

SWAN VALLEY BEAR NEWS

SPRING 2006



Changing habitats and human activity threaten bears

By Tom Parker

I began guiding bear hunters in the Swan Valley 30 years ago this spring. I had not been in Montana for many years at that time, but I had spent every free moment exploring this amazing piece of country that was referred to by many as the Heart of the Rockies.

As I explored the Swan and Clearwater Valleys, tributary drainages and surrounding mountains, one thing I understood for sure—this was bear country. Bears were quite literally everywhere I went: black bears and grizzly bears of every color, size and description. Unraveling some of the key relationships of their world has changed my life and notions about many things forever.

I had lived in northern Maine, an area with a high bear density, where I was once treated to observing over a dozen bears while sitting in one spot near the border of Baxter State Park.

In my early explorations of the Swan Valley, it became apparent to me this area held nearly unimaginable concentrations of bears, especially in the spring and early summer, and that as summer came on most of these bears drifted off into the surrounding mountains in search of choice vegetation, insects, ripening berries and pine nuts.

In the summer and fall, I guided and packed in the Bob Marshall wilderness and I began to piece together habitat relationships there along with the ecological connections between the wilderness and front country. As I began to understand the seasonal habits of bears in the Swan, I realized that much of their interest in spring and early summer was associated with the rich and diverse wetland environments, which were not

available in the same way elsewhere on the larger landscape.

This was no secret to the bears. The mountainous areas flanking the valley, though rich in summer and fall foraging habitats, are still largely snow-covered in spring when the Swan

Valley and other lower elevation areas around the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem are green and lush. This helps to explain the spring and early summer concentrations of bears here. When natural food shortages occurred in the mountains in summer or fall, such as poor berry or pine nut crops, many bears would return to the Swan

to utilize foods from the wetlands, riparian areas and other environments.

Many things have changed for bears since I've been observing them here. One of the largest changes has been related to food availability in the mountains and surrounding wilderness areas due to

fire suppression and the loss of whitebark pine. Whitebark pine is a high elevation species responsible for upholding a web of ecological processes.

For bears whitebark pine nuts are critical for

reproductive success and for building the fat reserves necessary to survive through winter denning. Although whitebark pine had been heavily



Swan Valley School children learn about bears

2

By Leslie Hodgekiss, Swan Valley Elementary School teacher

Our 2nd-4th grade class at the Swan Valley Elementary School had a wonderful and exciting time studying about bears. There was a wealth of information learned about how bears are studied, the different types of bears, how to identify species by tracks, and what to do in case the students encounter a bear.

We were able to acquire "Bear Trunks" from the Brown Bear Resources Company in Missoula, and also a trunk from the Fish, Wildlife and Parks office in Kalispell. Each trunk had a variety of items that dealt with bears. There were radio collars, skulls, hides, tracks, books, and many other interesting things. I would definitely recommend these trunks to anyone studying bears in the classroom.

Each student did a research report on a different kind of bear. The bear species researched were: Asiatic black bear, Malayan sun bear, Kodiak bear, giant panda, American black bear, spectacled bear, grizzly bear and polar bear. The students addressed habitat needs, size/weight, diet, description of the bears, shelter and reproduction in their reports. Their written reports included pictures and then each student did an oral report about the information they discovered.

Along with the reports, the students did bear poetry, bear math, and bear stories. It was amazing to see the different creative sides of each of them.

Erin Edge of Brown Bear Resources came to the school for an informational workshop on bears. This was for Kindergarten-4th grade and the 5th-

8th grades. Erin covered identification of bears, their tracks and hides, the differences in skulls between brown and black bears, and what to do in case of an encounter with bear. The students loved this presentation!

A culminating activity that the 2nd-4th graders did for their bear unit was to go to Bud Moore's house and hear about his experiences with bears. The students shared what they learned about their bears with Bud, and then we had a question and answer session. We took a hike to the "Bear Tree" and saw where the bears had scraped the tree and left their marks. The students were amazed and awed by the bear tree, Bud and his stories.

All in all, the students worked hard, learned a great deal about bears and had a fun time.

When asked to recall their highlights from the Bear Study, the students responded:

Keanna Conley: "bear hides, the radio collar, the tracks, the bear tree and the stories"

Anna Stevenson: "Bud's place and learning about different types of bears"

Cheyenne Post: "All of it."

