

known, has created scent stations at which powerful olfactory attractants such as rotten fish offal are sprinkled around a single strand of barbed wire. From this, researchers have extracted bear hair for DNA analysis. To date, all the samples they've tested have belonged to black bears.

The failure to find solid evidence has everyone puzzled. My instinct is that a few grizzlies are finding their way into the Bitterroot—which explains the sightings—but that the bears don't stay long. The crucial question is why.

The unnamed pass is no more than a goat trail between two giant towers of metamorphic rock. We slide through sideways and look around. We're at the top of a 1,500-foot-high bedrock amphitheater looking down into a high alpine basin. Far beyond, through the haze, lies a huge lake—probably Elizabeth. One giant step below, a cascading creek dumps into a smaller turquoise pool.

We look down on a mountain goat sleeping on a ledge and realize there's no way to drop down the near-vertical face of the cirque. To the west, a series of ledges slope downward. The entire landscape is shaped by a blocky geologic joint pattern; giant rectangular cracks in the white gneiss are filled with subalpine fir and brush. That seems to be the way down.

Using hands and hiking poles, we edge along the run of short cliffs leading northwest, where the route is somewhat less vertical. Patches of snow are lodged in the coarse talus.

The ledge I'm walking pinches off, and I stare down a 50-foot cliff. I climb back up and continue contouring. We drop down the cracks and gullies where we can. Eventually, we hit stunted trees, alder, and mountain ash bushes. The descent takes all day.

At the bottom, a creek tumbles from a snow cave. A garden of purple monkey flowers and green moss lines the bank. Extensive sedge fields mark where the summer snow has melted.

My method for looking for grizzlies is more instinctual than technical. Experience tells me that this is a promising spot: Grizzlies are prodigious diggers in areas like this. A black bear might tear up anthills for food, but it doesn't dig; its bigger cousin plows meadows and benches for roots of lilies and other plants. If you find a series of big holes and trenches, you've discovered the work of a grizzly.

But tonight we're too exhausted to look around. We covered only a handful of raven miles today, but the 2,000 feet up and 1,500 down, scrambling with full pack, felt like 20. Except, seemingly, for Larry, who's already poking about for sign. Chuck and I hit the final flat and dump our packs, whipped and too tired to eat. Larry fires up his campstove and whistles as he starts in on an elaborate dinner from his freeze-dried stash. Chuck and I consider hiding rocks in his pack.

In the morning, we bask in the oblique autumnal sunlight.

(Continued on page 85)

Do The Numbers Lie?

GRIZZLY POPULATIONS ARE BOOMING AROUND YELLOWSTONE, BUT SOME OBSERVERS CALL IT A MIRAGE.

By Michael Lanza

By some measures, America's grizzlies are enjoying their best days in more than a century. Their numbers in the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem, an 18-million-acre area that supports the largest U.S. population outside of Alaska, has doubled to more than 600 since 1975. The great bears have also doubled their

range, with at least 100 now living in places where they haven't been seen in more than 50 years, like the Tetons and Wind Rivers. And most significantly: They've met every criteria laid out in a 1993 recovery plan for their removal from the Endangered Species List. "We still have a lot to do," says Chris Servheen, grizzly recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "But grizzlies are much better off now than when they were listed."

As a result, the Fish and Wildlife Service is poised to propose delisting grizzlies throughout Greater Yellowstone. If delisted, the bears outside Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks would be managed by the six national forests surrounding Yellowstone and the states of Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho. (Protections for bears within the national parks would not change.)

But some bear experts and most conservation groups vigorously oppose delisting. They cite threats to critical food sources and other pressures (see page 54) in arguing that today's good news masks serious long-term problems—ones that may

manifest belatedly because grizzlies live long and reproduce slowly. "Even though the grizzly population seems to be stable now, the long-term trend isn't promising," says biologist Dr. Lance Craighead, director of the Craighead Environmental Research Institute. "There's going to be less and less habitat to support them." Of the five Lower 48 recovery zones, only two—Greater Yellowstone and the Northern Continental Divide (Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall Wilderness complex)—have healthy grizzly populations. Grizzlies in the other three—northwest Montana's Cabinet-Yaak Mountains, the Selkirk Mountains of northern Idaho and northeast Washington, and Washington's North Cascades—are on the verge of extinction.

