

THE BLACKFOOT WATERSHED WOLF AND BEAR ACTIVITY REPORT

Fall 2018 and Spring 2019

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, but due to the large volume of grizzly bear conflicts and activity last fall, and the fact that we were short-handed due to the fact that James Jonkel (FWP R2 bear manager) was unable to work due to an injury, I was not able to complete a report last fall. And, it looks like we will be short-handed again this spring, James Jonkel will be out most of the spring and early summer recovering from surgery and it will be Eli Hampson and myself covering most of the issues with bears.

First, some history on the Blackfoot Challenge Range Rider Program: It was back in 2008 that the Blackfoot Challenge (BC) started a pilot season to explore hiring 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.

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

Eli Hampson---MFWP Bear/Lion Management Technician (406) 210-3213

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 or more Adults

Collared Wolf: Yes (1)

Pack Report: There were two radio collared wolves in this pack in 2018. One radio collared wolf was harvested during the 2018 wolf hunting and trapping season. A radio collared female should still be active in the pack.

AVON PACK

Pack Structure: 5 Adults

Collared Wolf: No

Pack Report: Nothing new to report.

BELMONT PACK

Pack Structure: ~5 Adults

Collared Wolf: No

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: ~8 Adults

Collared Wolf: No

Pack Report: Nothing new to report.

CONGER POINT PACK

Backcountry

HUMBUG PACK

Pack Structure: Unknown

Collared Wolf: No

Pack Report: Nothing new to report.

INEZ PACK

Pack Structure: ~5 Adults

Collared Wolf: No

Pack Report: There were two radio collared wolves in this pack in 2018. A radio collared adult was harvested during the 2018 wolf hunting and trapping season. And a two-year-old radio collared female was illegally taken.

LANDERS FORK PACK

Pack Structure: Unknown

Collared Wolf: No

Pack Report: Nothing new to report.

MORRELL MOUNTAIN PACK

Pack Structure: 7 Adults

Collared Wolf: Yes (4)

Pack Report: MFWP continues to monitor via radio telemetry.

SEELEY LAKE PACK

Pack Structure: 4 Adults

Collared Wolf: No

Pack Report: Nothing new to report.

STONEWALL MOUNTAIN PACK

Pack Structure: 4 Adults

Collared Wolf: Yes (1)

Pack Report: Nothing new to report.

UNION PEAK PACK

Pack Structure: 4 Adults

Collared Wolf: No

Pack Report: Nothing new to report.

WOLF ACTIVITY

Wolf activity in the Blackfoot remains consistent with years past, with reports coming in throughout the valley.



Wolf tracks from the Sunflower Pack near Gold Creek.

On March 7th, 2019, The Blackfoot Challenge partnered with Wildlife Services, FWP, and a local ranch to deploy turbo fladry to deter wolves from entering a calving yard.

For 2019, Wildlife Services has not verified any wolf depredations in the Blackfoot or in FWP's Region 2 (As of 4/26/2019).



A wolf track (lower right corner) paralleling the turbo fladry on the outside of a calving yard.

IMPORTANT UPDATES REGARDING GRIZZLY BEAR ACTIVITY IN THE BLACKFOOT VALLEY

2018:

Last summer turned out to be the worst grizzly conflict season on record in the Blackfoot watershed. Most years, we average four to five livestock depredations and 15 or so residential conflicts, involving garbage, bird feeders, fruit trees, freezers, grain sheds and other attractants. But this last year we had approximately 80 grizzly-related conflicts, six of which were verified livestock depredations and one depredation attempt.

Due to the large number of residential-related conflicts last year, I grouped some of the individual conflict incidents into conflict episodes. For example, during a two-night period in June, we had two grizzlies come into Ovando, that got into uncontained garbage at multiple homes and businesses, grain in one chicken coop and a garbage wagon. These conflicts were all lumped and counted as one conflict episode.

With that in mind, I did my best to break the 2018 grizzly bear conflicts up by tributary:

Clearwater Drainage 2018

In the Clearwater Drainage we had approximately 18 conflicts: 15 involved grizzlies getting into uncontained garbage and chicken or livestock feed; one predation of a pig; and two crowd control/ traffic hazard- related conflicts. The majority, of these conflicts, were related to the radio collared grizzly bear “Baptiste”, who was destroyed by FWP near Condon in early July. There was at least one additional adult male grizzly that killed the pig and was involved in a handful of garbage incidents. This unmarked adult male also spent time on the Blackfoot Valley side near Woodworth and Ovando.

