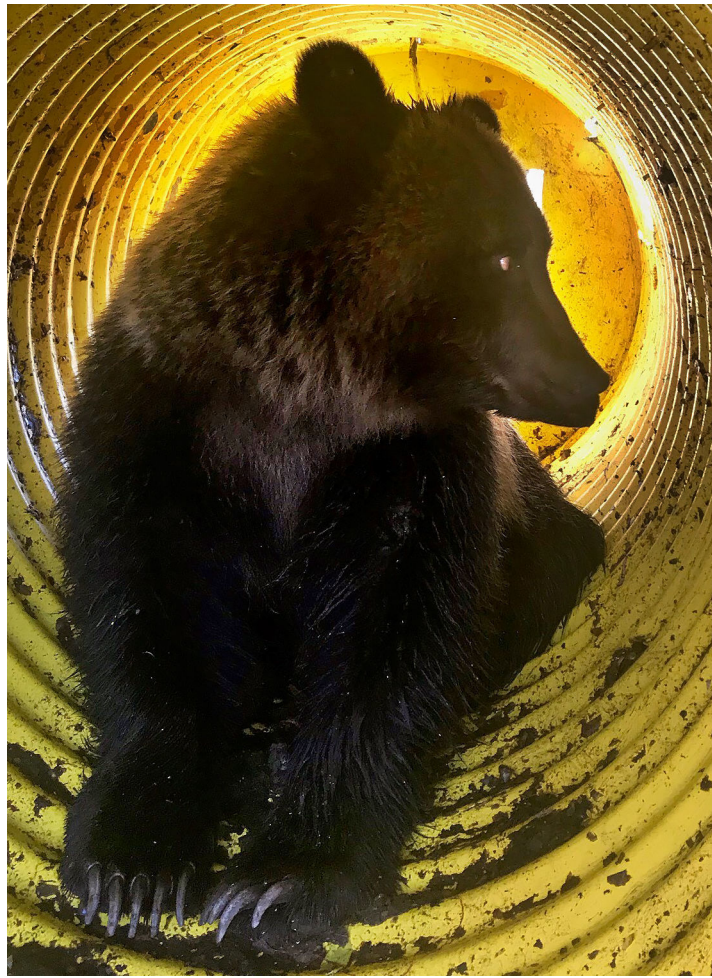


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## **Golf course griz raises lots of questions**

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The grizzly captured on the Whitetail Golf Course north of Stevensville recently.

Courtesy photo

The grizzly bear captured near a Stevensville golf course probably came for the earthworms. And he left a lot of questions behind.

Chief among them: Why, after experts have spent decades planning for the return of grizzlies in the grizzly-vacant Bitterroot Ecosystem just six miles to the west, did this bear get hauled back across Interstate 90 and released back in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, current bear population 1,050?

Tuesday's meeting of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Bitterroot Subcommittee will have that looming over its agenda. The simple answer is bear managers at Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) don't have a protocol in place to relocate a captured grizzly in the Bitterroots or the Sapphire Mountains surrounding the Bitterroot Valley. But the tougher problem is deciding how Montanans want to manage grizzlies if or when they get delisted from federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) protection.

“Moving that bear has triggered a lot of conversations,” FWP Region 2 Supervisor Randy Arnold said. “The Bitterroot subcommittee has been working on public education and outreach. It’s been less focused on the role it plays when it finally receives bears.”

All grizzly bears in the Lower 48 states have been classified a threatened species under the ESA since 1975. At that time, there were just a few hundred bears concentrated in Glacier and Yellowstone national parks and the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex. As part of the recovery strategy, the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee defined six ecosystems where it would concentrate its efforts.

The two biggest grizzly populations became the Northern Continental Divide and Greater Yellowstone ecosystems incorporating Glacier and Yellowstone parks, respectively. Two smaller areas, the Cabinet-Yaak and Selkirk ecosystem, in northern Montana and Idaho along the Canadian border, each held fewer than 50 bears.

The North Cascades Ecosystem in Washington had a handful moving in and out of Canada. And the Bitterroot had no resident grizzlies, although it once had significant numbers tied to salmon spawning areas on the Idaho side. Salmon-blocking hydroelectric dams and a dedicated effort to hunt out the bears eliminated the known population by the early 1960s.

