

Saving Grizzly Habitat in Montana

Why it matters.

By Jim Petersen

“Thousands of miles of forest roads have been closed or destroyed to disallow human activities in bear country. Millions of acres of public forest have grown so thick the canopy has closed and sunlight-starved ground cannot grow the forage bears need.”

—BRUCE VINCENT, EVERGREEN FOUNDATION

The conundrum that the Evergreen Foundation’s Bruce Vincent describes was the prelude to the 2025 Joint Venture agreement between Chas Vincent, a conservationist and logger from Libby, Mont., and the U.S. Forest Service’s Rocky Mountain Research Station (RMRS). The agreement describes a data-gathering process that will be used to validate or refute a long-held belief that science-based

thinning and prescribed burning can improve forest health, grizzly habitat and community stability in rural northwest Montana.

The agreement, “Improving Grizzly Bear Habitat Through Timber Harvest,” was written by Tavis Forrester, a Ph.D. research biologist with the RMRS. It underscores the need for researching modern forest management and habitat efficacy to determine if those

measures are “saving grizzly bear habitat to death” by not managing habitat well enough to prevent insect and disease infestations that lead to catastrophic wildfires.

How? Most everyone in northwest Montana knows the answer. Forests and habitat on the 2.2 million-acre Kootenai National Forest haven’t been actively managed since the 1980 spotted owl listing. In the ensuing 45 years, insect and disease infestations and inevitable wildfire have killed more than 363 million board feet of timber on the Kootenai.

The contract between the RMRS and Vincent represents the coming together of forestry and grizzly management, and it’s the

first effort to measure the impacts of thinning and fuels management on bears and bear forage. The necessary research will be completed in about four years. If the data show that habitat management increases the grizzly population and its genetic diversity in the Cabinet-Yaak ecosystem, which includes the Kootenai National Forest, it will quash the whole idea that “the only way to save threatened or endangered species is to not manage forests.”

One of the project’s major goals is to grow forage for bears that frequent garbage cans in Troy and Libby, Mont. This is the first step in learning how to coexist with grizzlies, which were added to the endangered species list as a threatened species in 1975.

The grizzly bear’s endangered status has become a cash cow for environmental groups that oppose public lands forest management. The direct and visible result of litigation has been a dramatic increase in forest density and a corresponding increase in insect and disease infestations and wildfires.

The Vincent/RMRS research project is centered on Hecla Mining Company forestland in the Bull River Valley south of Troy. Collaborators include the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, the Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation, the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes at Pablo, Mont., the Kootenai Tribe at Bonners Ferry, Idaho, the Montana Forest Action Partnership, the Society of American Foresters, the Kootenai Forest Stakeholders, Hecla Mining Company, several prestigious forest scientists and the Evergreen Foundation.

As part of the permitting process for proposed mining activities, Hecla was required to: (1) purchase thousands of acres of old private-industrial forested lands in the southern reaches of the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem; and (2) dedicate those acres to grizzly bear habitat. These forested acres have become overstocked, unhealthy stands with ever-increasing wildfire potential and minimal habitat value for grizzly bears and other species.

To reduce the risk that a wildfire on its land would spread north to Troy, Hecla Mining hired Chas Vincent to do the necessary thinning and stand-tending work. Knowing northwest Montana forests as he does he

began to think about whether his work could also simultaneously improve habitat efficacy for grizzly bears so he sought the help of Andy Eckberg, an Idaho Forest Group forester at Moyie Springs and Wayne Kasworm, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service’s legendary grizzly biologist in northwest Montana’s Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem and Northern Idaho’s Selkirk Mountains Ecosystem. Kasworm and Eckberg helped Vincent lay out his thinning and fuels-management grids on Lake Creek near a now-closed underground mine that Hecla is in the midst of reclaiming.

Last summer, Vincent moved his logging

equipment through areas Vincent has thinned. What isn’t yet known is whether grizzlies will stay in the Bull River Valley as their food supply increases.

Multiple wildlife and fish species will benefit from the project, but U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service’s primary goals are: (1) increase the size of the grizzly bear population within the federally designated Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem; (2) increase genetic diversity within the grizzly population; and (3) increase the range/distance of migratory corridors that grizzlies are known to use as they travel to and from Canada, Glacier National Park, the Kootenai National Forest and the



PHOTO © JULIA PETERSEN

LEFT: Chas Vincent, center, explains thinning work on Hecla forestland to a Society of American Foresters tour group last August. MFWP biologist Sam Martinez is on left. BELOW LEFT: Overgrown forest, before treatment, is a megafire waiting to happen. BELOW: After thinning. The berries the bears crave will be able to grow with more access to sunlight.



