

# **THE BLACKFOOT WATERSHED WOLF AND BEAR ACTIVITY REPORT**

## **August and September 2016**

Hello everyone, this is Eric Graham working as the wildlife technician for the Blackfoot Challenge. In coordination with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) we produce this wolf and bear activity report.

Thanks to both Sigrid Olsen and Jordan Mannix for helping out with the range rider efforts this season. Sigrid has been working out of the Potomac area and Jordan has been working around Ovando and Helmville. We are working with several ranches throughout the Blackfoot watershed to help them keep an eye on predator activity and to increase herd supervision until the end of October 2016. I have also been monitoring collared grizzly bears and wolves in the watershed and assisting MFWP with research and management trapping efforts.

Thanks to all of the ranchers, landowners and partners that make this program possible every year in the Blackfoot. Thanks for the continued support of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Livestock Loss Board, Northern Rockies Conservation Co-op, Defenders of Wildlife, Vital Ground, Cross Charitable Foundation, 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 predator 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 wolf/grizzly bear predation, you can request an investigation to see if the losses were due to a confirmed or probable wolf/grizzly bear 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**

On 8/2 a 100 pound yearling gray male wolf was captured East of Seeley. The wolf was fitted with a radio collar for monitoring purposes. It is part of the Seeley Lake Pack, which is a newly confirmed pack for the region for 2016. There are at least three adults and two pups in this pack.



A radio collared yearling male wolf from the Seeley Lake Pack. Photo by Tyler Parks.

On 8/2 WS confirmed a calf depredation by wolves South of Lincoln. Forty-five days are given to remove wolves from a pack after a confirmed depredation. WS has removed 8 wolves from this pack.

On 8/15 a 240 pound young male grizzly bear was captured in the Basin area between Helena and Butte. The bear was involved with some property damage and had received a food reward of uncontained cat food. On 8/16 the grizzly bear named "Basin" was fitted with a radio collar and was relocated to a remote location northwest of Lincoln hoping that he was not completely food conditioned. The bear was closely monitored and headed into the backcountry for some time but was eventually located by a MFWP flight survey west of Lincoln. On 8/30 the bear was reported by residents west of Lincoln near home sites eating serviceberry, apples and he had broken into a horse trailer to access feed. On 8/31 MFWP immobilized the bear by the "free

range" use of a dart gun and placed it in a culvert trap for transport. On 9/1 the bear was euthanized. [Click to read the full press release from MFWP.](#)

On 8/22 MFWP captured a 450 pound grizzly bear named "Silver King" east of Lincoln and collared him for research purposes. On 9/7 a MFWP flight survey reported that the "Silver King" collar was beeping on mortality mode which simply means the collar is not moving. On 9/12 the pilot was able to retrieve the dropped collar and confirm the bear was not dead.



The MFWP pilot was able to retrieve the dropped "Silver King" collar. Photo by Joe Rahn.

### **BLACKFOOT VALLEY WOLF PACKS**

#### **ARRASTRA CREEK PACK**

Pack Structure: 5 Adults 5 Pups

Collared Wolf: Yes (1)

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

#### **BELMONT PACK**

Pack Structure: 5 Adults 5 Pups

Collared Wolf: Yes (2)

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

#### **BUGLE MOUNTAIN PACK**

Backcountry

CHAMBERLAIN PACK

Pack Structure: Unknown

Collared Wolf: No

Pack Report: Nothing new to report.

CONGER POINT PACK

Backcountry

HUMBUG PACK

Pack Structure: Unknown

Collared Wolf: No

Pack Report: WS collared one wolf and euthanized five following a confirmed depredation.

INEZ PACK

Pack Structure: 8 Adults

Collared Wolf: Yes (1)

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



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A trail camera photo of the collared wolf from the Inez pack. Photo by Jordan Mannix.

#### LANDERS FORK PACK

Pack Structure: 5 Adults

Collared Wolf: No

Pack Report: Nothing new to report.

#### MORRELL MOUNTAIN PACK

Pack Structure: 2 Adults

Collared Wolf: Yes (1)

Pack Report: MFWP continues to monitor via radio telemetry.

#### SEELEY LAKE PACK

Pack Structure: 3 Adults 2 Pups

Collared Wolf: Yes (1)

Pack Report: MFWP continues to monitor via radio telemetry.

#### STONEWALL MOUNTAIN PACK

Pack Structure: 6 Adults

Collared Wolf: Yes (2)

Pack Report: MFWP continues to monitor via radio telemetry.

#### UNION PEAK PACK

Pack Structure: Unknown

Collared Wolf: No

Pack Report: Nothing new to report.

#### GRIZZLY BEAR ACTIVITY

Grizzly bears have been widely dispersed throughout the Blackfoot and Clearwater valleys this season and have been reported by landowners, ranchers, local residents, recreationists and hunters. PLEASE remember to carry your bear spray and to keep a clean camp as to avoid attracting bears to prevent conflicts.