Darrian Conley: "Bear trunks, fur, skulls and doing the bear reports."

Katie Hood: "The bear tree, learning about types of bears, and the reports."

Cassidy Meade: "Bear reports and learning about different types of bears."

Alaina Townsend: "All of it."

Kimberly Kellogg: "Learning about where the bears live."

Bear Resistant Containers: Loaner and Rental Program

The Swan Valley Bear-Resistant Container Loaner Program is now entering its second year. We are pleased to report that last year, all of the available loaner bins (10 bins) were checked out by Condon area residents.

This winter the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee provided additional funding through the Swan Ecosystem Center (SEC) so additional containers could be purchased for the loaner program.

The program is also being expanded to Seeley Lake this year. Residents who take their garbage to

the Seeley Lake dump can now check out a loaner bin from the office at the dump.

We want to express our sincere thanks to the Seeley Lake Refuse Board and the Seeley Lake dump staff for agreeing to house and check out the bins.

The containers being made available through the loaner program have been tested by the Living with Wildlife Foundation and all managed to withstand at least 60 minutes of "abuse" by captive

Continued page 5

Grizzly bear DNA research update

Hair snagging research analysis nearly completed

by Jeff Stetz, U.S. Geological Survey

The Northern Divide Grizzly Bear Project, a massive research project to estimate the size of the grizzly bear population in the greater Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE), has nearly completed genetic analyses of the 34,000 hair samples collected during our 2004 field season.

As of mid May, 2006 we have received results for 81 percent of the samples, and are expecting a large portion of the remaining results by the end of this month. All genetic analyses are expected to be completed by July of 2006.

Three of the six 2-week sampling sessions are complete for the entire study area, with some regions having even more samples analyzed. At this time, 471 individual grizzly bears have been identified in the NCDE, 55 percent of which have been identified as female.

The majority of the individuals (285, or 60%) were identified only through samples collected at hair snag stations, while 69 (15%) were identified only on naturally occurring bear rubs. The remaining 117 bears (25%) were identified in both kinds of samples. See the accompanying map (next page) for information on where and by which method grizzly bears were detected.

Nearly 2,700 samples have been analyzed for the Mission-Swan subunit of the project with 1,300 remaining. The Mission-Swan subunit includes roughly 1 million acres within the Mission Valley, Mission Mountains, Swan Valley, Swan Range and eastern Flathead Valley. Nineteen individual bears have been identified to date, 10 of which are female (53%).

Approximately half of the individuals have been identified through each method of sampling. Many of these bears have been found in samples from multiple sessions and/or subunits, which is very encouraging.

By far the majority of samples collected in the Mission-Swan have been from black bears. We plan to pursue funding and partnerships to get these

samples analyzed further. But this will come following publication of the grizzly bear results.

In April of 2006, we contracted Dr. Pierre Taberlet to conduct an independent assessment of the methods employed by the Northern Divide Grizzly Bear Project. Dr. Taberlet is considered a leading expert in genetic analyses and has pioneered many of the techniques used in this kind of work.

Dr. Taberlet inspected the quality control measures utilized by the project at every level, from field sampling through lab work and communication between the lab and the project leaders. He reports that our project represents the “state of the art” for this kind of research project. He identified no weaknesses in our methods. We plan to post Dr. Taberlet’s report on our

webpage in the near future.

As always, we want to extend our thanks to, and share the credit with, all of the partner agencies, organizations, and individuals who made this landmark project a reality and such a success.



Tim Koors photo

Bear Troubles, Whom To Call

Tim Manley, grizzly bear management specialist with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks:

Office phone: (406) 752-5501

Cell phone: (406) 250-1265

Home phone: (406) 892-0802

Eric Wenum, black bear and mountain lion specialist with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks:

