

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

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### Background

In September of 2007, personnel from Idaho Fish and Game Department and the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) received word that a subadult male grizzly bear had been killed in the Bitterroot Mountains in a remote area of central Idaho north of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. The bear was a mistaken identity kill by a black bear hunter over bait. The event was noteworthy because this was the first documentation of a grizzly bear in the Bitterroot Mountains in over 60 years. The Bitterroot Mountains in north-central Idaho and western Montana contains the largest contiguous wilderness area in the conterminous 48 States at over 15,000 km<sup>2</sup>. The Bitterroot Mountains is one of six grizzly bear recovery areas identified in the USFWS grizzly bear recovery plan (USFWS 1993, Figure 1). The USFWS attempted to restore grizzly bears to this area in 2000 using reintroduction of grizzlies as an “experimental population” (Bitterroot Record of Decision 2000). This option in the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA) allows a threatened species to be restored in an area with fewer protections than typically required. Reintroduction of an Experimental Population was justified by the fact that so much of the habitat was already protected by the U.S. Wilderness Act. The proposal also included provisions for a joint citizen/government management panel that would direct population management as long as its decisions 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 he determined that the reintroduction effort would not be implemented. The listed status of grizzly bears and the failure to implement the experimental population program means that as grizzlies repopulate the area naturally, these bears will have the full protection of the ESA as a “threatened” species.

### Recent Information on Movements

There have been numerous reports of grizzly bears in the area since 2007 between the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness and other grizzly bear populations to the north. New monitoring techniques such as GPS collars have increased documentation of grizzly bears in this area. The combination of trail cameras, GPS collars, and genetic data that pinpoint the origins of bears from hair have provided new insights. Genetic samples from the subadult male killed in mistaken identity by a black bear hunter in 2007 revealed that the animal came from the Selkirk Ecosystem population approximately 250 km to the northwest. In 2009, another grizzly bear was killed 25 km east of Coeur d’Alene, Idaho because of mistaken identity (Figure 2). GPS collars have documented the movements of several grizzlies from surrounding populations into the Bitterroot Mountains. A radio collared female bear from the Northern Continental Divide population moved through the area in 2013–14. In 2016 a radio collared young male grizzly bear (#924) was killed 15 km north of Wallace, Idaho at a bait site by a black bear hunter in another case of mistaken identity (Kasworm et al. 2020). Grizzly bear #924 was part of the Cabinet Mountains population augmentation program (Kasworm et al 2007). A young male grizzly bear was captured in 2018 at a golf course near Stevensville, Montana in the Bitterroot Valley just east of the Bitterroot Mountains. The bear was digging and eating earthworms on the golf course. After capture the bear was preemptively moved 100 km to the north because of the lack of an “agency approved”

release site nearer the capture location. Another young radio collared male from the Cabinet Mountains population augmentation program (#927) spent several months in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness during 2019. A second male (#1006) from the Selkirk Mountains, that had naturally dispersed to the area in 2019, was detected using trail cameras and hair collection. A trail camera captured a picture of another grizzly bear in 2020 about 10 km west of Lolo, Montana.

These documented movements indicate that grizzly bears are beginning to naturally repopulate the Bitterroot Mountains. These movements highlight the need for management programs to reduce conflicts and mistaken identify killings and the need to enhance opportunities for more natural connectivity with other grizzly populations.

#### Future Management Needs

It is increasingly important to keep these naturally dispersing bears alive as they move into and occupy the Bitterroot Mountains. Education programs for hunters could reduce the number of mistaken identity kills by black bear hunters. Montana has a mandatory hunter education program that requires a species identification test for black bear hunters, but it is minimally effective because it is required to be taken only once in a hunter's lifetime. Idaho has no similar mandatory black bear hunter education program. Mortalities due to mistaken identity continue to harm the public image of hunting.