Upper Blackfoot Drainage 2018

In the Blackfoot Valley we had approximately 62 conflict episodes. There were roughly 50 incidents involving grizzlies accessing garbage, livestock feed, chicken feed, Crystal Lyx, bird feeders, BBQs, dog food, fruit trees, animal carcasses in yards and one incident of a freezer full of meat on a back porch. There were two reports of a grizzly hitting hunting camps in the Scapegoat Wilderness. There were three sudden encounters, in two of which bear spray was deployed. And in the Blackfoot, Wildlife Services, verified five livestock depredations and one depredation attempt on calves. And in the Lincoln area there was one road hazard/crowd control situation involving a road-killed female grizzly and her 3 orphaned cubs. The majority, of the residential conflicts, involved two grizzly bears traveling together and additional grizzly bears, one of which had a severe limp. It was difficult to determine how many grizzlies were involved with the Blackfoot Valley depredations, but it was verified that a family group was involved with the one calf injury west of Helmville in early April, and a lone grizzly was suspected in depredations south west of Helmville. But, due to the large numbers of conflicts in 2018 it was difficult to determine exactly how many different bears were involved in conflicts. Two adult grizzlies and three orphaned cubs were trapped as a result of these conflicts. The two adults were relocated to the Flathead National Forest and the three cubs were placed in the Quebec Zoo.

(Note: there were a handful of additional incidents with livestock involving grizzly bears feeding on or scavenging other predator’s kills and/or suspect kills. And south of the Blackfoot Valley, in the Gold Creek area, there was one verified grizzly calf depredation July.)

We had higher conflicts in 2018 for multiple reasons: 1) The grizzly bear population has increased and we have reached capacity; 2) Grizzlies that have keyed into agricultural crops in proximity to houses; 3) Multiple family groups with dispersing sub adults are inhabiting the valley; 4) Unusual spring and heavy snow pack has concentrated the bear activity on green-up sites around the valley floor; 5) The 2017 fires burned hot along the south end of the Bob Marshall and Scapegoat Wildernesses and bears were displaced to adjacent areas; 6)

Exceptional berry crops (service berry, choke cherry and hawthorn) lured bears into the lower elevations; and 7) Bears are being trained up by individuals with uncontained residential/agricultural foods that are good to eat (garbage, grain, fruit, etc.).

The two male grizzlies trapped and relocated were captured during the following management actions:

1. On April 22nd, 2018, 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.) In late summer 2018 "McElwain" dropped his collar in Glacier National Park.
2. On September 19th, 2018, a young adult male was captured at a ranch near the Aunt Molly Wildlife Area after it tipped over several burn barrels and investigated the yard area. The bear was approximately 300 pounds and was named "Blackfoot". The bear was collared and relocated to the Flathead National Forest on the edge of the Great Bear Wilderness Area. His last known location was last fall south of the Blackfoot Indian Reservation on the Rocky Mountain Front.

The residential/ranch-site conflicts that occurred in 2018 were mostly due to a handful of grizzlies that developed food-conditioned behavior last year. 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 area 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.

2019 To-Date:

Adult male grizzly tracks were observed in the foothills and higher ridge lines as early as March 19th this year. By the end of March our two collared males, a research male known as “Walking Bear” and a subadult Male that was relocated from the Bitterroot to the NE side of the Rattlesnake Wilderness, both emerged from their dens. The research female grizzly, known as “Silverqueen,” was still in her den as of last week.

Since the second week of April a handful of bears appeared in the valley floor. There have been multiple incidents this spring:

