



January 8, 2009

Eye on the Environment

SWAN VALLEY DEVELOPS A BEAR TASK FORCE

By LIZA WARD, Swan Ecosystem Center

Tim Manley, Grizzly Bear Specialist for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, knew the bear would be trouble the first time he trapped the female cub with her mother and sister in the Flathead Valley.

The cub was officially a problem bear, but her troubles began long before that—at the moment of conception—an uncertain future read by a fortune teller in the lines of her paws.

Her mother was a conditioned bear. She had learned that easy rewards came from eating apples in an orchard, and as soon as her cubs were old enough, she showed them how to do the same.

After he trapped the whole family on the edge of the valley, and outfitted the mother with an Argos collar, Manley relocated them to the South Fork of Quintonkon Creek.

It was not long before they were back in the Flathead. Fall found the three bears in the Lake Blaine area getting into apples and garbage.

He trapped them a second time, and moved them up to the Spotted Bear River.

Within a month they had travelled 500 miles to wind up back in the Lake Blaine area, and the next time he trapped and moved them to Spotted Bear they had returned within a week.

The following year, they were trapped in the fall and moved to private land, spending the rest of

the season feasting on deer carcasses before climbing up into the Swans for hibernation.

Things got ugly when the mother kicked out her sub-adults in the spring of 2008.

They were getting into trouble on their own now. The more dominant of the two bears showed her sister how to get into apples and garbage, and Manley suspects they may have broken into a shed.

He trapped the dominant sub-adult near a pig barbecue and moved her to the Whitefish Range.

She was fine for the summer, but as soon as the huckleberries dropped off, she lumbered into Eureka and began feasting on apples again. She was trapped a sixth time.

Manley got permission to move her into Glacier National Park, but a few days later, she was found in Apgar feasting on horse feed from a dumpster that was carelessly left open.

What followed was her last stand; garbage in West Glacier. Lying with her head between her paws, eating dog food off a porch, bold and without fear.

Even as the dog barked and the people yelled, she lay with her nose between the boards, lolling outside the front door like a dog herself.

The seventh trapping was the last. There was little choice left but to remove her. In this case, she was moved to Washington State for research.

In other cases Manley is left with no other option but elimination.

It began with a conditioned mother. A conditioned bear begets a conditioned cub. It's a never-ending cycle of trouble stemming from a single event.

Many of our bears in the Swan are habituated to humans, which means they no longer have a negative response to residences or cars, but they still survive on natural food sources.

On the other hand, a conditioned bear is a bear that has learned—from as much as a single bowl of dog food on a porch, or grain scattered from a bird feeder—that unnatural food sources make easy rewards.

Of the many food conditioned bears Manley has tried to work with in the recent past, less than 40% have survived. They were hit by trains, cars, shot illegally, or had to be eliminated due to conflicts with humans.

There is an elaborate list of categories and recommended responses when it comes to conditioned bears depending on gender, age, and the type of situation.

Arizona bears don't get second chances. Colorado has a two-strike policy. But here in Montana, Manley has more leeway because he deals with a threatened species.

He tries his best to do right by the bear, possibly relocating it, and keeping watch by means of radio telemetry and flyovers, understanding that the problem often stems from landowners not having the right information at their fingertips.

For example, did you know that hanging plants are just as effective in attracting hummingbirds as sugar water?

That a chemical compound in certain plastics and foams attract bears?

That it took a male grizzly sixteen hours to take a bite out of an electrified deer carcass, and only because he accidentally knocked over a lazily positioned energizer?

Just because you think you haven't had a bear problem before, doesn't mean a bruin hasn't sniffed out your bird feeder in the middle of the night.

According to Tom Parker, one innovative conditioned Swan Valley bear proved capable of getting into a stash of dog food stored by mice in the insulated panels of a garage.

Manley says, "The bears show us what is bear proof." It is up to us to make use of what we have learned, insuring that the next batch of young bears isn't handed a death sentence.

This is winter, the season when biologists who have spent six months collaring and trapping grizzly bears in the Swan move inside to make sense of their research.

Chris Servheen of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service analyzes satellite telemetry readings, drawing certain conclusions about survival of grizzly bears in our valley.

This year, Tim Manley will be using much of Servheen's GPS data to target particular grizzly haunts in our valley, hoping to mitigate bear problems before they arise, and to map recurring problem areas, with the intent of ensuring that Swan Valley bears don't become conditioned to unnatural food sources.

It's a lot for Manley to respond to on his own, and each situation offers up a new set of circumstances. As snow drifts by the window and the unshed collars tick under root balls and north facing slopes of occupied dens, Bear Ranger Mark Ruby, along with Northwest Connections and Swan Ecosystem Center, are hard at work on developing a grassroots solution to Swan Valley bear problems modeled on Bear Smart Durango and Bear Smart Canada, two highly successful programs in which humans have adapted to live successfully among bears.

By the time the bruins emerge from the den again with pint-sized cubs trailing behind them, a volunteer Bear Task Force will be in place here in the Swan.

The task force will consist of a group of trained volunteer community members capable of providing free bear-safe property assessments to interested parties, follow-up visits, and equipment at a discounted cost.

Swan Ecosystem Center has 70 personal use bear proof containers on order for utilization in the program.

Members of the task force will be on call to respond to problems should they arise, plan bear events, and keep records—functioning as a liaison between Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the community.

Individuals are invited to submit their names for volunteer positions in their neighborhoods. The volunteers will provide information to new residents and keep the task force abreast of local bear activity.

Please call Swan Ecosystem Center at (406)754-3137 to submit your name as a volunteer, or if you would like a free property assessment come spring.

Why bother? Some might ask. Why do we care about bears, and how would our lives be different if bears did not make up the fabric of our everyday existence?

Life would be easier, certainly, but how would we define ourselves?

Grizzlies give us something to be proud of. They make us different, reminding us of our place among all creatures.

Even when they're dened in winter, bears hibernate on the edges of our minds, alive in memories and promises of more abundant seasons.

Like the bears, we sleep longer as the hours of darkness increase. Our thoughts turn to the perils of travel: icy roads, avalanches.

We put out the bird feeders, and watch the specks of gray become black capped chickadees, or the brilliant feathers of stellar jays. Every sign of life is a testament to toughness. A revelation.

The valley forces us to connect to seasonal changes in ways few people do these days, and to those of us who are looking, bear behavior can clock time with as much urgency as the sun.

As the tips of grasses emerge from the snow banks, we take down the bird feeder. Build an

electric fence around the chicken coop, or the apple tree.

We carry bear pepper spray when we hike, and plant our gardens, marking September 15th on our calendars, the magic hour when carrots need to be picked before they become palatable to bears.

It's helping us take responsibility for ourselves, giving the young bears in the valley more of a chance. Being "bear smart" is a community effort. We urge you to get involved!