Office phone: (406) 752-5501

Cell phone: (406) 250-0062

Home phone: (406) 756-1776

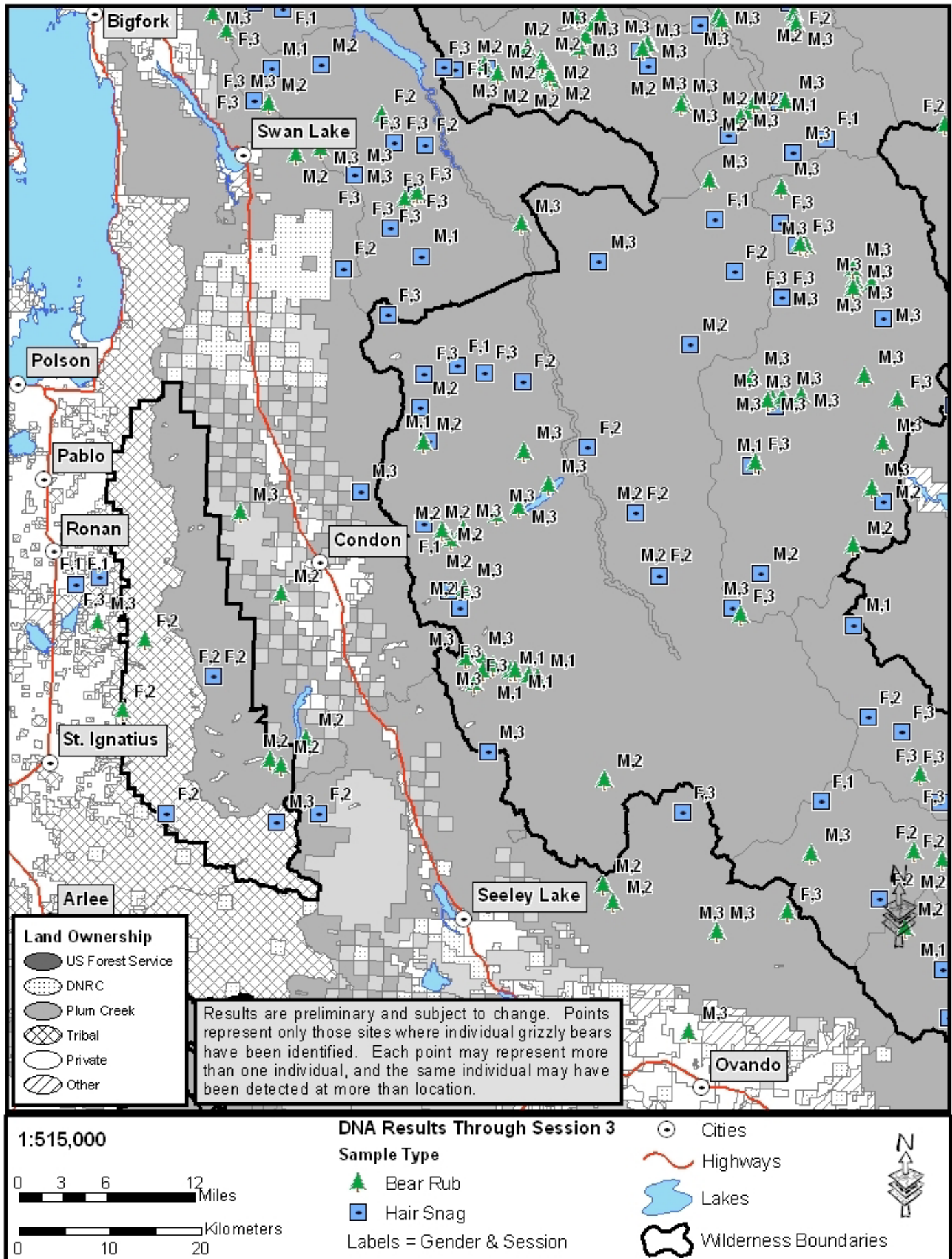
Emergencies

Dial **911** if you live in Seeley Lake or Condon

If you live in Swan Lake dial **886-2324**

Early reporting is critical

Sites where grizzly bear hair was collected in 2004



Habitats and human activity continued

affected by blister rust over the previous half-century, many ridges and basins still had a residual population of cone producing trees and were still used heavily by bears only a few short years ago.

The recent mountain pine beetle epidemic has all but collapsed those surviving stands. There has been an observable corresponding abandonment of high country habitats by bears and an increase in their presence in the valley.

At lower elevations, habitat values for bears are also a fraction of what they were even a decade ago in the Swan Valley. Many of their important wetlands and riparian areas have been compromised. Berry crop failures in the last decade due to drought, fungus and other factors have amplified food stress and, when coupled with all other cumulative effects, have pushed bears to desperate behavior. This is a large part of why grizzly and black bears have been so visible in the Swan and other areas around the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem.

