

Good News Bears



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The Waterton region is famous as the place where the mountains meet the prairie. Though two hundred years of human activity have restricted the grizzly bear to the mountains, the call of their ancestral home on the prairies must be loud.

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The future of grizzly bears in southern Alberta is starting to look a little more rosy these days, in large part due to a growing collaboration between landowners, municipalities, environmental groups and government staff working to reduce human/ bear conflicts. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the southwestern corner of the province, where the work of the Drywood Yarrow Conservation Partnership (DYCP) is beginning to pay dividends.

For many years, the traditional view of grizzlies in this region has been that they are relatively secure in their strongholds in the mountainous and forested public land to the west, but the moment they step eastwards over the forest reserve boundary, they come into conflict with private landowners. The result is either the relocation of these “problem” bears, or worse still, death at the hands of gun-toting supporters of the policy Ralph Klein infamously referred to as “shoot,

shovel and shut up.”

Increasingly however, this picture is being turned on its head. While poorly-managed motorized recreation continues to contribute to unsustainably high grizzly mortality in much of their range on public land, early indications are that grizzlies are beginning to spread out onto adjacent private land to the east. And if initiatives such as the DYCP can continue their work to keep both bears and people safe by reducing the attractants which can bring bears into closer contact with people, then there is no reason why grizzlies cannot be a permanent part of this landscape into the future.

Grizzlies Coming Home

In a way it is not entirely surprising if grizzlies are indeed moving east from the mountains out onto the prairies. When we think of grizzlies today, we tend to associate them with the mountains and foothills, the remote spectacular wilderness landscapes where they are

most likely to be encountered. But it was not always thus. In fact grizzlies are at heart a prairie species; they evolved out on the wide open grasslands, and this is their ancestral home. In southwestern Alberta, where the prairies butt right up against the mountains with a minimal transition zone, it is perhaps not too surprising that grizzlies here are tempted to head east, even into country where they have rarely been recorded in many decades.

For people who have lived and worked on these landscapes for generations, it is not necessarily an easy matter suddenly to have to deal with a large carnivore on their doorstep. But rather than discreetly getting rid of their new ursine neighbours, or clamouring to have Fish and Wildlife staff come and take them away, an increasing number of people are looking at ways to learn to live with them.

On a beautiful early summer’s day south of Pincher Creek, DYCP and

Trout Unlimited hosted a field trip to explain some of their recent initiatives. The Drywood Yarrow Conservation Partnership was initially formed in response to the floods of 1995, which wreaked havoc on riparian areas throughout the region. Working with groups such as Cows and Fish, they looked at ways to allow riparian areas to recover, including fencing to keep cattle away from regenerating areas at crucial times of year. The lush young cottonwood growth that can be seen today on Tony Bruder's ranch alongside Yarrow Creek is a testament to the success of this program. "The creek banks are starting to stabilize a little bit and it's making a big difference," explains Bruder, president of the DYCP.

But in 2008, DYCP's focus began to expand: "we started to really notice an increase in large carnivore activity in the area," says Bruder. Clearly something was happening to attract more bears onto the landscape, and the prime candidates were quickly identified: dead livestock (or "deadstock"), elderly grain storage bins, silage stores and beehives. The provincial *Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan 2008-2013*, which was released later the same year, recognized attractant management as one of the primary issues that needed to be addressed: "Problem bear issues... are usually a result of improperly stored attractants, and therefore, **improper storage of attractants represents one of the primary threats to grizzly bear persistence**" (emphasis in the Recovery Plan).

Deadstock Removal

Not so long ago, if a cow died, it was a relatively simple and economical process to have the carcass removed and taken to the rendering plant. But Alberta's BSE outbreak in 2003 changed all of that. The increased costs of moving and disposing of dead livestock in the days post-BSE meant that it became too costly to have animals removed. Instead there was little option other than to dig a hole and drop the dead animal in, or maybe burn it. Carnivores, particularly bears, are always on the lookout for an easy meal, and their spectacular sense of smell would have quickly alerted them to the presence of such a rich source of food buried just below the surface. "Once grizzlies find



Tony Bruder demonstrates the electric fencing that is helping to keep bears out of his silage stores and beehives.

PHOTO: © N. DOUGLAS



Carcass disposal bin, provided by Alberta BearSmart. Deadstock can be deposited in the bin and removed before they become an attractant to large carnivores.

PHOTO: © N. DOUGLAS

where the carcasses are they come back,” says Mac Main of MX Ranch near Twin Butte.

To help deal with this growing problem, a number of large bear-proof carcass disposal bins have been established at strategic points throughout the landscape; participating landowners can bring their dead animals to be disposed of before they begin to attract the attention of grizzlies. “My opinion is that the deadstock removal program has helped immensely by trying to keep the bears from coming in and creating conflicts,” says Tony Bruder.

Grain, Silage and Bees

DYCP programs have also concentrated on other factors that were attracting bears into conflict situations. Tony Bruder talks about his 92-year-old father who has lived in the area all of his life but never saw a grizzly until 1997. Quickly grizzlies began to cause problems with silage stores; the bears would rip their way into the large plastic silage bags and once open, the contents were wasted. The Bruders could lose 40 tonnes of silage in this way in a single year. True to their cartoon stereotype, the attraction of honey-filled beehives also proved to be irresistible to grizzlies and again the damage could be extensive. The solution turned out to be electric fencing for the silage yards and beehives, though early pilots proved that the power had to be increased on the fencing around beehives to ensure that the bears stayed out. For the past two years, the fencing has been successful in deterring bears, and Bruder has had no bear “incidents.”