Identification of potential connectivity areas between existing populations and the Bitterroot Mountains is needed (Proctor et al 2015), along with habitat protections in such areas including maintaining sufficient cover and reduced motorized access. 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. Major highways and associated human development can be an impediment to connectivity and in worst cases function as mortality sink for bears attempting to move through those areas. Habitat protections, such as conservation easements or acquisitions on private lands, and appropriate highway crossing structures can facilitate successful bear movement and reduce unnecessary mortality. Food storage regulations need to be implemented on public lands like other recovery areas. Bear-wise sanitation, attractant storage, and small livestock protection on private lands can reduce conflicts and keep bears wild. Relocation sites need to be identified on public lands south of the existing populations so that grizzly bears, like the animal that was preemptively moved from the golf course, can be relocated near or into the Bitterroot Mountains when appropriate. These and other approaches collectively can provide a foundation for ultimately restoring grizzly bears to the Bitterroot Mountains of Idaho and Montana.

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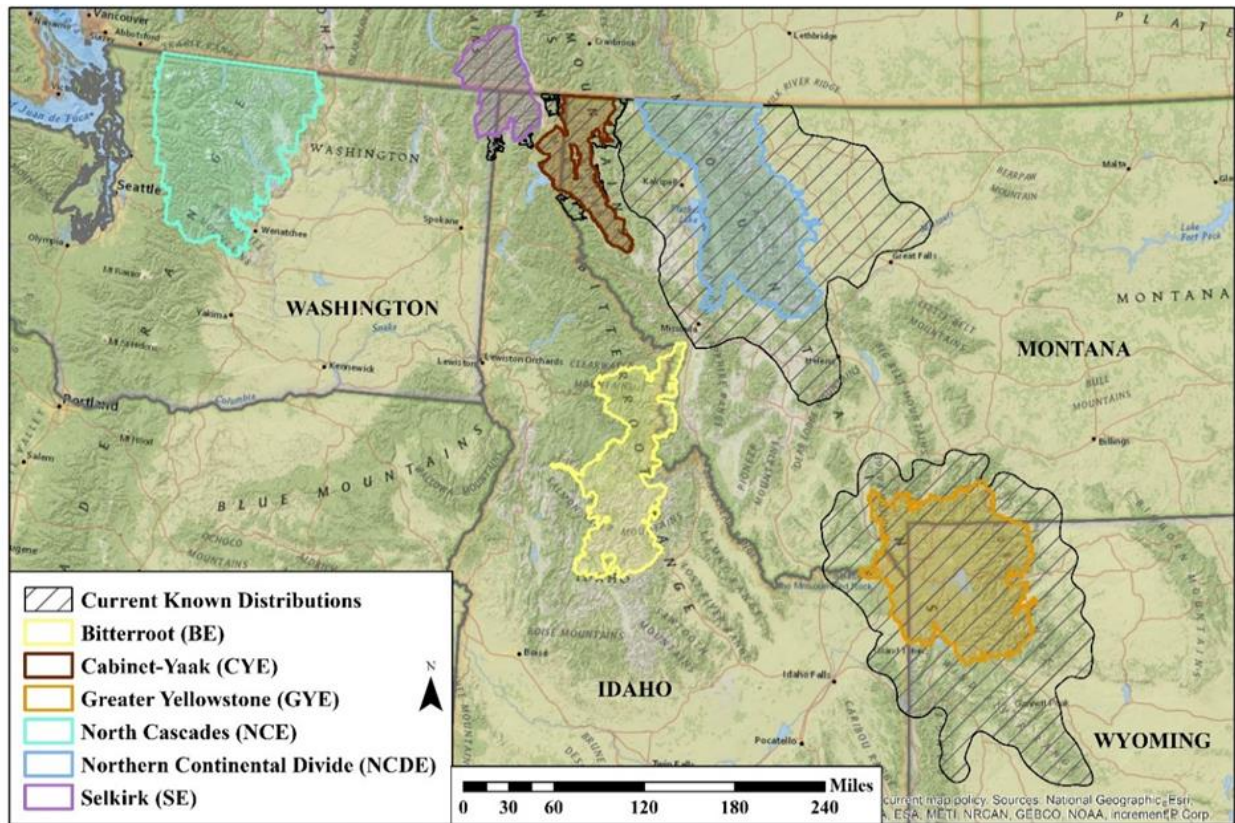


Figure 1. Grizzly bear recovery areas in Idaho, Montana, Washington, and Wyoming.



