



GRIZZLY PHOTO © PAM MULLINS

## SPECIAL REPORT: GRIZZLY

# High Anxiety

*Out-of-control grizzlies have Montana ranchers on a knife-edge.*

*By Dave Skinner*

**H**ardworking citizens and the communities of northwest-central Montana's Rocky Mountain Front region are dealing with a rapidly increasing number of particularly nasty, violent neighbors, with no end in sight. Are they drug gangs? No. California COVID escapees? Nay. Antifa? Sorry. These new neighbors are peerless beasts: grizzly bears.

### **When Old Becomes New Again**

Before the first humans crossed the Bering land bridge into the Americas 10,000 years ago, thousands upon thousands of grizzly bears ruled over North America west of the 100th meridian. In varying densities in every conceivable habitat whether mountains, desert, or plains, they stretched from Mexico north to the Arctic coast of both Canada and

Alaska. The thing is, Indians never developed weapons matching a grizzly's massive and instantaneous killing power, so grizzlies kept right on ruling.

When Meriwether Lewis and William Clark led the Corps of Discovery through the Louisiana Purchase from 1804 to 1805, expedition members were repeatedly ambushed from riverside cover by *Ursus arctos horribilis*,





*Wildlife managers constantly warn the public to keep a safe distance from grizzly bears. Images like this, taken with a telephoto lens, are as close as one can, and should ever hope, to get. But with grizzly populations surrounding both Glacier and Yellowstone parks now well above planned recovery numbers, the unlucky few who have involuntarily found themselves too close for a camera, and have the scars (or tombstone) to prove it, may soon be joined by an unlucky many. BELOW: Steve Skelton stands his ground as Lane and Tucker Perleberg move Skelton's sheep "pack" to the day's graze.*

Department of Interior officials realized dead bears meant dead careers. So after the new, improved Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973 replaced the lame, wimpy 1968 version, and despite the fact that 55,000 grizzly bears still filled mountainous western Canada and the great state of Alaska with wild excitement, in 1975 the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) took emergency action. The several hundred bears remaining in six Lower 48 subpopulations were listed as "threatened."

#### Planning for Recovery

After listing came a period during which federal courts "clarified" the true meaning and effect of the ESA's statutory language. (Yes, you really must. No, you really can't.) But by 1993, the Interagency Grizzly Bear Commit-

tee. Current estimates exceed 700, meaning, as Obama-administration FWS director Dan Ashe conceded last year to National Public Radio, Yellowstone has "reached its carrying capacity for bears." Are Yellowstone bears delisted? No. Rather, in July the 9th U.S. Cir-

**"America is supposed to be of, by and for the people. Our government needs to start listening."**

STEVE SKELTON

Latin for "horrible bear." But Lewis and Clark, and every explorer or settler who followed, brought along the needed weapons. Over time, the American West was made safe, or safe enough, for humanity.

Fast-forward to 1968, greatest of all the '60s. As part of a new philosophy toward "natural regulation"—created at least partially in response to 1967's infamous "Night of the Grizzlies" in Glacier National Park when two young women were killed and partly eaten by two different, "trashy" bears on the same night—the National Park Service decided to cut off its trash-habituated, semi-tame grizzly bears cold turkey from garbage dumps in Yellowstone and Glacier parks.

Oops! Bear populations promptly crashed. In Yellowstone, hundreds starved, leaving an estimated 136 survivors. Glacier National Park bears, while less dependent and brazen than Yellowstone's, also declined noticeably.



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tee (IGBC) issued a fairly robust recovery plan that foresaw a "total estimated cost of recovery" of \$26 million, outlining how many bears there should be and where they would live. Once "recovered," meaning no longer "threatened" or "endangered" by foreseeable extinction, grizzlies would be "delisted," with management oversight returned to the respective game departments of states the bears inhabit.

Around Yellowstone, the target was 500, up from the low of 136. Is the goal now met?

cuit Court of Appeals affirmed the District Court's order requiring a "commitment to recalibration" of population requirements.

