

THE BLACKFOOT WATERSHED WOLF AND BEAR ACTIVITY REPORT Mid-April through Mid-August, 2018

Hello everyone, this is Eric Graham working for the wildlife program at the Blackfoot Challenge. In coordination with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) we produce this wolf and bear activity report. These reports are typically compiled during our range rider season from May through October. It was back in 2008 that the Blackfoot Challenge (BC) started a pilot season that began to explore the idea of hiring on seasonal range riders and here we are in our 10th season of range rider efforts in the watershed. We will continue to work with ranches throughout the Blackfoot watershed to help them keep an eye on predator activity and to increase herd supervision and communication until the cows come home from their grazing leases this fall.



From left to right: Jamie Jonkel FWP Region 2 Bear Management Specialist, Randy Gazda Blackfoot Challenge Wildlife Committee Chair, Sigrid Olsen BC Range Rider, Vicki Pocha BC Range Rider, Eric Graham BC Wildlife Coordinator, Kelsey Bailey BC Range Rider, Jordan Mannix BC Range Rider, Tyler Parks FWP Region 2 Wolf Management Specialist. Photo by Barry Gordon

Thanks again to all of the ranchers and landowners that make this program possible. Thanks to all of the partners that provide funding and technical assistance - MFWP, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the Livestock Loss Board, Northern Rockies Conservation Co-op, Defenders of Wildlife, Vital Ground, the Cross Charitable Foundation, the Stranahan Foundation, and numerous individuals.

If you have any questions about the wildlife program please call the Blackfoot Challenge **Wildlife Committee Chair - Randy Gazda (406) 793-7402.**

Contact Info for reporting wolf and/or bear activity:

Eric Graham – Blackfoot Challenge Wildlife Technician (406) 240-3132

Jamie Jonkel – MFWP Bear Management Specialist (406) 544-1447

Tyler Parks – MFWP Wolf Management Specialist (406) 531-4454

Scott Eggeman – MFWP Blackfoot Area Wildlife Biologist (406) 542-5542

If you have a suspected depredation please notify USDA **Wildlife Services (WS)** as soon as possible to determine the cause of death. Regarding reimbursement for losses through the **Livestock Loss Board**: If you suspect a livestock loss due to mountain lion/wolf/grizzly bear predation, you can request an investigation to see if the losses were due to a confirmed or probable depredation. The Livestock Loss Board can pay only for confirmed or probable losses as determined by USDA-Wildlife Services (WS).

WS Powell County - Bart Smith (406) 660-0368

WS Missoula County - Ted North (406) 274-4856

WS Lewis & Clark County - John Meidtke (406) 855-8429

Department of Livestock - Livestock Loss Board (406) 444-5609

IMPORTANT UPDATES

BLACKFOOT VALLEY WOLF PACKS –

ARRASTRA CREEK PACK

Pack Structure: 5 Adults ~8 Pups

Collared Wolf: Yes (2)

Pack Report: In June, MFWP radio collared two yearling female wolves.

AVON PACK

Pack Structure: ~3 Adults

Collared Wolf: No

Pack Report: Nothing new to report.

BELMONT PACK

Pack Structure: 5 Adults #? Pups

Collared Wolf: Yes (1)

Pack Report: This pack is thought to spend time on the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribe reservation.

BUGLE MOUNTAIN PACK

Backcountry

CHAMBERLAIN PACK

Pack Structure: ~5 Adults #? Pups

Collared Wolf: No

Pack Report: Nothing new to report.

CONGER POINT PACK

Backcountry

HUMBUG PACK

Pack Structure: 2-3 Adults #? Pups

Collared Wolf: No

Pack Report: Nothing new to report.

INEZ PACK

Pack Structure: 8 Adults 3 Pups

Collared Wolf: Yes (2)

Pack Report: MFWP continues to monitor this pack via radio telemetry.

LANDERS FORK PACK

Pack Structure: Unknown

Collared Wolf: No

Pack Report: Nothing new to report.

MORRELL MOUNTAIN PACK

Pack Structure: 3 Adults #? Pups

Collared Wolf: Yes (1)

Pack Report: MFWP continues to monitor via radio telemetry.

SEELEY LAKE PACK

Pack Structure: 5 Adults 4 Pups

Collared Wolf: No

Pack Report: Nothing new to report.

STONEWALL MOUNTAIN PACK

Pack Structure: 4 Adults >3 Pups

Collared Wolf: Yes (1)

Pack Report: In June, WS trapped and collared a yearling wolf.

UNION PEAK PACK

Pack Structure: 3+ Adults #? Pups

Collared Wolf: No

Pack Report: Nothing new to report.

