

# SWAN VALLEY BEAR NEWS

SPRING 2007



## Swan Valley grizzly bears in danger; people implicated

*By Melanie Parker*

The Swan Valley is a dangerous place if you are a grizzly bear. According to recent monitoring efforts, you have a 45 percent chance of being killed if you are a grizzly who spends much time here.

A collaborative effort between Plum Creek Timber Co., U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to monitor grizzly bears inside the Swan Valley Grizzly Bear Conservation Area has turned up some surprising facts.

First of all, most of the bears marked with satellite GPS radio collars stayed in the valley bottom all season. This surprised agency officials who had previously thought bears come out of their high country dens and then down into the valley for spring, but move upslope into the wilderness areas as soon as the snows retreat and the berries ripen.

Perhaps, even more surprising was the level of mortality documented. Of a total of 24 grizzly bears marked in the Conservation Area between 2000-2004, 11 are known to be dead. And this does not include three additional unmarked bears killed during that time period. Chris Servheen, Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator for the USFWS calls this “an unsustainable level of mortality.”

You might think that maybe we just have too many bears around here. Because several bears have been quite visible, many people have this perception. But the Grizzly Bear DNA study conducted across the Northern Rockies in 2004 showed a relatively low density of grizzly bears in the Swan Valley compared to more productive habitats in the Great Bear Wilderness and Glacier National Park to the north.

Forty-five bears were detected in the Mission-Swan area that includes the whole Swan Range stretching from Columbia Falls to the Clearwater Divide and the entire Mission Mountains and tribal

**Continued, page 4**

## Grizzly sightings remind us to bring in bear attractants

*By Anne Dahl*

Spring is a season of wildlife sighting reports in the Swan Valley. It's always a thrill to see bears, especially grizzlies with cubs. People share their stories with a lot of excitement and a hint of concern in their voices.

When grizzlies or black bears let themselves be seen it can mean they are having trouble finding wild food and putting themselves at risk close to homes in search of food. So it is cause for concern if we are hearing lots of bear-sighting reports. The



**An Alaska grizzly family**

stories remind us to be careful with the attractants that draw bears to our yards and porches.

In May we heard of three sightings of different mother grizzlies with yearlings or 2-year-old cubs.

Don Schmitz was hiking with his dog up near the edge of the Mission Mountains Wilderness far from any open road or house when he encountered a grizzly mother with cubs.

Don said at first he didn't know what he was seeing about 30 yards away. But as the mass of fur separated into individual bodies he spotted two grizzlies, then three, then four. The mother and her three 2-year-old cubs were feeding on grasses. All four looked exactly alike, brown on their legs and backs and blondish on their humps.

The dog froze. When the mother bear spotted Don she stood on her hind legs and roared.

“She's been watching too much of Bart the Bear on television,” was Don's first thought. He hadn't

**Continued, page 2**

The Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) has led the recovery of the grizzly bear in the lower 48 states since 1983. Committee experts say bear spray is critical to grizzly bear recovery because it effectively deters grizzly bears and helps humans avoid injury.

Bear pepper spray is not a substitute for taking the proper precautions to avoid a bear in the first place. It should be used only as a deterrent in a confrontation with an aggressive or attacking bear.

The bear spray is only effective when used as an airborne deterrent sprayed as a cloud at an aggressive animal. It should not be applied to people, tents, packs, other equipment or surrounding area as a repellent.

No deterrent is 100 percent effective, but compared to all others, including firearms, bear spray is the most successful in fending off bear attacks and preventing injury to the person and animal involved.

According to the IGBC, the proper use of bear spray can reduce the number of grizzly bears killed in self-defense, reduce human injuries caused by

bears, and help promote the recovery and survival of the grizzly bear.

## Handling and using pepper spray

- Each person should carry a can of bear pepper spray in bear habitat.
- Spray should be quickly accessible, such as in a hip or chest holster. In your tent, keep bear pepper spray next to your flashlight. Also keep a can in your cooking area.
- Spray should be tested once a year. Do not test spray in or near camping area.
- Aim slightly down and toward the approaching bear. If necessary, adjust for any cross wind.
- Spray a brief shot when the bear is about 50 feet away.
- Spray again if the bear continues to approach.
- Once the animal has retreated or is busy cleaning itself, leave the area as quickly as possible, but do not run.

### Selecting a bear pepper spray:

- Purchase products that are clearly labeled “for deterring attacks by bears.”
- Purchase products that are registered with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The [EPA Bear Deterrent web site](#) lists registered bear pepper spray manufacturers.

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## Bear sightings, continued

realized bears actually roared off camera. After the grizzly roared, she dropped on all fours and crow hopped toward him. Then she rose on her hind legs and roared once more.

Don spoke firmly: “You go on and take care of your cubs. My dog and I aren’t going to hurt you.” The mother bear and the cubs then turned and left.

On the east side of the valley, Rich Thomason said he saw a cinnamon colored grizzly mother with one yearling cub on national forest land. The bears were fairly close to homes but not in any trouble when he saw them.