#### Recalibrating the Plans

But recalibration is something else in practice. The 1993 goal for Montana's Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) subpopulation, centered in northern Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness, Glacier National Park and five adjacent national forests, was to grow the existing "over 300 bears" to 391. That





*With boss/dad Shanun's injuries having caused the loss of at least a month's production (and counting), the Rammell and Sons Logging and Firewood crew works to build up 2020's sales inventory.*

*Shanun Rammell compares his "good" right hand with claw marks wildlife officials told media are "weathered."*



number considered sex ratios and emphasized breeding sows, plus other criteria. One was a limit on yearly "human-caused" mortality, capped at four percent and no more than 16 overall, with only five breeding sows. Second, breeding sows had to be well distributed across the NCDE "recovery zone" plus "a 10-mile area immediately surrounding the recovery zone."

In hindsight, 1993's recovery target plan seems attainable. And it was attained, earlier than expected. However, the public learned



that much later than it deserved. Today, as Bynum rancher Steve Skelton sees it, “With grizzlies, just as with wolves, we are so, so far beyond promised projected population levels where we were supposed to delist, it’s ridiculous.”

How ridiculous? In 2004, Congress appropriated nearly \$5 million on a regional sampling of bear hair in the NCDE, designed and overseen by U.S. Geological Survey research biologist Kate Kendall. Project Grizzly involved over 2,500 stink-baited hair-trapping sites, plus just under 5,000 rub trees inside and surrounding the recovery area, all monitored by 400 employees and volunteers who collected over 34,000 hair samples.

Researchers went back to their labs, and then, Steve Skelton recalls, “Things got real, real quiet.” And stayed quiet for years, despite intense public interest. What was going on?

Well, in early spring 2009, FWS released Kendall’s results, a “population estimate of 765 grizzlies—more than twice the 300 to 400 number the agency had previously estimated, based on sightings of female grizzlies with cubs [IGBC’s 1993 technique].” Furthermore, bears were confirmed present well past 10 miles from the recovery zone—beyond 70 miles in some instances.

Wow! More than twice! But, “The FWS is not ready to consider delisting the population.”

Why? Officially, Kendall’s project lasted one summer, a scientific “snapshot.” Researchers declared they “still do not know whether grizzly numbers are increasing or decreasing” and would thenceforth monitor collared females to determine a “trend.” Another recalibration.

Unofficially? Well, spring 2009 was the beginning of the Obama presidency, with the president’s party enjoying impressive majorities in both houses of Congress. So, of course, the goalposts were moved—a tactic now defined in court rulings as recalibration. But the trends, and recalibrations, keep coming: According to USDA Wildlife Services, there were 16 investigations of grizzly bear depredations of livestock in Montana during 2016. In 2019, there were 138.

In fall 2019, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) revealed that bears had nearly doubled occupied range (to 25,000 square miles), increasing 42 percent over 2004. At a conference at the end of 2019 in Missoula, the IGBC announced an “estimated” 1,050 NCDE bears, two and a half times 1993’s original goal and a 40 percent overall increase in the 15 years between 2004 and

## **“Thank God Jamie was in the pickup and knew the drill. I would have been the first fatality.”**

SHANUN RAMMELL

2019—good news balanced by increased mortalities, a “record” 51 in 2019, five percent of the total population.

Montana Sen. Bruce Gillespie, an Ethridge rancher, notes that such figures are “well over past [delisting target population] numbers and there’s no end in sight. I’ve never heard anyone from the agencies give an upper population limit, or even hint at one.”

The bottom line is, 2019 set records in everything grizzly: Record population, record mortalities, record conflicts, both human and livestock—but no delisting, no recovery announcement in sight—and with the 9th Circuit’s recalibration mandate, which smells a lot like “moving the goalposts,” perhaps no delisting ever.

while the sow was euthanized the next morning. The 10-pound cubs were later found, rescued and adopted by a zoo in Arizona, with all four counting as a “human-caused” removal from the NCDE.

Five weeks later on the Sun River reach below Gibson Dam west of Augusta, a member of a float party breaking camp surprised another sow with cubs and was taken down badly enough to need a helicopter transport. A fly-shop manager from Missoula, his experience is posted on the Blackfoot River Outfitters Facebook Web page. Both sow and cubs were unhurt and allowed to move on.

