzly Bear Recovery in the Bitterroot Mountains of North Central Idaho and Western Montana

Wayne Kasworm, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and North American Bear Expert Team, BSG

In September of 2007, personnel from Idaho Fish and Game Department and the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) received word that a grizzly bear had been killed in a remote area of central Idaho north of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. The bear was mis-identified by a black bear hunter at a bait site. Officials met the guide that transported the bear out from the backcountry and confirmed it was a young grizzly bear male possibly 4–5 years of age. The event was noteworthy because this was the first documentation of a grizzly bear in this area in over 60 years. North-central Idaho and part of western Montana holds the largest contiguous wilderness area in the lower 48 states at over 15,000 km². The area was one of six identified in the U.S. grizzly bear recovery plan (USFWS 1993). An attempt was made by USFWS to restore grizzly bears to this area in 2000 through use of an “experimental population” option in the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA) that allows a listed species to be restored in an area with fewer of the protections than typically required (Bitterroot Record of Decision 2000). The use of this provision was supported by the fact that so much of the habitat was protected by the U.S. Wilderness Act. The proposal also included provisions for a citizen and government panel that would determine the course of population management as long as it resulted in recovery of the population. The proposal met with staunch opposition from the Idaho governor (Dirk Kempthorne). Governor Kempthorne later became the U.S. Secretary of Interior, a position that oversees the USFWS and the project was never funded. Legal opinions now indicate that if bears repopulate the area naturally, the “experimental” status will not apply and any bears residing there will have the full protection of the ESA.

Since 2007 there have been numerous unverified reports of grizzly bears between the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness and other grizzly bear populations to the north. However, new wildlife research techniques and innovations have allowed greater ability to verify grizzly bear presence. Trail cameras, GPS radio collars, and genetic data from collected hair have provided new insights. Genetic samples from the bear killed in 2007 revealed that the animal came from the Selkirk population approximately 250 km to the northwest. In 2009 a grizzly bear was killed 25 km east of Coeur d’Alene, Idaho by ??? in a case of mistaken identity (Figure 1). Radio collars have allowed tracking of several individuals that have moved from surrounding populations to the Bitterroot Mountains. A radio collared female bear from the Northern Continental Divide population that was involved in several relocations at human conflict sites moved through the area in 2013–14. In 2016 a radio collared young male grizzly bear (924) was killed by a black bear hunter in another case of mistaken identity at a bait site 15 km north of Wallace, Idaho (Kasworm et al. 2020). The grizzly bear was part of the Cabinet Mountains population augmentation program. In 2018 a young male grizzly bear was captured at a golf course near Stevensville, Montana in the Bitterroot Valley just east of the Bitterroot Mountains. The bear was digging and eating earthworms. After capture the bear was moved 100 km to the north because of the lack of a local “agency approved” release site. Another young radio collared male from the Cabinet Mountains population augmentation program (“927”) spent several months in the area during 2019, and a male from the Selkirk Mountains naturally dispersed to the area in the same year. A trail camera captured a picture of a grizzly bear in 2020 about 10 km west of Lolo, Montana.

These documented movements suggest that bears are beginning to repopulate the Bitterroot Mountains, but management programs are needed to allow them to persist in the area and improve

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Commented [CH3]: Someone could read this as E. so you might add in there that full protection is T plus 4d rule.

Commented [TJE4]: Did you intend to more fully identify the situation, rose lake elk farm right?

connectivity to other existing populations. A remote sensing based grizzly bear habitat map for the Bitterroot Mountains south of the Clark Fork River would be a first step toward identifying connectivity areas and inventorying available habitat to the south. Keeping bears alive once they reach the area needs an emphasis. Education programs for hunters could reduce the number of mistaken identity kills by black bear hunters. Montana has a mandatory identification test for black bear hunters, but it is only required once in a hunters life. Idaho has no similar mandatory hunter identification program. Mortalities due to ~~M~~ mistaken identity ~~kills~~ harm the public image of hunting. Identification of connectivity areas between existing populations and the Bitterroot Mountains is needed, along with habitat protections such as maintaining sufficient cover and motorized access management within those zones. Major highways and associated human development can be an impediment to ~~connectivity movement~~ and in worst cases function as a mortality sink ~~for~~ ~~ence~~ bears ~~reaching~~ ~~move~~ ~~through~~ those areas. Habitat protections such as easements or acquisitions on private lands and appropriate highway crossing structures can help bears move through these areas and avoid unnecessary mortality. Bear-wise ~~S~~ sanitation, attractant storage, and small livestock protection in these areas ~~is also important~~ are necessary priorities to keep bears wild and avoid human-wildlife conflicts. Relocation sites need to be identified on the public lands south of the existing populations so that ~~for~~ grizzly bears, like the animal that was preemptively moved far from its dispersal to the Bitterroot Valley, have more chances to reach the Bitterroot ~~Stevensville area~~. These approaches and other approaches collectively provide a foundation for ultimately restoring grizzly bears to the Bitterroot Mountains of Idaho and Montana.