WOLF ACTIVITY

In April and May, wolves were frequenting calving allotments near Helmville and Ovando. In one case, two calves were injured and Wildlife Services removed a wolf in response. The wolf activity in that allotment quieted down shortly after the removal. On another allotment, turbo fladry was deployed to help deter wolves from the calving yard. This project was completed in partnership with the ranch, MFWP, WS and the Blackfoot Challenge.

On 6/20/18, WS trapped and radio collared a yearling male wolf out of the Stonewall Mtn Pack.

On 6/25/18, MFWP trapped and radio collared a yearling female wolf out of the Arrastra Creek Pack.

On 6/27/18, MFWP trapped and radio collared a second yearling female wolf out of the Arrastra Creek Pack.

On 7/9/18, WS confirmed 5 lambs as probable wolf kills on private land near Avon. WS continues to monitor the area.

On 7/17/18, a calf was killed by wolves near Helmville. Five gray wolves were seen in the area. WS continues to work the area in response.

On 7/23/18, one ewe sheep was killed by wolves on private land near Lincoln. Another ewe was reported as a probable wolf kill. WS will be attempting to remove wolves in response to the depredation.

On 8/1/18, WS confirmed that a calf was killed by wolves near Ovando. One wolf has been removed by WS. WS continues to work the area.



Yearling female from the Arrastra Creek pack. Photo courtesy Tyler Parks, MFWP.

IMPORTANT UPDATES REGARDING GRIZZLY BEAR ACTIVITY IN THE BLACKFOOT VALLEY

Adult male grizzly tracks were observed in the foothills and higher ridge lines as early as March 8th this year. And more grizzly bears than normal were reported out of their dens and/or down in the valley floor by mid-April. Perhaps due to last year's fires, the heavy snow pack and the fact that more bears than normal were attracted to the valley floor this year during spring green up, we had heavier use of the valley floor by grizzlies than in year's past. The Blackfoot Region is well known for a community-driven approach to managing and mitigating for bear conflicts, and the Blackfoot Valley has been recognized internationally for having some of the lowest numbers of grizzly conflicts in the state. But for the first time since 2003, the valley has experienced a spike in the number of grizzly conflicts. The summer of 2018 is going to surpass that previous record tenfold. This season, thus far, we have had a total of 53 home/ranch site conflicts. The conflicts are mostly due to a handful of grizzlies that have developed food-conditioned behavior. These bears are showing us where lots of home sites and ranches are leaving out uncontained sources of grain, chicken feed, bird feeders and grain. Please remember, that the best way to keep bears from developing bad habits in the first place, is to be diligent in containing any food-related items around the household or ranch. If possible manage garbage carefully and store grain, sweet licks and other desirable attractants behind electric fence or within stout buildings with closed doors. That is, anything that a bear might find desirable should be locked up tight and be made unavailable--especially if your homesite or ranch is adjacent to areas with known bear activity. The best way to keep the valley safe is to deter bears from coming in and around homesites by not encouraging them or training them to seek out food rewards around homesites in the first place. In the meantime, FWP is actively attempting to capture the grizzlies involved and has had traps out at six different residential sites that have been visited by the bears. The bears are ranging widely, have avoided traps and/or have not been returning for a second night of easy feeding.



These grizzly bear tracks were found on April 15th when we were conducting winter track surveys in partnership with the Forest Service. The first tracks of the season are typically the big males coming out of the den. Photo by Eric Graham

LIVESTOCK CARCASS PICKUP PROGRAM

The Blackfoot Challenge's Livestock Carcass Pick Up and Removal Program ran from mid-February through mid-May. Thereafter, carcasses in the Blackfoot Valley have been picked up by FWP. If you currently have a carcass for picking up, please call 544-1447 to reach Jamie Jonkel with Montana FWP. The carcass will be taken to the compost site near Clearwater Junction to help prevent conflicts with bears and wolves. To learn more about this program, click here: "Living with Carnivores: Boneyards, Bear & Wolves"

This April there were 5 incidents of grizzly bears venturing into ranch compounds to retrieve carcasses left out for the carcass pickup program. Dead calves were either left on the ground or placed on hay bales within high activity areas on the ranch and bears were lured in to feed on the carcasses. As a result, we are re-evaluating pickup protocol and recommending that after March all carcasses set aside for pickup be stored away from ranch premises.