Both human incidents “checked off the boxes.” A large majority of events involve surprise. Check! Most occur in “undeveloped, natural” environments without built, covered structures. Check! Most involve vegetation-impeded sight lines, usually very near water, often stream bottoms. Check! Furthermore, persons involved are usually recreating, as in hiking, boating, hunting, mountain biking, or other fun—including the thrill of a close, but not *too close* grizzly encounter. Check!

Alongside major events, Montana FWP’s fascinating “Prairie Bear Monitor” Facebook page was tallying an amazing number of



### **Hitting the Limits**

While bear year 2020 isn’t over, it gives every sign it will set significant milestones. First came an early emergence from hibernation in mid-March, and numerous sightings. On the evening of April 9, near Dupuyer’s bear-resistant dumpster site, a hiker jumped a sow with three cubs. She bit him; he shot and wounded her. He was able to walk to meet medical help,

hugely widespread sightings, depredations, trappings, relocations, hazings, and, yep, removals, all with something very important in common: None occurred within the official 1993 NCDE recovery zone, but rather dozens, even over 100 miles outside the boundary, often completely out of sight of the Rocky Mountains. Furthermore, as Sen. Gillespie puts it, “These bears are spilling over onto

private property where we should be able to protect ourselves.”

However, on July 27 came an attack that didn't check the usual boxes. The attack was a surprise, near water, in cover, but the water was an enhanced, dug-out spring pond far from any stream, and the cover was a derelict railroad boxcar repurposed into a barn. Further, the human wasn't recreating. At all.

### The Survivor

Shanun Rammell is that rarest of Great Plains creatures, a logger. He and his wife, Jamie, work hard at multiple jobs raising a big family of 10 kids. Nine, the youngest age three, are still at home on Bole Bench several miles north of Fairfield, the Malting Barley Capital of the World, high above and east of Freeze-out Lake Wildlife Management Area, itself world famous for spectacular migratory waterfowl concentrations.

Rammell harvests deadwood from private

land in Lincoln, on the other side of Rogers Pass, hauling the logs on his self-loader truck to his yard at home. There he processes logs into firewood, distributing his product to retail and wholesale clients along the Rocky Mountain Front.

To help keep everyone entertained and fed, the Rammells keep ribbon-winning market goats and pigs—there are no neighbor-

hood covenants. The pens and shelters at Lotadoe Acres are a little improvised, but more than sturdy enough for the Rammell livestock. But not for grizzly bears.

Starting three years ago, a number of different bears needed to be hazed away from the Rammell place, with most moving on. But in October 2019, a small male grizzly took up residence somewhere on the bench. From then on, it was repeatedly spotted, photographed and reported to Montana FWP by Rammell and others, who all asked the agency to trap and relocate it.

A few days before he was mauled, Rammell recalls, “Jamie and I chased him away with our pickup. That’s legal.”

Why wouldn't the bear go away? “I was born in Seeley Lake, saw my first grizzly with my dad on his logging job at age six, saw them all the time until I moved over here 25 years ago. I grew up with bears. That bear is too young and too small to defend himself against another adult bear, especially another male in good habitat.” Furthermore, Rammell pointed out that there are five spring-fed water holes spread around on about 25 sections of bench: “He’s skinny and hungry, but not thirsty, not dead.”

Finally, on July 27, a neighbor called the Rammells and said he’d seen the bear. Concerned, Shanun, Jamie and daughter Leisal drove over to check things out. “I told Jamie and Leisal to stay in the truck while I checked the pond bank for fresh sign. I didn’t see any, but then decided to check the barn to see if there might be an attractant, like spilled grain or something. I stuck my head in the boxcar door, heard a growl and it hit me.”

The bear decked Rammell, who managed to stand back up facing the bear, then down again, with the bear on Rammell’s back, biting. Fortunately, Jamie had been watching closely and immediately reacted by starting the pickup truck and zooming the truck at the bear. “Thank God Jamie was in the pickup and knew the drill,” Shanun recalls. “Otherwise, I’d have been the first fatality.”