Commented [TJE5]: Reword. "kill harm" together is tad confusing. I took a stab at it.

Commented [TJE6]: accurate? It was earthworms on a golf course, not obtaining secured attractants. Or was he deemed habituated? Might add preemptive context to bear's intro in paragraph 2

Bitterroot Record of Decision. 2000. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2000/11/17/00-29531/record-of-decision-concerning-grizzly-bear-recovery-in-the-bitterroot-ecosystem>

Kasworm, W. F., T. G. Radandt, J. E. Teisberg, T. Vent, A. Welander, M. Proctor, H. Cooley and J. Fortin-Noreus. 2020. Cabinet-Yaak grizzly bear recovery area 2019 research and monitoring progress report. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Missoula, Montana. 105 pp.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1993. Grizzly bear recovery plan. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Missoula, Montana.

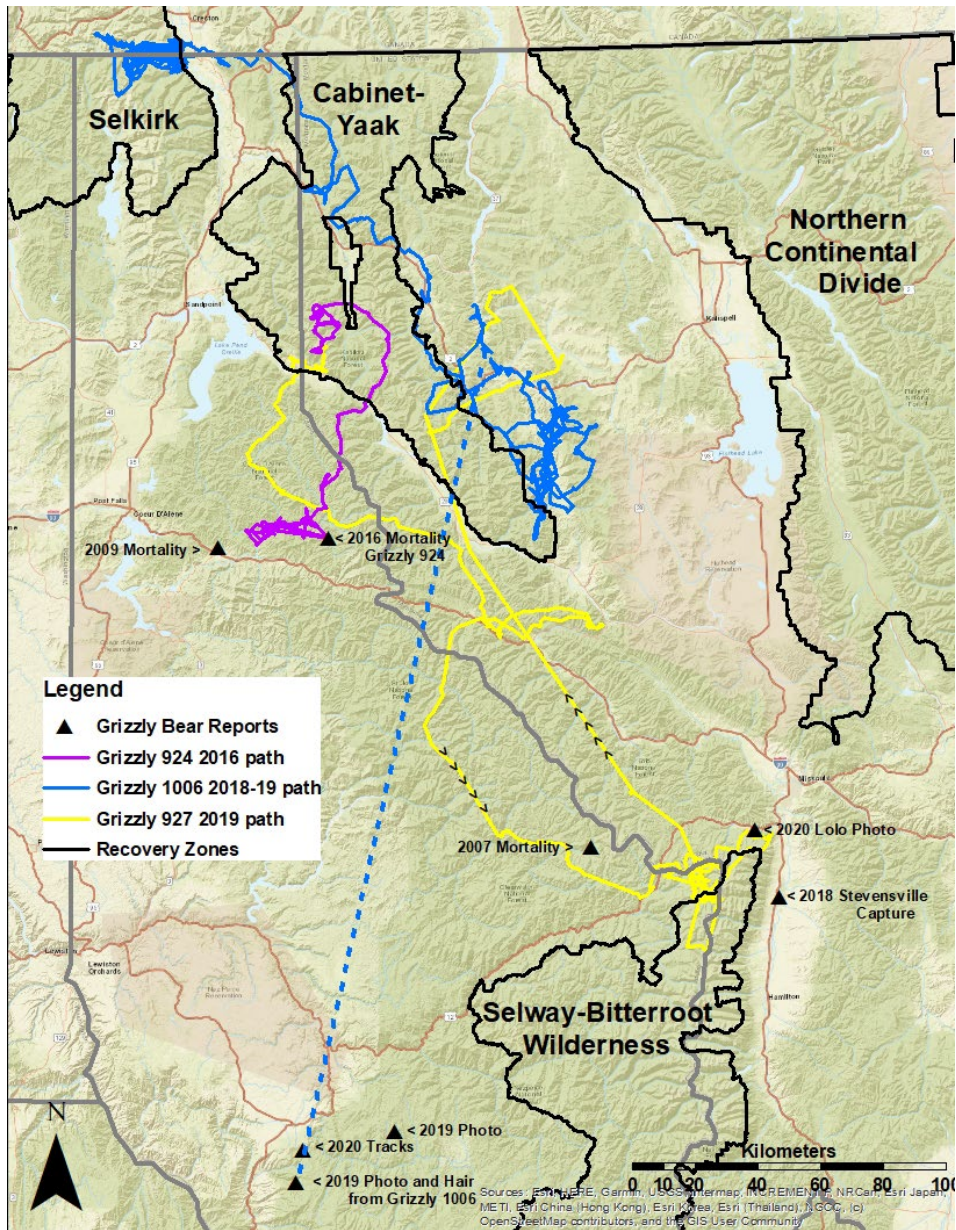


Figure 1. Records of grizzly presence in the Bitterroot Mountains of Idaho and Montana, 2007-20. I also want to add the path of Ethyl.