

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.

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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.



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