The bear ran off and the trip to medical help began. Shanun drove at first, but he was hurt badly: A fang through one knuckle, multiple penetrations through web of right thumb, nerve and crushing damage to left forearm, and bites from behind underneath both shoulders as he’d tried to protect his neck while pinned facedown. While stopped to switch drivers, Jamie filmed Shanun. The video is posted on Facebook. It’s worth watching because words can’t do it justice. “When they were working on me in the

**“I did not get a  
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compensation.  
Standing your ground  
costs money.”**

DAVE MCEWEN



Dave and Lenora McEwen show off their front-window companion, Gold Butte in the Sweet Grass Hills. Their 2016 grizzly predations occurred on the facing slopes above the bottoms.



emergency room, I already hurt so bad I told them I didn't need any Novocain."

The July 27 attack wasn't the end. Montana FWP swung into action, declaring that the bear would be euthanized if caught. It wasn't. A neighbor sent pictures of "Rammell's bear" on August 4. On August 5, after getting home from a hospital visit for follow-up wound treatment, Rammell relates, "There I am on the couch, still wearing hospital booties with teddy bears on them, fuzzy from the drugs, when Leisal comes in and says, 'Grizzly's outside, Dad!'"

RANGE could write about the ensuing nightmare, but again there's cell video on Facebook. After that was over, Rammell again called FWP. "The only people who took it seriously were the sheriff's department." Just three days later, FWP pulled its traps, later explaining to a Great Falls TV station that the only bear they'd been able to locate was collared, "likely the one observed the night before" the August 4 picture was taken. "I was holding on to his ears, face to face! No collar!"

FWP also claimed the traps were pulled to avoid capturing the wrong bear. An exasperated Rammell responds: "They had hair samples from the barn and could just hold the bear until the DNA test came in. No harm, no foul!"

A final step was installation of a high-voltage electric fence around the Rammell's yard. "So, this is how we're supposed to coexist? We're in the zoo cage now while the bears run free?"

When RANGE visited a few weeks after the events noted above, it became clear the Rammells are still on edge, especially the kids.

"One of the best things about living here," Shanun explains, "is being near town but out of the way. We and our neighbor [who owns the barns and water hole] are the only ones you see on our road."

Jamie adds, "The best part of growing up on a farm or ranch is the sense of being free, being able to explore everything that interests you." She pauses, then goes on: "For my kids, this entire situation has really hurt their sense of exploration and freedom. They can't do anything without worrying if there's a bear nearby."

After a month, Rammell is left facing his lingering injuries and a stack of medical bills: "I still don't have full use of my hands and arms. The older kids help best they can, but my busy sales season is coming up. My woodpile is only half done. I stand to lose everything I've worked for."

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*Steve Skelton feels the interests of affected citizens need more respect: "We're never gonna go back to 1972, but we need management where OUR rights are brought into the equation and our direct experiences are given real weight when policy decisions are made. I don't want Band-Aids, I want solutions that really work." In June 2017, Montana FWP was flying for bears and reported "26 adult bears just on my deeded land."*

### Crazy

West of Bynum just north of the Blackleaf Wildlife Management Area is the Skelton Ranch owned by Steve and Billie Skelton. While Billie, a traveling nurse, was away in California helping fight COVID-19, Steve was happy to give RANGE a grand tour.

As is the local norm, the Skeltons run Black Angus cattle. But they've diversified into Targhee sheep, partnering with a specialty customer in North Dakota. "When folks found out I was going to run sheep, they told me I was crazy." In early June 2017, for example, Skelton recalls, "Montana FWP was flying for bears and one of them came by to tell me they'd spotted 26 adult bears just on my deeded land." But the Skelton place is ideal for providing the rich forage, exercise and cold nights that help sheep produce a higher-quality wool.

The answer? Serious "livestock guard dogs" or LGDs, some \$20,000 worth. "Grizzlies are an apex predator, so we need apex dogs." The breeds? One is Akbash, which Skelton explains are "sticky" dogs that stay with the sheep. The others are Anatolian shepherd, Turkish Boz, and Turkish Kangal, tasked with "patrol," ranging out in all directions on the hunt for intruders and threats. "All these dogs are apex dogs and will fight, while Pyrenees won't."