On the other side of the valley at about 6:15 a.m., I saw a black-colored bear and two yearling cubs from my living room window. They were across my meadow about 350 yards away. At first I assumed they were black bears. But when I got the binoculars adjusted it was clear they were a family of grizzlies. The fur on their legs and backs was a very dark coffee-color and lighter brown on their humps.

The bears came down out of the forest into the meadow, then they abruptly turned and retreated back into the woods. I thought: “Good. She wants to stay out of trouble.”

But a minute or two later, the mother and cubs returned to the meadow. They ambled and nosed at grass for about five minutes. The cubs swatted playfully at each other a few times. The bears worked their way closer to the house before disappearing into the woods on the opposite side of the meadow. They didn’t enter the yard.

Tom and Melanie Parker saw a small grizzly too close to their home. The young bear may have been on its own for the first time this spring. The Parkers got a picture of it out their window. After checking to be sure no attractants were outside, they contacted their neighbors and sent out an e-mail reminding people to be careful with pet and stock food, barbecues, bird seed and other attractants.

# What to do if you see a bear

The best strategy for dealing with bears is to avoid them in the first place, said Kevin Frey, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks bear biologist in Bozeman. “Learn to recognize bear sign, make noise near creeks and in thick timber, and stop once in awhile to look around for movement,” Frey said.

Bears move to lower elevations after leaving their dens to search for green grasses. Grizzly bears will also look for winterkilled carcasses.

Frey said seeing a bear is to be expected in Montana, but in most cases conflicts can be easily avoided. When conflicts do occur it is often because the bear has been surprised, teased, fed, or meets a person over a big game carcass or huckleberry bush.

“If a bear can not be avoided, the next best thing is to prevent the bear from feeling threatened,” Frey said. “A bear may watch a person, or even stand on its hind legs to sniff the air. That is normal bear behavior, it is just trying to figure out what it is seeing,” he said.

Here are the questions Frey asks when he encounters a bear.

- Is this a grizzly or a black bear? Grizzly bears are generally more aggressive than a black bear. If you don’t know, assume it is a grizzly.
- Is the bear preoccupied? Has it noticed me? If not, immediately back up and leave quietly.



- Is the bear looking at me? If so, remain alert but relaxed as the bear tries to identify what it is seeing. Then call out in a calm, firm tone so it can hear your voice.
- The bear will generally turn and leave or huff and appear anxious.
- Give the bear time to react and avoid any threatening movements or sounds.
- If a bear begins to bounce on its front legs it is trying to scare you away or preparing to bluff charge.
- If a bear is moving toward you straight backed, head down and picking up speed it is charging. A bear will often run past a person and then away if there is an easy avenue of escape. If the bear knocks you down, stay down until you are certain it has moved completely away.

Bear pepper spray is a last resort to use when a bear charges. While Frey urges people to carry bear pepper spray, he says it is an emergency measure and is not foolproof.

Inexperienced bear pepper spray users can benefit from mentally reviewing possible bear-conflict scenarios and from test-spraying the product until they are confident they can use it safely and effectively.

## Bear ranger knows his way in the Swan Valley

Our 2007 bear ranger, Mark Ruby, was a fisheries technician in 2004 in the Swan Valley for the U.S. Forest Service Swan Lake Ranger District, and in 2005 he was the loon and bull trout ranger.

This year Mark will be the Swan Valley bear and loon ranger. He will talk to residents, business owners and campers about preventing bear encounters and how to avoid disturbing nesting loons. Mark will discuss Leave No Trace techniques and the Flathead National Forest Food Storage Order that protects people and bears. He will give evening and campfire presentations and meet with home

owners associations.

In 2006 Mark earned his B.S. in Wildlife Biology from the University of Montana. He was born and raised in Kalispell. He grew up hunting, fishing, and hiking around the Flathead.

The Bear/Loon Ranger partnership is funded by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee; the Montana Loon Society; Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Flathead National Forest; Lake County; Plum Creek Timber Company; private donors and Swan Ecosystem Center.



# Food Storage Orders Require Planning

Many Montanans may be caught unprepared by the food storage orders in effect on U.S. Forest Service lands including the Flathead, Lolo, Lewis and Clark, and Helena National Forests and others.

Recreating in grizzly bear country today requires good planning around the foods you choose to bring and how you plan to store that food and your garbage. The U.S. Forest Service food storage restrictions are for the public's safety. The restrictions help aid grizzly bear recovery by preventing bears from becoming food-habituated.

All food and garbage, including pet and livestock food, must be suspended 10 feet above ground (from the bottom of the item) and four feet out from any support. Or it can be stored in a hard-sided camper, vehicle trunk, cab, enclosed horse trailer, or in an approved bear resistant container. The usual cooler or plastic storage box is not bear resistant and food stored in them must be attended

at all times by an adult or surrounded by an electric fence that meets the specifications of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee.