- On April 5th a grizzly was observed crossing a field with cows near Helmsville. The bear did not chase or show interest in the cows.
- On April 13th a grizzly was observed crossing Hwy 200 on the west side of Ovando. The bear skirted the edge of town and continued south toward the Blackfoot River.
- On April 15th there were two separate incidents where grizzlies investigated residences. A grizzly was photographed at night in a yard near Clearwater Junction. The bear tipped over two empty garbage cans and moved around several fuel/oil barrels. And that same night a grizzly, north of Seeley Lake, accessed a winter’s worth of garbage that was being stored in an open trailer. We are monitoring "Stevi" as he is in this vicinity and we hope he has not learned about garbage.
- In the Helmsville area, Wildlife Services responded to a handful of grizzly/predator complaints involving livestock, including: an injured calf near the Aunt Molly WMA; an injured calf near Nevada Lake; a scavenged calf near Avon and several reports of missing calves; and several verified depredations. On April 20th Wildlife Services did set traps for a grizzly involved with a calf depredation SW of Helmsville and on April 23rd a lone grizzly was captured and destroyed. It was believed that this grizzly was involved in two depredations at this site this spring and three depredations at the same site last year. Traps were also set at an adjacent ranch on April 23rd for a grizzly that killed one calf, maybe two. No bear has been captured at this site.
- On April 25th three grizzlies were observed near a homesite/bus stop in the vicinity of the Aunt Molly WMA. It was determined that the grizzlies were feeding on a bull carcass near the site. This situation was monitored and it appears that the bears have left the area now that the carcass is mostly consumed.

See the link below for more:

https://missoulian.com/news/local/after-busy-grizzly-managers-brace-for-more-work/article_7f861c8b-3169-58f5-9b9a-10748263efe5.html

LIVESTOCK CARCASS PICKUP PROGRAM

The Blackfoot Challenge's Livestock Carcass Pick Up and Removal Program runs from mid-February through mid-May. Thereafter, carcasses in the Blackfoot watershed are picked up by FWP. If you currently have a carcass for pick 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, watch the video ["Living with Carnivores: Boneyards, Bear & Wolves."](#)

In the spring of 2018 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 now recommend that after March 2019 all carcasses set aside for pickup be stored away from the ranch premises.

In late March 2019 we sent a letter out to participants with this wording:

"Due to last year's issues with grizzlies being lured into several ranch compounds for livestock carcasses, it is recommended that, after April 1st, carcasses not be stored within the ranch headquarters or near cattle activity. Rather, carcasses should be stored at a minimum of 400 yards from human and livestock activity at an accessible site with good visibility. Make sure the carcasses are still convenient for carcass pickup, but at safe site well away from human activity and cover. If possible, place carcass on top of an old hay bale. If livestock die be sure to call Dan Massey so he can prioritize his normal route pickup schedule. If needed, the ranch can also call Eric Graham with the Blackfoot Challenge or James Jonkel with MFWP for emergency pickup. If there is concern that a carcass will lure in bears before pick up, there is always the option of personally hauling the carcass to the Clearwater Compost site. In certain situations, the carcass can also be relocated to a remote site on the ranch, well away from livestock where it can be left for scavengers. It is recommended, for safety reasons, that such locations on the ranch be made off limits. Note: Be sure to lock up all sheds and barns where garbage, grain and other attractants are stored and if you are in need of additional electric fence materials or energizers for containing carcasses or other bear attractants (grain, sweet licks, garbage, etc.) call Eric Graham or James Jonkel."

NEW GRIZZLY BEAR ADVISORY COUNCIL TO BE APPOINTED BY GOVERNOR BULLOCK

Grizzly bear management in Montana is complex. While they are at recovery levels in the Greater Yellowstone (GYE) and Northern Continental Divide Ecosystems (NCDE), they have yet to reach recovery goals in the Bitterroot and Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zones. In places where bear numbers are on the rise, they are dispersing into places they haven't been for decades, sometimes causing conflicts with people and communities. The council will consider these changes and challenges and will help make recommendations for grizzly bear management and conservation in Montana.

The Grizzly Bear Advisory Council will be comprised of a broad cross section of Montanans with a diversity of views on grizzly bear management, conservation, and recovery. The Council will be tasked with considering broad strategic objectives, such as:

- Maintaining and enhancing human safety
- Ensuring a healthy and sustainable grizzly bear population
- Improving timely and effective response to conflicts involving grizzly bears
- Engaging all partners in grizzly-related outreach and conflict prevention
- Improving intergovernmental, interagency, and tribal coordination

For more information on the new advisory council, visit:

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

BLACK BEAR AND MOUNTAIN LION ACTIVITY

Black bear conflicts have been minimal this spring. Two different black bears have been reported investigating back yards in the Seeley Lake area. There were a handful of mountain lion conflicts this March in the Seeley Lake and Potomac areas. Reports of mountain lion activity the Blackfoot, 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 residences 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 at 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>