PHOTOS COURTESY EVERGREEN FOUNDATION

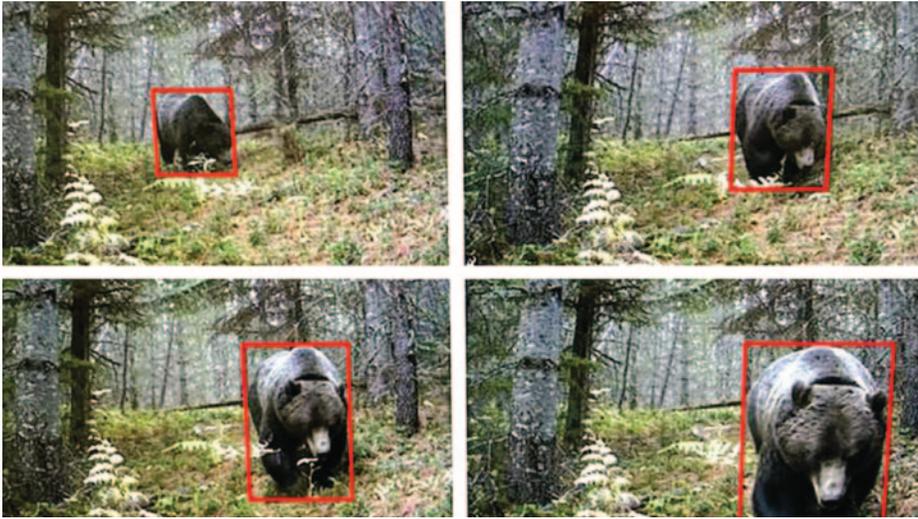


equipment to a new Hecla plot at the south end of Bull Lake. He is using a variety of science-based techniques to reduce forest density, allowing sunlight to reach the forest floor for the first time in decades, stimulating forest growth. Adjacent to the Hecla ownership and included in the study area is the South Bull Lake Wildlife Management Area owned by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. The agency hopes Vincent can start work on this tract using similar thinning protocols in May or June 2026.

Berries, herbs, forbs and grasses—important food sources for grizzlies and many other wildlife species—are again growing in mosaics along Lake Creek. One collared female from Glacier National Park has trav-

elled through areas Vincent has thinned. upper reaches of the Panhandle National Forest in northern Idaho.

These goals are controversial in Montana. Many see the grizzly as a charismatic apex predator while others see it as a threat to their safety and/or a tool for litigators to use to stop projects that will aid in bear population recovery while reducing wildfire risks. Most people living in Lincoln County fall into the latter category because their homes lie within the federally designated Wildland Urban Interface, and hungry grizzlies are shopping for food in their garbage cans.



Boar grizzly bear, taken by a trail camera in a neglected and unthinned thicket that big animals have a hard time navigating. Worse, no food sources grow in these dark thickets.

Litigants will continue to use the bear as a surrogate because they oppose habitat restoration work that can improve bear habitat efficacy and forest health. But, to win the argument in court, pro-forestry groups need peer-reviewed science. As part of its Joint Venture Agreement with Vincent, RMRS will prepare a white paper from data it is collecting now and will continue to collect for three years after Vincent completes his work.

The Evergreen Foundation compiles progress reports that help the public under-

stand what is being done, why it is being done and what results are expected. Without their collective efforts, communities in northwest Montana and the Kootenai National Forest will continue to suffer from more frequent and destructive wildfires, and bears will continue shopping for groceries in Libby and Troy. ■

Jim Petersen is founder and president of the nonprofit Evergreen Foundation. For more information go to evergreenmagazine.com.

LETTERS

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ranchers are overly possessive of public land where they only have grazing rights. It's a shame that hunters and ranchers cannot work together since ranches do a lot of good for wildlife habitat. Maybe ranchers should consider hunters as allies since they both fight against well-heeled organizations that want to eliminate both hunting and ranching!

MIKE COLVILLE, PRESCOTT VALLEY, ARIZONA

I was blessed to live Out West for many years after retiring from the U.S. military. During my time in service, I sadly learned, "first-hand," the lies told to service members and the public. We were not in the Southwest Asia Op area to protect American interests, but to enrich a few corporations and their board members. "To this day, no one truly talks about it or cares!" To this point, I am grateful your magazine is fighting the "good fight" and exposing the corruption and lies disrupting ranchers' lives, bankrupting their families, and stealing their lands.

God bless you all and keep fighting!

AARON TASSEFF, LAKE HALLIE, WISCONSIN

I always look forward to my *RANGE* and am so glad you had the Maude story in Fall 2025. ["Malicious Prosecution" by Patricia Aiken.] My late husband, Jerry, and I lived near Heather's folks' ranch at one time and I knew her grandmother, Annabelle, well. They are all such good, honest, hardworking people who did not deserve the treatment they received. I thought the jail threat was over the top and I cannot imagine the stress and worry it caused, especially for the young children. I'm so glad for the people who are "going to bat" for them. Thank you for all *RANGE* does.

HONEY DEFORD, BANNER, WYOMING

CJ, you are my hero! Thank you for *RANGE* magazine, and its inspiring truths about our Great American West. God bless you and God bless America.