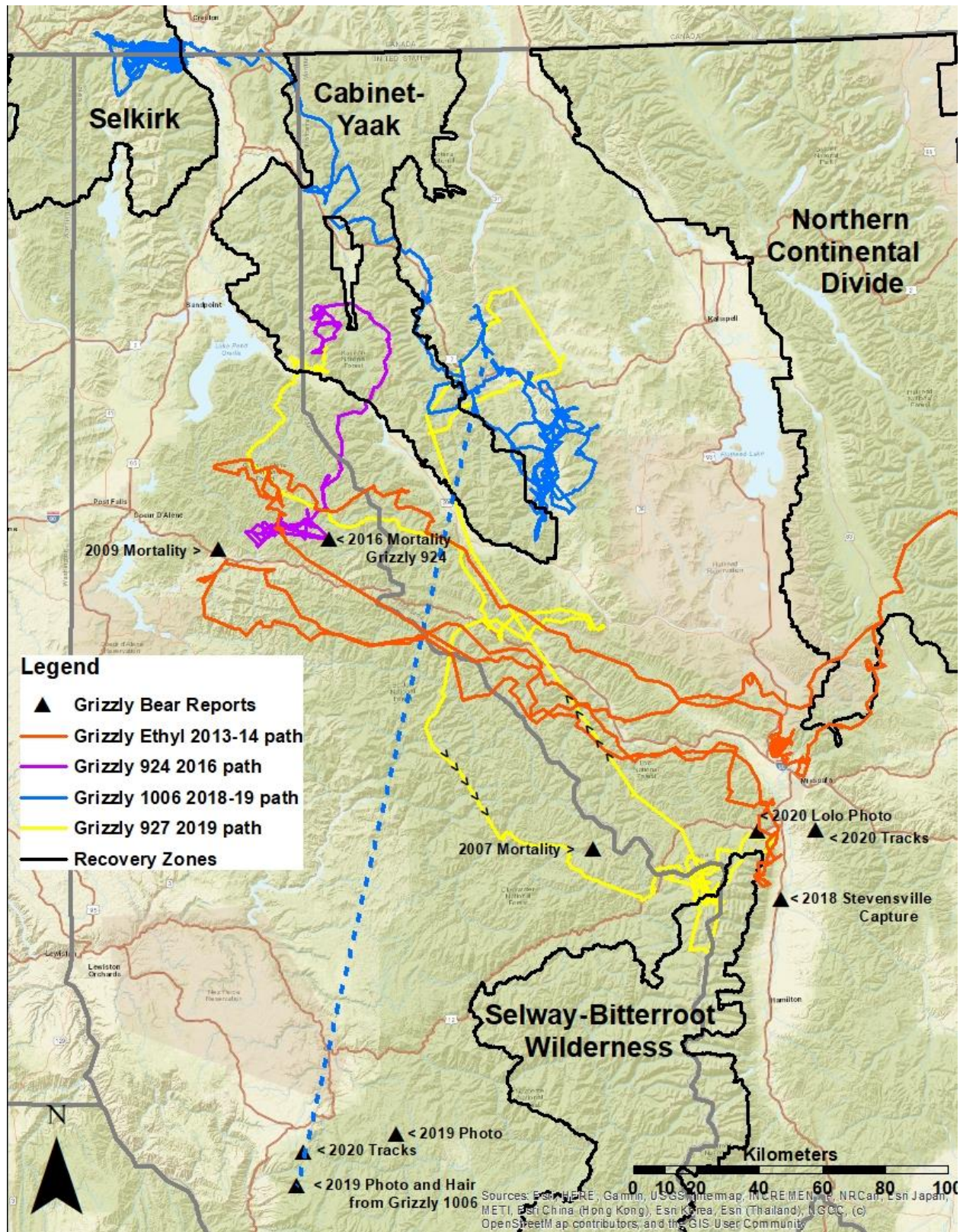


Figure 2. Records and documented movements of grizzly bears in the Bitterroot Mountains of Idaho and Montana, 2007-20.