"There is a small industry growing up around supplying bear resistant food storage," said Patti Sowka, FWP's Wildlife Center manager in Helena. Sowka worked with several government officials and other experts to develop testing protocols for products to be used on private land in bear country.

"Testing with real grizzly bears in a controlled setting ensures that when people pay for a bear resistant product they get something that is bear resistant," Sowka said.

All bear resistant testing in Montana is done with grizzly bears. Sowka works with the West Yellowstone Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center to test products. Swan Ecosystem Center has tested bear resistant garbage containers and other products for sale or rent to own.

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## Swan Valley grizzlies in danger, continued

lands down to Hwy 93. Less than half of these bears were located in the Swan Valley per se. There isn't an overabundance of grizzly bears in the Swan Valley, but those that are here have a high chance of coming into contact with humans and dying

Another recent monitoring effort points to escalating dangers in the Swan Valley for grizzly bears. In 2004, 45 female bears were trapped and marked in



order to track population trends across the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem. Once the DNA project finalizes their population estimate, this effort will track whether or not that population is stable, growing or declining by monitoring the birth and death rate of both the females and their cubs.

Of the 45 female grizzly bears marked so far, eight have since died. According to state researcher Rick Mace, those deaths are as follows:

- 1) Subadult female found full of bird shot near Condon Loop Rd.
- 2) Female found shot on the backside of Big Mountain
- 3) Female with 3 cubs - collar found up Trail Creek in the North Fork
- 4) Female #11 found just south of the Condon airstrip
- 5) Female shot during hunting season up Woodward Creek, likely mistaken I.D.
- 6) Female found dead near Peck Lake; no bullet; possible poisoning
- 7) Female #92 found dead near Napa Point
- 8) Female found dead on Firefighter Mountain near Hungry Horse

What is alarming is that five of these eight mortalities were in the Swan Valley. It appears that bears from all over the region are dying in the Swan Valley. We have become, what biologists refer to as a "mortality sink" for this species.

To get a summary of the data from recent Swan Valley monitoring efforts or to volunteer to help develop solutions, contact Kathy Koors at Swan Ecosystem Center or Jessie Lund at Northwest Connections.

One thing we all can do right now is to redouble our efforts to secure bear attractants at our homes and businesses. Thanks for caring!

# Bear Managers Need Your Help

Montana's trespassing law hinders Tim Manley's ability to monitor grizzlies and help land owners prevent property damage from problem bears. Flathead County attorneys say prior permission must be obtained from landowners before entering property that is posted "No Trespassing." If the property is not posted it is permissible to enter the property to speak with the landowner,

If the property is posted, it is illegal to enter the property for any reason, even to request permission for access. This law applies to everyone. Manley says that without prior permission from landowners to enter their property, it will be impossible for him to effectively monitor or rehabilitate management bears, which sometimes have a history of breaking into buildings in search of food.

"If I know that a bear with a habit of breaking windows is on someone's property, and that property is posted and I don't have permission for access, I cannot legally drive in and alert the landowner that the bear is in the area," Manley said.

In the North Fork, more than 30 landowners have given Manley blanket permission to come on

their property while monitoring a grizzly or to alert them when a management bear is in the vicinity. The following are reasons to give Manley prior permission to enter your land:

- ° He can more effectively monitor bears and track their movements.
- ° He can let you know that a management bear is nearby and ensure that you are prepared for the animal to move through harmlessly.
- ° He can encourage a problem bear to move out of the area before it causes harm, and he can apply aversive-conditioning techniques to teach the animal that it is better off leaving human developments alone.
- ° He can help you secure bear attractants, thus preventing property damage and reducing threats to human safety.

The form below is provided for you to give Manley permission to enter your property to manage grizzly bears. If you have a question, please call Manley at (406) 250-1265 (cell), or (406) 892-0802 (home).

## Permission for Bear Managers to Enter My Property

Landowner's name(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Permanent address \_\_\_\_\_

Local address \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone numbers(s) \_\_\_\_\_ e-mail address \_\_\_\_\_

Swan Valley telephone number \_\_\_\_\_

Permission granted until revoked by landowner(s) (check here) \_\_\_\_\_

Or time period during which access is permitted (month/day/year through month/day/year) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Return this form to: Tim Manley, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, 490 N. Meridian, Kalispell, MT 59901

### Bear Troubles, Whom To Call

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

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**

# 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 15<sup>th</sup>, 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).

The SWAN VALLEY BEAR NEWS is published as a cooperative effort of the Living With Wildlife Foundation; Northwest Connections; Swan Ecosystem Center; Swan Valley residents; Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Flathead National Forest and Lolo National Forest.

## The Bears Need Your Help

Swan Valley Bear News is funded in large part by private donations. To donate send a check earmarked for the bears to Swan Ecosystem Center, 6887 Highway 83, Condon MT 59826. Contact us if you want to contribute with your credit card 406/754-3137, 406/754-3138.



Visit our Bear Aware web page at [SwanEcosystemCenter.com](http://SwanEcosystemCenter.com).

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