A final resolution may be years off, because conservation groups are sure to challenge delisting in court. This much both sides agree on: We stand at a pivotal moment with the grizzly. What we do in the next decade could help it flourish from the northern Rockies to the North Cascades or reduce it to a few isolated populations.



PHOTO BY MICHIO HOSHIMIZEN PICTURES

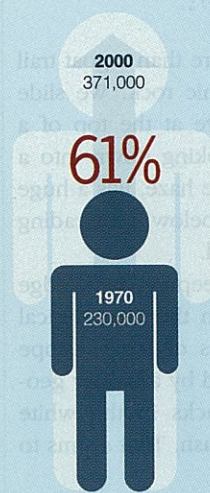
The Grizzly Puzzle

Grizzlies represent the knottiest kind of wildlife riddle: Even as their population has grown in the last 3 decades, bolstering faith in the restorative power of the American wilds and legislative protections, serious threats remain. By Michael Lanza

The Great Debate Should grizzlies be removed from the threatened species list? Critics of the proposed delisting want the Endangered Species Act's stricter protections applied everywhere grizzlies live and have solid science behind them. Proponents argue that delisting bears will actually improve their lot. Their logic? Remove restrictions on economic development in the 5.9-million-acre recovery zone, and people will no longer view grizzlies as an impediment to the American dream.

"Our job is to build a constituency for the bears," says USFWS biologist Chris Servheen. "Their future will be built on people who live, work, and recreate in grizzly habitat."

But many conservationists don't trust such attempts at compromise. "Delisting is about energy [development] and exploitation of habitat," says Louisa Willcox, head of the Wild Bears Project.



POPULATION GROWTH The human population around Yellowstone Park grew by 61 percent between 1970 and 2000. The national growth rate was 38 percent.

BY THE NUMBERS

250

Average weight, in pounds, of females in spring

400

Average weight, in pounds, of males in spring

50-100

Average pounds gained before hibernation

10-12

Heartbeats per minute of a hibernating grizzly

4-7

Age, in years, at which females begin breeding

6

Number of litters a female grizzly typically has in a lifetime

2

Number of cubs in a typical litter (usually hairless and weighing 1 pound)

20-25

Age, in years, most grizzlies reach before dying

34

Age, in years, of oldest wild grizzly ever captured

Diminishing Diet

Yellowstone grizzlies' major food groups are evaporating.

- Whitebark pine nuts provide up to 40 percent of a bear's winter fat—but the trees are under assault by the mountain pine beetle and blister rust, a European fungus.

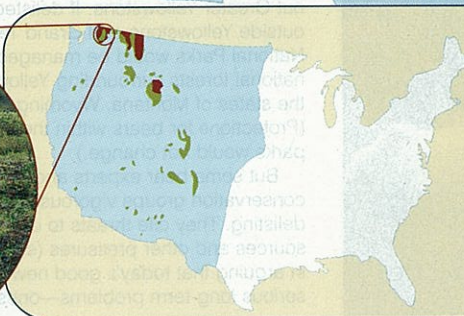
- Yellowstone Lake's cutthroat trout population has been decimated in the past decade by lake trout, a voracious predator illegally introduced there that swims too deeply for bears to catch.

- Climate-change modeling forecasts the loss of 90 percent of alpine habitat—including that of army cutworm moths, which grizzlies lick off the undersides of rocks.



Homes on their Range

Grizzlies are the archetypal wilderness animal in part because they can't live without 50 to 500 square miles of open space. But we've reduced their range by 98 percent in the Lower 48. The human population in greater Yellowstone grew at nearly twice the national rate during the 1990s, when 50 square miles of adjacent national forest was clear-cut. New trophy homes sprouted like cheatgrass in Wyoming's Wapiti Valley and other fringe areas. Oil and gas extraction threats loom in places like Bridger-Teton National Forest, where one current proposal calls for opening 80,000 roadless acres to development. A subdivision has been proposed for the North Fork of the Shoshone, a recognized griz-human hot spot. Experts agree that "linkage zones" joining different bear populations are essential to genetic diversity and long-term viability south of Canada. But highways and communities choke off natural migration corridors.



Grizzly bear distribution in the United States

- 1800
- 1922
- Present