Bears are using new and different foods, much of them related to humans such as dog food, garbage, bird feeders, livestock boneyards and hunter and highway killed animals and gutpiles. The resulting conflicts have ended in the deaths of many bears.

Today because of dramatic changes in both front country and backcountry habitats, bears have no choice but to try to meet more of their caloric needs in the valley bottoms and in areas of human settlement.

Cumulative effects from heavy handed forest management, development, vastly increased road densities, fire suppression, forest diseases such as white pine blister rust and invasive weeds, coupled with human intolerance, have combined to impact bears at a landscape scale.

My opinion, as someone whose life and living has been dependant on understanding bears, is that today they are flat out up against it. I believe the better we understand the current stresses on bears across their habitats, the more likely we are to have tolerance and understanding for creatures that are often feared more than understood.

The least we owe these great creatures is our personal effort to minimize the chance our activities will draw a bear into harms way.

Bear resistant containers continued

5

grizzly bears at the Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center in West Yellowstone, Montana. While there is no guarantee that bears won't be able to get at the contents stored in these containers, a number of unsuccessful attempts by bears have been reported by Condon residents over the past two years.

Seeley-Swan Valley residents and visitors can check out 95-gallon bear-resistant garbage bins, 64-gallon bins and 30-gallon plastic containers with screw-on lids for up to two weeks at no charge. If you will need the container for more than two weeks, you can also arrange to lease one or more of the containers through SEC.

Please keep in mind that even if you typically don't generate much garbage, the containers are very useful if you are having a special event or gathering at your home or business and will be generating more trash than usual. The bins are also helpful if you are experiencing conflicts or visits by bears and have no way to store your garbage or feed indoors, or if you are considering purchasing a container of your own and would like to try one before buying.



If you are interested in checking out or leasing a bear-resistant container, please contact the Swan Ecosystem Center at 406-754-3137. We hope that residents will take advantage of this opportunity and help prevent Swan Valley bears from getting into trouble.

How To Prevent Bear Problems

Each of us is responsible for keeping a clean “camp,” and ensuring that we do not encourage problem behavior among bears. Here are some tips:

- Haul garbage to the dump as often as possible.
- Feed pets inside. If this is not feasible, do not leave uneaten pet food outside, especially overnight.
- Keep coolers, refrigerators or freezers **inside**, even if empty!
- Clean and securely store barbecue grills.
- Keep pet food, garbage, human food and all odorous food-like items secure in a sturdy building away from doors and windows, in a bear proof container or elevated in an Alaska-style cache.
- Do not leave food or garbage in your vehicle.
- It is best not to feed birds in summer and fall. If you must (bird species that live here do not require feeding by humans), place only a small amount of seed into the feeder each day so that it will be completely consumed before dark.
- Bring hummingbird feeders in at night or while you're away. An alternative to hummingbird feeders is a hanging basket of bright colored flowers, like fuchsias.
- Avoid planting clover. It is not native, and it is becoming a favorite among bears.
- Avoid feeding deer grain. Supplemental feeding interferes with a deer's ability to digest natural foods, and deer will attract mountain lions, an additional threat.
- If you have a vegetable garden, especially carrots, consider placing an electric fence around the perimeter, or hang “critter-gitters.” Pull carrots by September 15th, a magic carrot hour for bears according to Tim Manley.
- Compost piles are not recommended.
- Avoid using bone meal on gardens.
- Do not leave fish entrails alongside streams or trails. Puncture the air bladder and sink the entrails in deep water, or pack them out.
- Hang game in a very secure building or Alaska-style cache. Butcher meat as soon as possible. If you must hang meat outside, hang it at least 10 feet off the ground and 4 feet away from trees.
- Pick fruit as it ripens.
- If there is a bear in your yard and it doesn't appear to be just passing through, make noise by banging pots and pans together and shouting to try to encourage the bear to leave. Do not approach the bear.
- A general rule of thumb: anything with an odor, even if it is not food-related can attract bears to your property. Keep anything with an odor in a secure place (bears have been known to get into motor oil, antifreeze, gasoline, paint and cleaning agents).

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To donate contact Swan Ecosystem Center.
6887 Highway 83, Condon MT 59826.

406/754-3137, 406/754-3138



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