



## Bruins abound in region

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By *MICHAEL JAMISON of the Missoulian*

CONDON - Once upon a time, this old grizzly bear learned that white refrigerators hold tasty snacks that are neither too hot nor too cold, but just right.

And so the Albino Basin Male, or No. 191 as he's known to biologists, slaps his big muddy paws up on a window, presses his nose to the glass and checks things out. If he sees a brown fridge, or a green fridge or even a yellow fridge, he usually moves on.

But if it's white, he smashes his way in, a sort of reverse Goldilocks looking for porridge and anything else that might be stashed away in the cupboards.

During the last week in August, he broke into no fewer than nine unoccupied cabins in the Condon area, leaving behind a huge mess and enough DNA that biologists now know exactly who he is. He's the same bear that hit Forest Service cabins back in 2006.

The bear remains at large, although wildlife managers have captured several other innocent bystanders in the area while trying to trap the culprit. In fact, bear specialists with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks have captured 10 grizzlies in northwest Montana, just in the past week.

“Oh yeah,” Jim Williams said, “it's been kind of busy around here.”

Williams is wildlife manager for FWP in this area, and he's busy because the bears are in hyperphagia, a scientific term that basically means overeating, but for bears means autumn. This time of year, Williams said, bears are packing on fat for winter, eating 20 hours a day, looking to take in as many calories as possible while using as few as possible.

A big white fridge, then, is the jackpot.

So is a dumpster full of kitchen grease, which is what a whole handful of bears found behind a market north of Condon. It was a pit stop long-since established, Williams said, and in recent years his agency has worked with the store owner to put up an electric fence.

But when the fence failed this fall, “it was a feeding frenzy,” Williams said. “Kitchen grease is a pretty powerful scent.”

Powerful enough that lots of bears found it, tipped it over, lapped it out of the soil. Teams working with FWP have since hauled off that contaminated dirt, and have built what they hope is a bear-proof system for the market.

Because the store is just a couple miles up the road from those nine cabins, Williams said, “the first thing that came to mind was a connection there.”

But when they nabbed three male grizzlies at the grease spill, none proved a DNA match with the blood and

hair old Albino left at the cabins.

So they set traps at the cabins themselves, and soon caught two black bears and yet another male griz. "All of them were exonerated by DNA," Williams said. The culprit remains at large, although several of his neighbors now sport radio collars.

The DNA left at the break-ins tells Williams exactly who the burglar bruin is - a 20-year-old bear with a huge home range and very few teeth.

Likewise, Williams knows well the adult female grizzly who, with her two cubs, has been picking apples from orchards near Lake Blaine. She's a persistent problem, Williams said, although only in the fall, and only in the apple trees.

"That's her only problem," he said. "She's an apple bear. Otherwise, she's a fine bear."

That's the story with lots of bears, he said. "It's all apples, all apples. If you live in the woods and have an apple tree, you're going to have a bear. People need to clean up their fruit trees."

About the same time bear specialists were capturing all those griz in the Swan, other FWP agents were picking the Lake Blaine female and her family from the orchard, fitting her with a collar and moving them all high into the mountains.

"What we need now is some cold weather and some snow," Williams said, because that would force the bears into seasonal dens before they can find any more trouble.

Problem is, fall is stretching on - and so is the grizzly's range. In recent years, Williams said, bears have been turning up in some surprising places.

"Don't be surprised to encounter a grizzly bear anywhere in western Montana," he said. "They're everywhere."

Even south of Noxon, where FWP biologists just caught up with a female and two cubs near Pilgrim Creek.

"We had no idea she was in there," he said.

Not until she started plucking plums, that is. The trio was nabbed and dropped high in the mountains, south of the Clark Fork River.

That drop-off spot reflects a whole new policy at FWP, one Williams says recognizes the continued expansion of grizzly territory.

Previously, grizzlies were relocated into "designated recovery areas," parcels of forest identified by federal land managers as suitable for grizzly bear populations. Those lines were drawn after the bear was listed for protection under the Endangered Species Act, "but we know wildlife species don't recognize political lines very well," Williams said.

Now, though, his agency manages bears in the places bears live, regardless of "designated recovery areas."

The Noxon three were caught in what is, geographically, the northern end of the Bitterroot Range, well outside the recovery area. And they were likewise released outside the recovery area, "because that's where they live," Williams said. "It doesn't make sense to pack them all into a few small areas and expect them to stay put."

Because bears don't stay put. They travel for denning sites, for huckleberry patches, for breeding grounds and, in the case of at least one old grizzer, for white refrigerators.

“We'll catch up with him,” Williams said. “We know who he is, and we know what he likes. The only thing we don't know is where he is now, or where he'll strike next.”

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