We appreciate you taking the time to call in all of your grizzly bear observations including tracks and sightings. If possible take photos and a measurement of the width of the front foot of grizzly bear tracks.

MFWP had been trapping for grizzly bears to put out five GPS collars for an electric fence research project in the Blackfoot watershed. Six male grizzly bears were collared: "Moose" a 544 pound male was captured on 5/14 and dropped his collar up the North Fork of the Blackfoot. "Walking Bear" a 466 pound male was captured on 5/28 and has been located between Lincoln and the Highway 141 Blackfoot River bottom. "Stone" a 253 pound sub-adult male was captured on 6/19 and has been located north of Ovando and south of Helmville. "Dan" a 475 pound male was captured on 6/23 and has been located east of Elevation Mountain over to Monture Creek and over by the Highway 141 Blackfoot River bottom. "Marten" a 336 pound male was captured on 7/12 and has been located near Monture Creek and the Blackfoot Community Conservation Area (BCCA). "Silver King" a 450 pound male was captured on 8/22 and had been located up the Landers Fork before he dropped his collar near Silver King Mountain. Four of these male grizzly bears are still wearing their collars. Now that bow hunting season has started MFWP has shut down the grizzly bear research trap lines for this season.

There was some confusion about the collared grizzly bears named "Stone" and "Dan" that were mentioned in the last report as being located with radio telemetry near the Highway 141 Blackfoot River bottom. Those bears were both originally caught and released on-site near Ovando and had traveled on their own over to the river bottom.



A trail camera photo of the “Silver King” grizzly before the capture. Photo by Eric Graham



A photo of processing/radio collaring “Silver King”. Photo By Tyler Parks.

Several grizzly bears have been reported feeding on oats, peas, barley, hay barley and alfalfa this season. Some of the bears have been digging for gophers out in the pivots. If possible we suggest not planting these crops close to homes as to avoid human/bear conflicts.

There have been several grizzly bear sightings near the Aunt Molly Wildlife Management Area (WMA). It has been reported that there are 2 or 3 family groups and at least 2 other lone bears taking advantage of the abundant food sources and the good habitat in the area. If bow hunting in the area please carry bear spray, remove harvested game as quickly as possible and know that cow calling may bring in a bear.

Please pick your apples and keep your grain contained as to not attract bears near home sites. If you missed it, [this recent Seeley Swan Pathfinder](#) article highlights the importance of securing your garbage.

On 8/7 MFWP removed a roadkill deer carcass that had been drug across the Double Arrow golf course by a bear. The bear had fed on the carcass before it was removed from the site.

Currently there is one research female grizzly bear in the valley to support the ongoing NCDE population trend monitoring study. "Icel" continues to be localized around Woodworth, Monture Creek, the Blackfoot River above Clearwater Junction and Cottonwood Creek. There had been another research female grizzly named "Portman" but her ear transmitter is no longer working. More information related to the grizzly bear population monitoring study is available on the MFWP website:

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

On 9/6 a twelve year old 500+ pound male grizzly bear was picked up as roadkill by MFWP along Highway 83 near Condon. The dark black grizzly had been caught several times for research and was known to spend time on the Flathead Indian Reservation and in the Swan Valley.

MFWP responded to a family group of grizzly bears that were getting close to a home site north of Helmville. The female and 3 cubs of the year were feeding on barley. A propane cannon was set up to try to deter the bears. The cannon did not work as the bears returned. The landowner cut the barley and the bears moved on.

Bears are still feeding on natural foods such as hawthorn berry, kinnikinnick berry, red-osier dogwood berries and the remaining huckleberries. The bears are also digging biscuitroot and taking advantage of moth sites.

More grizzly bear activity is being reported to the south of the Blackfoot watershed. Two grizzly bear sightings have been reported from the Big Hole.

## **BLACK BEAR ACTIVITY**

On 9/6 a female black bear was reported as roadkill along Highway 141 north of the Nevada Lake Reservoir. MFWP responded and there were two orphan cubs of the year onsite and another cub was reported as also being roadkill. On 9/7 one of the remaining cubs was captured and was taken to the MFWP rehab center in Helena. The other cub was not captured.



The orphan black bear cub that was captured and taken to Helena. Photo by Mike Miller.

There have been some reports of black bears in and around Lincoln. One black bear was sighted in Lincoln and MFWP responded and pushed the bear out of town.

In Seeley Lake there have been some black bears getting on porches to access birdfeeders and also tipping over garbage cans. Please take down your birdfeeders, contain your garbage and pick your fruit trees.

There have been several reports of black bears around Potomac. Please contain your attractants such as pet food, salt licks and livestock feed as to reduce human-bear conflicts.

For more 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 STUDY**

### **Grizzly Bear Study Update**

Hello everyone,

The electric fencing study has ended for the year. This was our second field season. Hopefully there is enough data to give us some definitive answers, but if not, we will carry out a third field season next summer from June to mid-August. Now that I've had my fun with two field seasons, the hard and not so fun part begins where I spend my days learning how to and then analyzing the data. I do not have any definitive answers yet, but once that data is available I will be sending it out in this report. We had a lot of bear activity this season, and once again the majority of the activity was from black bears.