The learning curve has been steep. The first year, the Skeltons ran 250 sheep with four inexperienced adult dogs and tallied 14 losses. But during that first year, a number of puppies were raised with the flock from the very day they could keep up, socialized to view the

flock as their pack. While he mostly lets these apex, pack-minded dogs establish their own pecking order, within reason, Skelton has firmly established himself as the alpha arbiter of everything.

How about this year? One of Skelton's Akbash dams named Grumpy Patty got into it with a bear that wanted a sheep supper. "She was hurt badly enough that we had to go find her, but we got her to the vet in time and she'll be okay." The ewe/lamb pair she was protecting, however, was a wanderer and the bear killed the ewe the next day. Skelton observes, "Sure, you're going to lose animals, but with 1,200 sheep now and one adult dog per 100, our losses so far are miniscule."

As it so happens, the Skelton Ranch is evolving into a fine place to raise, train, and sell experienced guard dogs. (If interested, visit Skelton's Blackleaf Guardians Facebook page.)

Skelton escorted RANGE to a new, shock-fenced pen about a mile from the home place. He tells of a run of nights when bears pressed the flock hard. While no sheep were picked off or any dogs harmed, he says, "I noticed the dogs had that *thousand-yard-stare* look, super tired. They needed a break, and I needed help giving it to them. After all, I couldn't be here without these dogs."

So, with labor and materials assistance from People and Carnivores (an environmental group), in went the pen, which Skelton is happy to have when needed. "I try to cultivate good relationships because you catch more flies with honey," he explains. "People and Carnivores put their money where their

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STEVE SKELTON

mouths are” with videos, volunteer labor, and sharing costs for dogs and fencing. “They know predators are a factor and they won’t promise something, then lobby or sue otherwise, like some other environmental groups.”

Skelton has a “great relationship with government trappers” and works with the other bear agencies as best as he can, but not everything is beer and skittles. He still needs to call in federal trappers to snare and relocate aggressive bears, including some caught less than 100 yards from the home place. And while the dogs keep fangs and claws away, Skelton points out: “When bears or any predators are present, the stress is huge for both sheep and cattle. Just imagine the adrenaline when a bear scares you. Just try to gain weight—which is what I’m trying to sell.”

Then there is the very real risk of human injury or death. When bears are hungriest, every spring and fall, he says, “We’re all ready with pepper and handguns all the time.” Skelton has learned there’s really no safe time or place. “We were having a family gathering with a barbeque. Yep. My granddaughter Brooklyn finished a shower at the guest cabin and a bear was right there when she came out. My grandkids are forbidden from playing near the creek.”

### Principles Cost Money

As noted above, grizzly depredation has skyrocketed since 2016. In August that year, rancher Dave McEwen, then president of the Montana Wool Growers Association, had “at least one” grizzly kill 13 sheep, with only one showing any signs of being “eaten,” in the western Sweet Grass Hills, fully 90 air miles away from any “recovery zone.”

While bear predation is still a one-time event for McEwen, two related issues manifested. First of all, coyote predation on sheep is a constant. One useful tool against coyotes is, and has long been, the M-44 cyanide trap. Coyotes tug the bait, get a snootful of sodium cyanide powder, and die almost instantly. The cyanide then degrades and disperses below lethal levels, preventing secondary, unwanted deaths of other animals. But when a grizzly is thought to be nearby, McEwen explains, M-44s must be withdrawn in favor of the protected species, “leaving us to the mercy of coyotes,” at least until government managers decide no bears are nearby.

Second, as bear incidents increased, McEwen and other producers noticed



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“Wildlife Services trappers being gone off more and more on bear management rather than on normal predator control activities.” Money and people were being diverted so McEwen, nobody’s shrinking violet, started twisting important arms and whispering in useful ears about certain laws already on the books, and how certain agency leaders should be reminding certain agency staff what they should and shouldn’t do.