Mac Main elected to build one large electrified structure on his land to hold both grain bins and silage bags. As well as bears, elk were a perennial problem on Main’s land, breaking their way into silage bags for a free meal. While standard electric fencing will deter a bear, it will not necessarily prevent an elk from jumping over, thus the seven-foot-high structure that Mac has affectionately dubbed “Jurassic Park.”

On other properties, old-fashioned wooden grain storage bins also proved to be little deterrent to a determined grizzly. But well-constructed electric fencing can help to render them bear-proof and for a more permanent solution, steel granaries are increasingly being used.



Mac Main’s “Jurassic Park” fence serves to keep both bears and elk from his grain and silage stores.

PHOTO: © N. DOUGLAS



Wooden granaries will not stop a hungry grizzly, as is clear from these old bins at Valley View Ranch. But newly-installed electric fencing is proving to be highly successful so far.

PHOTO: © N. DOUGLAS

Beyond the Drywood-Yarrow Region

The one drawback of the DYCP program is its scale: it is a pilot project, which is having noticeable results within one region, but the need for similar programs throughout grizzly bear range in the province is pressing. Many groups have been generous with their funding for projects (see sidebar for supporting groups), but electric fences and steel granaries are expensive, and if grizzlies are to remain on the landscape for the foreseeable future, long-term financing commitments will be essential.

As we have seen, the province's 2008 grizzly recovery plan made it clear that "improper storage of attractants" is a primary threat to grizzly bear persistence. Yet implementation of the plan has been erratic, and funding has still not been provided to allow initiatives such as the DYCP to become the norm throughout grizzly bear range. Further north, in the Livingstone Bear Management Area (between Highway 1 and Highway 3) the most recent provincial estimates indicate a population of around 90 grizzlies. But in 2011 alone, six bears were known to have died and another nine were caught and relocated out of the region. Losing 17 percent of the population in one single year is alarming for any species, particularly a slow-breeding *threatened* species such as the grizzly. And the fate of the bears that are captured and removed is highly doubtful. "Relocations are a concern because the survival of these animals is low," the University of Alberta's Dr. Mark Boyce recently told the *Edmonton Journal*. "Many of them are killed or end up going back to the place where they got into trouble."

Clearly the great example being set by DYCP is something that will need to be multiplied over a much wider scale to help communities throughout grizzly range learn to live with their own wildlife issues.

The Future for Southern Alberta's Grizzlies

The overriding impression from talking to some of the passionate individuals involved in the DYCP is one of optimism: people are willing to look at ways to learn to live with grizzlies and other carnivores on the landscape. And the breadth of individuals working to achieve this is impressive. As well

as the many ranchers and landowners who have been carrying out projects on their own land, many conservation organizations are working to provide their support. They include: Alberta BearSmart, Southwestern Alberta Conservation Partnership, Cows and Fish, Trout Unlimited, and the Alberta Conservation Association. Governments are pitching in too: local Fish and Wildlife offices have been a crucial resource, and indeed they are finding that conflict avoidance measures are a more economic use of resources and staff time than chasing "problem" wildlife. Some local municipalities have been highly supportive of attractant management programs: the MDs of Ranchlands and Cardston already have their own carcass disposal programs (the latter partly funded by the Waterton Biosphere Reserve and the provincial government). Cardston County is even working on an innovative deadstock composting program to make it more financially viable to deal with the dead animals that are removed.

The measures being carried out by the DYCP are entirely consistent with the province's grizzly recovery plan. Though it may not be practical for the provincial government to impose the required attractant management programs upon unwilling local communities, the fact that this community has grabbed the challenge with both hands and is showing a strong sense of leadership is extremely encouraging. Hopefully their leadership will provide a lesson that will be applied by other communities learning to live with carnivores. The prospects for the future are best summed up by Kelly Cooley with the Cowboys and Carnivores project, a partnership between the DYCP and Miistakis Institute: "The finished puzzle is a functioning ecosystem and a healthy community," he says. Who could ask for anything more than that? 🐾

Southwest Alberta's grizzlies

On the DYCP's June field trip Nate Webb, the Alberta government's carnivore specialist, put the position of Alberta's southwestern grizzlies into context:

- In 2007, the Alberta government estimated there were 51 grizzlies in Alberta between Highway 3 and the U.S. border.
- Alberta's grizzlies are part of the larger Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, which supports around 1,000 bears. The population is estimated to be growing by three percent per year, mostly on the fringes.
- Though there is no scientific proof, it is likely that Alberta's grizzlies are also expanding eastwards in this region. Earlier records mostly reported male bears, but now females with cubs are also recorded regularly, suggesting that this is more than just a few seasonally wandering individuals.
- A pilot grizzly DNA study is being carried out in southern Alberta where hair samples are taken from bear rub trees. In 2011, these studies identified 51 individual bears in the forested public lands alone. In 2012 these studies will be extended onto private land.

Funders of the numerous projects profiled during DYCP's June field trip included:

- Trout Unlimited Canada
- Royal Bank of Canada
- Shell Canada
- Alberta Conservation Association
- MultiSAR
- Alberta BearSmart
- Miistakis Institute
- Alberta Beef Producers
- Alberta Ecotrust
- Land Stewardship Centre
- Southwestern Alberta Conservation Partnership
- Cows and Fish