I have three things left to do for the study: 1) develop a map of all permanent electric fence in the Blackfoot Watershed, 2) collect data from five collars the bear management team deployed this year and analyze that data in a year, and 3) write a paper detailing the study and its results and recommendations.

I would love to hear from landowners who have permanent electric fence on their property so I can develop our map. After we have developed this map, we will overlay the grizzly bear GPS points from the five collars and look for any patterns of avoidance or use where electric fence is present. If you have permanent electric fence, feel free to give me a call at 406-214-5749.

I would like to thank everyone for your support during our field seasons. It has been a wonderful experience working in the Blackfoot Valley!

Brittani Johnson



Figure 2 - This grizzly walks around the fence multiple times but never attempts to pass



Figure 1 - This black bear eventually crawls underneath the fence while its turned off to reap the rewards of some rotten fish

## **Grizzly Bear Study Design**

During the summers of 2015 and 2016, a small wildlife study was conducted in the Blackfoot Valley. Brittani Johnson, a graduate student of Montana State University, is studying the effects that permanent electric fence has on the movement patterns of grizzly and black bears and whether or not the miles of electric fence in the valley will hinder these animals from gaining access to portions of the landscape. The study will take place over the course of two years, and there are two parts to the study.

The first part, or **Study A**, is an experiment where Brittani built and tested two different designs of electric fence:

1) The first design is a style of three-wire electric boundary fence that was recently approved by the state legislature. It is hypothesized that this style of new boundary fence will allow bears passage under the fence if only the top hot wire is hot (42"). If this fence proves to actually hinder wildlife passage when the top wire is hot it may have impacts on fence design criteria for conservation easements across the west.

2) The second style is a three-wire hot/ground/hot fence that is much closer to the ground. It is hypothesized that this style when turned on will actually prevent bears from entering. The importance of testing this fence design is that at this time the only electric fences officially approved for deterring bears from backcountry camps, sheep bedding grounds and other attractant sites is a 5 to 7 wire hot ground system. Fences that are less than five wires at this time cannot receive funding from the NRCS, Defenders of Wildlife and other groups. We are hoping to prove scientifically that three wire fences, with two hot wires and one ground wire that are just above knee height will stop bears and will be appropriate for funding in certain situations - - such as quickly electrifying a large orchard, crop field or temporary livestock enclosure. We are hoping to prove that three-wire electric fences are applicable for deterring bears so as to get funding for the rapid deployment three wire electric fence (a new tool in the basket) that we were hoping to put around alfalfa and seed crop fields near home-sites when bears are getting too close. The overall goal is to find a fence design that when turned on, hinders bear movement into sensitive areas such as calving pastures, crop fields, and other areas that bears are not wanted at certain times of the year, but when turned off it allows the bear to go through the fence and gain access to the landscape.

Each electric fence design involves baiting the small enclosures with scent lure, and observing through trail cameras the behavior of any bear that comes to the site and tries to go through the fence. Every three days the fences will be turned on and off. When the fence is off, the bear will penetrate the fence and receive a reward from a scent lure placed inside the fence. The bear will hopefully then come back and try to penetrate the fence when it is electrified and receive a shock. Brittani will observe if the bear comes back to the fence after being shocked and tries to penetrate the fence again or if the bear

never comes back because of the negative experience of being shocked. The overall goal is to find one fence design that when turned on, hinders bear movement into sensitive areas such as calving pastures, crop fields, and other areas that bears are not wanted at certain times of the year, but when turned off it allows the bear to go through the fence and gain access to the landscape. And to test a second design, that was recently approved by the legislature for boundary fence, that will hopefully allow free passage of wildlife across the landscape when only the top wire is electrified.

The second part of the study, or **Study B**, is a presence/absence study of all grizzly and black bears in the Blackfoot Valley. Throughout the course of the two year study, 60 trail cameras will be placed at random points in the valley to determine where these animals are and where they are not. At the end of the study, these data will be used to create a map of grizzly and black bear occupancy throughout the valley, and whether or not these bears are already hindered by areas that are heavily fenced with electric fence and have been avoiding those areas because of difficulty of passage.

### **LIVESTOCK CARCASS PICK-UP PROGRAM**

The Blackfoot Challenge's Livestock Carcass Pick Up and Removal Program ran from mid-February through mid-May. If you have a carcass before that program starts up again in mid-February 2017, please call Jamie Jonkel 544-1447. To learn more about this program, click here: ["Living with Carnivores: Boneyards, Bear & Wolves"](#)

### **ELECTRIC FENCE COST SHARE PROGRAM**

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. More information is available at <http://www.missoulabears.org> along with more detailed reports on grizzly bear, black bear and mountain lion activity.