McEwen’s encouragement helped get extra effort from U.S. Rep. Greg Gianforte and U.S. Sen. Steve Daines (both R-MT), and Interior Secretary David Bernhardt agreed to visit Montana in 2019, getting a firsthand look at a number of issues. October found Bernhardt in Choteau to hear, as Bernhardt wrote in his resulting March 2020 memo, “growing discontent among the people who live with these bears.”

Bernhardt then arranged a series of action meetings between the agencies, tribes, and even with Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue, to “discuss the challenges presented by the recovered and growing [Montana and Yellowstone] grizzly bear populations still subject to listing, plus streamline a ‘complex framework’ that was causing ‘risk-averse and delayed’ conflict responses.”

As Dave McEwen explains to *RANGE*: “The Fish & Wildlife Service is the lead dog. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and Wildlife Services are partners, but subordinate *and* separate. Wildlife Services is under the secretary of Agriculture, not Interior. Something else important that most people don’t know is that while Wildlife Services is responsible under FWS for animal conflicts, handling human conflict incidents falls to FWP, again under FWS. Basically, if a cow gets attacked,

then Wildlife Services under USDA gets the job. If a human is attacked, then FWP, again under FWS, gets the call.”

After Bernhardt’s memo came changes. One was the clarification of “actions the public can take” against troublesome bears, such as “paintballs, noise-making projectiles, and visual deterrents”—specifically separating allowable “haze” from illegal “harass.” Further, Wildlife Services’ funding diversions were corrected. McEwen explains that out of \$400,000 annually allocated for regional control, “roughly \$200,000” was being hijacked away. After Secretary Bernhardt issued his directives, McEwen says, “Another \$260,000 in supplemental funding was

made available to Wildlife Services” for 2020, which may include “removal or control of predatory, nuisance or depredating animals such as grizzly bears.”

McEwen notes other recent positive policy changes. The first was the retirement of 35-year grizzly program manager Chris Servheen, replaced by Hilary Cooley in 2017. “For many years, FWS wasn’t a very good friend to agriculture. But Hilary Cooley is very aware of our concerns, a welcome change from prior federal managers. Overall, while federal management was purely reactionary for too long, now it’s almost proactive and timely.”

*RANGE* couldn’t resist asking McEwen if he was compensated for his efforts. “I did not get a damned dime in compensation. I did this for my industry, friends, family, my community—just because it was the right thing to do. Standing your ground costs money!”

### A Stacked Deck

In his March 2020 grizzly memo, Secretary Bernhardt announced: “Recovery of the grizzly bear in the Lower 48 states is an amazing success story. I look forward to the day when these populations are fully under state management.”

When will that be? Likely, not soon enough. Delisting of Yellowstone grizzlies is now locked up in the federal District Court of Judge Dana Christensen. And since Christensen has jurisdiction over all of Montana, it is obvious environmental groups hope he will oversee the inevitable lawsuit over northern Rockies delisting.

Delisting also hinges on whether Montana produces a management plan acceptable to Judge Christensen. Thus, in spring 2019,



Montana Gov. Steve Bullock (D) called for applicants to a “diverse” volunteer Grizzly Bear Advisory Council to outline Montana’s future state management framework. Of 150 applicants, 18 were selected. Along with neighboring state legislators, state Sen. Bruce Gillespie (R) also applied for the bear council. He says: “None were appointed. It was heavily loaded pro-bear, but we expected that. At the time, Governor Bullock was running for president, needing a feel-good exercise and good talking points.”

How heavily loaded? Eight selectees had agricultural backgrounds, but all were amateurs, arrayed against five professional, management-level environmental advocates. There was a special sixth—a “rancher,” also an associate director of the nonprofit Western Landowners Alliance, which a quick *RANGE* Internet sniff shows is a “nonprofit focused on private lands conservation” birthed by the Wildlands Network. Ring a bell? Sure! Officially the Wild Earth Society, dba Wildlands Network, formerly known as Wildlands Project. Slogan: Reconnect! Restore! Rewild!