FWP bear specialist Jamie Jonkel said the Stevensville grizzly probably had been digging for nightcrawlers when Whitetail Golf Course staff spotted a big hole in the grass of the seventh fairway. The bear was also suspected of snapping the flags on the putting greens. Grizzly bears feed on anything from dandelions to bison. Although strong enough to kill a mature cow, they are generally scavengers, taking meat from the kills of others.

And while they may roam hundreds of square miles in search of a next meal, highways form one of the biggest barriers to grizzlies trying to move between ecosystems. Interstate 90, Interstate 15 and Highway 93 chop up the routes bears from the Northern Continental Divide and Greater Yellowstone ecosystems might use to reach the Bitterroot. But there are a few options.

“I’m guessing he came out of the Blackfoot drainage,” Jonkel said ahead of lab results on the DNA samples he took from the Stevensville grizzly. “He probably came south through the Garnet Range, got across the Clark Fork (River) and I-90. There are a handful of spots that allow for passage around Rock Creek and Clinton and Drummond. If they find those — bang — they’re south of I-90 and into the Sapphires.”

In the 1990s, the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) launched a plan to re-establish grizzly bears in the Bitterroot Ecosystem. The effort produced a remarkable coalition of conservation groups, labor unions and the timber industry, which backed the plan. But it also drew fire from both Montana and Idaho residents who feared bears and from some environmental activists who thought the reintroduction wasn’t good enough.

“We got right up to it,” National Wildlife Federation Regional Executive Director Tom France said of the campaign. “Bears could be reintroduced in Selway as a non-essential, experimental population under a citizen-managed committee. Then the 2000 election occurred, the Clinton administration went out, and — most damaging to bear recovery — Dirk Kempthorne was elected governor in Idaho. [Montana Gov. Marc] Racicot and [Idaho Gov. Phil] Batt worked together, but Kempthorne wanted no part of a bear recovery.

"So in 2002, the Fish and Wildlife Service made a new draft finding saying it would rely on natural recovery to restore grizzlies to the Selway-Bitterroot.”

Alliance for the Wild Rockies founder Mike Bader helped lead resistance to the reintroduction, arguing the “experimental” designation wouldn’t give the grizzlies enough protection to persist. Two decades later, he’s still working for greater grizzly protections with hope a natural population can get established. But he added the landscape has grown even harder for the bears to move.

“You can’t base recovery on population alone,” Bader said. “You need linkage and habitat. On the map, it looks like a hop, skip and a jump to get from the NCDE to the Bitterroot. But that hop and a skip has to go over a divided interstate and a railroad line and past hunters and chicken coops and all sorts of things a bear could get its nose into and ruin the journey.”

About a half-dozen grizzlies have made it into the Bitterroots since 2000, but none appears to have taken residence. On the other hand, several dozen have been spotted in the Sapphire, John Long, Pintlar, Beaverhead, Gravelly and Centennial mountain ranges linking the Continental Divide between the Bob Marshall and Yellowstone. That area doesn’t fall into any designated recovery zone.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials have stated they plan to delist NCDE grizzlies by the end of 2018. If that happens (a similar delisting of Great Yellowstone grizzlies has been blocked in federal court), those bears would become primarily a Montana management issue.

Issues like where residents are prepared to have grizzlies relocated, where they should expect to encounter them, what responsibilities and rules govern bear activity — all need to go through a public process. And it may go far beyond FWP, perhaps down to local communities and up to the Legislature.

“We’ve needed a mechanism to have this conversation with the public,” Supervisor Arnold said. “Getting recovered populations in the NCDE and GYE has taken a lot of the oxygen out of the room. “It’s got to go beyond just population management in the ecosystems.”

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Grizzly Recovery Coordinator Hillary Cooley agreed the Stevensville bear could be the ice-breaker for renewed focus on the Bitterroot recovery area. Although recent requests for more research funding in the Bitterroot have been

declined, anecdotal evidence of grizzlies' interest in the largest undeveloped expanse of public land in the Pacific Northwest keeps growing.

“It’s exciting,” Cooley said. “We want recovery in the Bitterroot. I wish that bear hadn’t been trapped. It was on its way.”



Outside the recovery zones  
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### Bitterroot Grizzly Subcommittee Meeting

The Interagency Grizzly Bear Bitterroot Subcommittee meets at 10 a.m. Tuesday at the Bitterroot National Forest Supervisor's Office, Hamilton. See the IGBC website for agenda details.