LIVESTOCK DEPREDATIONS

Between April and July, the Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services and FWP R2 responded to 5 verified livestock depredations and a handful of additional reports (where cause of death was natural, not determined or where ranchers were not interested in having an investigation). Below is a synopsis of each of the incidents and management actions that occurred in the Blackfoot Valley:

- On April 22nd, a calf was attacked and injured northwest of Helmville. The calf survived. Wildlife Services verified the attack and traps were set for a female grizzly bear with 3 sub-adults that were observed at the site of the incident. The family group was not captured, however, on 4/25 a 474 pound-male grizzly named "McElwain" was incidentally captured. The bear was collared and relocated to Glacier National Park. (Due to heavy snow at the time, there were no other adequate relocation sites.) As of July, the bear was still in Glacier National Park.

http://fwp.mt.gov/news/newsReleases/fishAndWildlife/nr_1081.html



Here is a photo of a rancher loading "McElwain" onto the trailer. Photo by Eric Graham

- On May 9th, May 31st and June 3rd Wildlife Services confirmed calf depredations on another ranch southwest of Helmville. On the first and third incident, traps were set but no bears were captured. There was a 4th incident with an injured calf and it was not verified as grizzly or black bear. There was an additional incident with a calf with a broken leg that was not verified as predator related.
- On May 19th a pig was killed by a grizzly bear west of Clearwater Junction. Wildlife Services confirmed the depredation, set traps and a temporary electric fence was installed to protect the remaining pig. No bears were captured, but the grizzly did return and received a shock from the fence and did not come back. Later that month, in a partnership with FWP, Defenders of Wildlife (DOW), WS and the BC, the resident erected a permanent electric fence.
- There were a couple dead calves that were found in the Ovando area and were not suspected as depredations from predators. WS was not called in to investigate either of those calves.
- Since June there have been no additional grizzly bear depredation reports in the Blackfoot Valley. In mid-July, however, Wildlife Services did set traps for a calf that was killed by a grizzly in the Drummond area.

BLACKFOOT VALLEY RESIDENTIAL AND AGRICULTURAL CONFLICTS

As mentioned earlier there have been an unprecedented number of grizzly conflicts in the central portions of the Blackfoot Valley this June and July. FWP responded to a total of 46 home/ranch site conflicts involving grizzlies accessing or seeking out uncontained garbage, animal feed and bird feed. Since August, due to the bountiful production of choke cherries and hawthorn, no conflicts have occurred, but historically the highest conflict period occurs in September and October, therefore, FWP is predicting a busy fall.

The reasons for this sudden influx of bears exhibiting bad behavior is being evaluated, but it appears that last year's fire activity and late green up in the mountains, due to heavy snows, may have shifted more bear activity than normal into the Ovando/Helmville area. A few bears have learned that homesites and ranches are good places to find food. It should be noted, that at every single conflict site, where bears were able to access animal feed or grain, the attractants were uncontained and available—where the garbage and feed were outside or being stored on porches, open sheds, and open garages. At three sites where attractants were contained the bears investigated, tested doors, (except for one incident where the bear broke through a window to access the grain storage area), and the bears moved on.

As mentioned earlier the conflicts appear to be mostly due to two grizzly bears, traveling together at times, ranging widely across the Ovando/Helmville Valley and another single grizzly. The bears have been seeking out uncontained residential attractants such as animal feed,

garbage and bird feeders. (There is a possibility that additional bears have started up.) FWP R2 is actively trapping and monitoring for these bears. Members of the community are reporting incidents promptly and if these individual bears are captured or identifiable they will most likely end up being destroyed if DNA samples or photographs match up. The bears are rarely visiting homes and ranches on consecutive nights. We believe the bears were “trained up” this spring or last fall. They first came to FWP’s attention when they showed up in the town of Ovando on June 5th, and it was obvious that they were food-conditioned bears. Since that time, they have visited multiple homesites/ranches and traps have been set at 6 locations, but no bears have been captured.



Here are the bears North of Kleinschmidt Flats. Photo courtesy of the landowner.



Here are some photos of the bears in the North Fork country. Photos courtesy of the landowner.



Here is a photo of the grizzly bears in Ovando. Photo courtesy of the Blackfoot Angler.



On June 5th this electric fence was installed around a chicken coop that the bears had gotten into for chicken feed. Photo by Eric Graham

In late May this grizzly bear was reported feeding on roadkill along Highway 200 East of Lincoln.