Tellingly, the council failed to agree that “hunting has a role in grizzly bear management.” When asked about hunting, Steve Skelton shakes his head: “I totally support hunting, but bears don’t have Internet. Killing one bear doesn’t teach the others. The hunting season is just a short window in the entire bear year, plus the number of tags would be too small to have any significant impact, especially on problem bears. Management has to be year-round, where needed, when needed.”

The council also failed to agree that “social tolerance is not uniform.” However, there was agreement on a need for increased loss-compensation funding—for livestock. Increased? How much? Doreen Gillespie, Bruce’s wife, explains: “The Livestock Loss Board could easily be liable for the confirmed loss of, say, a registered breeding bull. We have some of the best in the country right here in terms of world-renowned genetics, and that animal could be worth well north of \$100,000.”

For Steve Skelton’s part, he warns: “I’m not in this business to cash compensation checks. I’m in the business of growing sheep and cattle for market sale.”

What about compensation for human harm? Not mentioned. But the council’s final recommendations to Gov. Bullock have a heavy “conservation biology/Wildlands” flavor—as in “the need for the involvement of private lands to support our vision for an

## “Now we’ve lost the freedom to even go for a short walk without being armed.”

DOREEN GILLESPIE



*After a lifetime of successful ranching in Toole County, Butch and Doreen Gillespie are well attuned to the views of their close-knit community. Doreen points out, “I’d like to see more worth given to human life when making management decisions.” OPPOSITE: The right dogs with spiked collars are serious deterrents.*

interconnected metapopulation of grizzly bears in Montana,” plus “creation of new suitable relocation areas inside *and between* [emphasis added] recovery ecosystems which further the conservation, connection and recovery” of grizzly bears.

### High Anxiety

Needless to say, the pool of “social tolerance” for bears along the Rocky Mountain Front is drying fast. “Producers day to day are flat tired of the lack of active management, the increasing number and intensity of conflicts,” says Dave McEwen.

“The terrain around Ethridge and the Kevin Rims is rough, with cover everywhere. Experts tell us all we need is a can of bear spray,” Bruce Gillespie explains, “but here we are, at Glacier Wind Farm. Spray doesn’t work in wind, so I need at least a .357. To pack that gun along with my fence-

fixing tools and the other whatnots I need is just an unfair burden.”

Doreen Gillespie recalls: “When I was a little girl, I could walk all the way down to the Marias River and back without a care in the world. Now we’ve lost the freedom to even go for a short walk without being armed.”

Even with guns, there’s a catch. “I could shoot you in self-defense and worry less than if I shot a bear,” Steve Skelton warns, “because grizzlies are protected—and humans aren’t!”

As of this writing, grizzly bears had not yet entered hyperphagia, the time when they fatten themselves up for winter hibernation. There’s a sense among the Rocky Mountain Front community, including Shannun Rammell, that his brush with death won’t be the worst “incident” of 2020. “Who would be held responsible if I’d been killed,” he wonders. “If one of my kids was killed? Or someone else? Nobody was willing to answer that.”

Sen. Gillespie adds: “The core function, top responsibility of government is to keep citizens safe, and the agencies aren’t doing that. If I let my dog go crazy and chew into a bunch of people, I’m going to be held responsible in a court of law.”

Skelton observes: “My kids were locked down in Choteau High School at least three times. And towns like Choteau are what we consider safe places, where little old ladies take their daily walks, kids ride their bikes or walk to school—and not in a straight line. Mark my

words, a bear is going to attack and maim, even kill someone in town, and then? Who will be held accountable?”

### Postscript

Over 18 months after introduction, a bill to remove Yellowstone grizzly bears from ESA protection, S.614, finally got a short, pro-forma hearing in the Senate on Sept. 9, 2020. Sponsored only by five Republican senators representing Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, but not the sole Democrat, S.614 would bypass court gridlock and implement the 2017 “final rule” regarding Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem bears. It is not likely to pass this Congress. As for Northern Rockies’ bears, no “rule,” proposed or final, yet exists. ■

*Dave Skinner has had “bear encounters” in forested northwest Montana. Fortunately, no animals or humans were harmed. So far.*