GARY WOLLWEBER, EDWALL, WASHINGTON

Sold the cattle ranch in Jordan Valley, Ore., in 2016 and moved to Prairie City. I live by myself in a four-bedroom triple-wide. I still drive and have a cabin in the mountains at Greenhorn, a ghost town with not much there. It is about 35 miles away and a place for our five generations together. It is snowed in so won't be up there 'til spring as its over

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PHOTOS COURTESY EVERGREEN FOUNDATION



This photo taken in August 2025 on Chas Vincent's project at the south end of Bull Lake. The purpose of the thinning is to reduce wildfire and disease risks while also improving wildlife habitat. Thinning allows sunlight to reach the forest floor. Forage, berries and flowering plants sprout in the warmth of the sun.

How Do They Know?

Animals are born with instinctive knowledge.

By David Wojick, Ph.D

Range dwellers typically spend a lot of time outdoors where they get to watch both wild and domestic animals, often with great interest. After much research I have something to watch for, which I call knowledgeable behavior. This means that what the animal does requires a great deal of knowledge. What is especially interesting is that this knowledge is often instinctive, not learned.

An obvious example is building a bird's nest. Nests can be very complex and built from a variety of materials, which have to be handled differently. Knowing how to do this requires a lot of knowledge. Moreover a nest is sometimes built by a pair of birds which requires shared knowledge. Birds do not learn how to build these complex nests from their parents or from repeatedly trying and failing as a human would. They are born knowing how to do it.

Plus there is a lot more to it than building the nest. They have to pick a good site and know where the materials are. I once observed an extreme case of getting materials. A bird was building a nest at my house, which fronts a fairly large field. The bird flew across the field to some bushes about a hundred yards away and quickly returned with some nest material that it added in. That bird knew where that stuff was so it must have studied the area for good materials before it started building.

Another extreme example that I have seen is the cow circle. A small herd with young calves was approached menacingly by two large dogs. The cows formed a defensive circle, tails together and heads out. The calves got into the middle for protection. The dogs decided not to bother them and wisely left. The cows probably did not learn how to do this and the calves certainly did not. The knowledge was instinctive.

In many cases the behavior is well known but we do not think about the knowledge required to perform it. Here is an example: I go to my open roof shed to get my riding mower and there is a baby bird on the floor there. It cannot yet fly so it runs and hides under the mower. I sit on the mower and it runs out and over to hide under my truck. This all makes sense but think about it. The baby bird had to know when to hide, how to hide, when to leave

the hiding place and how to find another. That is a lot of instinctive knowledge.

The trick is to stop and think. What would the critter have to know, perceive, decide and do in order to perform this action? Over the years I collected many observations like this so a few years ago I wrote them up as a blog, see horsecognition.blogspot.com. I also discuss how to do it.

Then too there are lots of cases where I simply do not know what the animal is doing. For example we have lots of crows and they are very busy, flying about and calling in several different ways. I often cannot figure out what they are doing so can't tell what they know. But I am sure they are doing serious things that must require a good bit of group knowledge because their behavior never seems aimless.

My overall conclusion is that animals lead complex lives that we do not understand. A lot of what we do understand clearly involves a good bit of instinctive expert knowledge. If you do not see that try to make a bird's nest. Watching animals and thinking about what they must know in order to do what they do can be a lot of fun. ■



CJ's Great Dane pup, Othello, is smarter than his boss. This is the day he arrived, wearing a coat.

David Wojick is an independent analyst working the intersection of science, technology and policy. He is a civil engineer with a doctorate in analytic philosophy of science. His specialty is untangling complex issues. He lives in West Virginia.

My Turn

This is not the time to stay silent. By Clark Carter, Monetta, South Carolina

As the assassination of Charlie Kirk fades into memory, we should remember its significance. It is not time to “move on. To “move on” is to forget or accept, but some things are unacceptable—such as killing people because you cannot answer their arguments.

Our reaction to Charlie's assassination should be more speech. It is no longer enough to stay silent as others spread hate and worry about being polite, and it is not enough to allow unchallenged propaganda to be the only thing heard at the dinner table.

The Left attacked conservatives socially and financially. Congressmen called for their supporters to harass conservatives in restaurants. People were fired for their political views. When that didn't work they destroyed 250 years of American tradition and used criminal prosecutions as a political weapon. They twice tried to assassinate President Trump. When the Left says “any means necessary,” they mean it. When we stay silent, we reward their thuggery.

The War on the West employed bureaucratic regulations to change public policy. Laws such as the Taylor Grazing Act were effectively repealed by rule-making bureaucrats backed up by extremely wealthy global leftist organizations. Court victories by people like the Hage family were ignored. Leftist PR propaganda glossed over any damage the preservationists caused—either to our public lands or our Constitution.

Today the Left is using the bureaucratic powers that proved effective out West to fundamentally transform our government and curtail individual freedom. If you think that standing against the violent Left's transformation of America entails too much personal and professional risk, may your chains set lightly upon you. ■