Photo by Sandy Burner



CLEARWATER VALLEY RESIDENTIAL AND AGRICULTURAL CONFLICTS

There have been a handful of grizzly conflicts in the Clearwater drainage. FWP has responded to a total of 14 home site conflicts involving grizzlies accessing or seeking out uncontained garbage, animal feed and bird feed. Most of the conflicts were related to the radio collared grizzly bear “Baptiste”, from the Flathead Indian Reservation, that was captured and destroyed near Condon, MT on July 2nd. “Baptiste” was originally captured as a sub adult in 2017 near Arlee. That fall he was documented spending time in the Clearwater drainage near Placid Lake and Seeley Lake and broke into a shed for a hunter’s deer carcass. This May, “Baptiste” returned and became food conditioned, getting into attractants such as garbage, grain and eventually broke into several barns and a greenhouse. The bear was monitored and an attempt was made to capture the bear. The bear eventually headed North into FWP Region 1 where he dropped his collar then was eventually captured and euthanized.

See the link below for more information:

<https://www.seeleylake.com/story/2018/07/12/news/grizzly-bear-captured-south-of-condon-euthanized/3763.html>

A grizzly bear cub was reported as road kill along Highway 83 North of the Seeley Lake RS.



"Baptiste" entering a barn with an open door in the Clearwater Valley. Photo courtesy landowner.

Female grizzly road-killed near Lincoln and cubs rescued

On June 5th an adult female grizzly, previously handled but whose identity will not be revealed until after DNA analysis, was struck and killed by a vehicle on Highway 200 east of Lincoln, MT. FWP used the female's carcass to capture her cubs. The incident has received national attention and there are multiple articles related to the rescue of the cubs. The three male orphans are being housed at the Helena Wild Montana rehabilitation center and will be sent to a zoo in Quebec, Canada. For more information, check out these articles:

<https://www.blackfootvalleydispatch.com/story/2018/06/13/news/three-cubs-rescued-after-female-grizzly-killed-on-highway-200/268.html>

https://missoulain.com/news/local/orphaned-montana-grizzly-cubs-prepare-for-new-home-in-quebec/article_fc2d8f40-1230-56c8-8835-c9712c2794db.html



On June 5th this female grizzly bear was reported as roadkill just East of Lincoln. The bear was approximately 18 years old with 3 orphaned male cubs of the year. She was placed in this culvert trap to lure the cubs down from the tree and into the trap so they could be captured. Photo by Eric Graham



Here is a photo of the 3 orphaned male grizzly cubs of the year waiting to be placed in a zoo. Photo by Eric Graham

RESEARCH TRAPPING

An upsurge of grizzly-related management conflicts through July, only allowed for a brief research trapping period at the end of July. On July 26th a 535 pound adult male, “Walking Bear”, was recaptured and collared west of Lincoln. On July 30th two grizzlies, an adult female and a sub adult male, were captured. The 245 pound female “Silver Queen” was collared NE of Lincoln and the young male, “Sunny,” was captured south of Lincoln and not collared. At this time there are no other radio collared grizzly bears in the Blackfoot Valley. One additional female known as “Icel”, wearing an ear transmitter since 2016, has been observed on several occasions, but the transmitter is no longer functioning. For more information related to the grizzly bear population monitoring study go

to: <http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/management/grizzlyBear/monitoring.html>

BLACK BEAR AND MOUNTAIN LION ACTIVITY

Black bear conflicts have been minimal this season. A black bear was reported tipping over a bear-resistant garbage can and pulling a bag of mineral salt out of a truck bed in a yard in the Kleinschmidt Flats area. Two traps were set in June for black bears in the Lincoln area. Two traps were set for black bears in the Potomac area as well.

There have been a handful of mountain lion conflicts thus far. A mountain lion was reported hunting house cats in the Kleinschmidt Flats area. In the Potomac area, a family group of lions was removed, after Wildlife Services received reports of depredations on chickens, goats and sheep. Reports of mountain lion activity, especially in the Lincoln and Seeley Lake areas are common.

For more information on black bear and lion activity in and around Region 2 check out these two sites:

<http://missoulabears.org/>

<https://www.facebook.com/missoulabears/>

And for information on how to avoid either directly or indirectly feeding wildlife in Montana, visit:

<http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/livingWithWildlife/feeding/default.html>

Electric fence cost share program

Multiple fencing projects have occurred at various residents across the valley. Electric fencing is an excellent way to protect livestock, fowl and contain residential attractants. Electric fence is a surefire method of ensuring that any bears or other predators that check out yard areas will not come back again. A good shock is the best way to teach bears to keep away. Contact Jamie Jonkel 544-1447 if you would like to talk about cost share programs to install electric fence around home sites, livestock holding pens (chickens, cattle, pigs, goats, sheep, bee yards), fruit orchards, gardens and other sites that might attract bears or other wildlife. Again, more information is available on electric fence and detailed reports on grizzly, black bear and mountain lion activity at:

<http://www.missoulabears.org>

<https://defenders.org/got-grizzlies>