GARRETT GROVE

Ryan Wapnowski at Cascade Pass, North Cascades: great trail running terrain, equally great griz terrain

Ursa Major

WITH BACKCOUNTRY USE BOOMING AND BEAR INCIDENTS ON THE RISE, WASHINGTON'S NORTH CASCADES FACE A KEY QUESTION: CAN RECREATION AND GRIZZLIES COEXIST?

BY GLORIA DICKIE

On a Wednesday afternoon in the summer of 2016, thirty-eight-year-old U.S. Forest Service law enforcement officer Brad Treat was biking with a friend near Half Moon Lakes in Flathead National Forest, just south of Glacier National Park, Montana, when he turned a sharp curve at twenty-five miles per hour and collided with a surprised adult grizzly bear. According to his companion, who sped away to get help, Treat went over the handlebars and was splayed out on the ground. When he returned, Treat was dead and his helmet had been bitten to pieces. He was the only person killed by a grizzly in North America in 2016. Typically, brown bears such as that kill an average of three people every year on the continent. His death, therefore, might have passed without much notice were it not for the fact he had been mountain biking at the time.

For the authorities who've worked on a plan to reintroduce grizzlies to Washington state's North Cascades mountains, the attack on Treat served as a lesson—and warning. Unlike the Northern Rockies, where the bears are well established, the North Cascades remain bereft of their original apex critter. With backcountry recreation exploding, biologists on both sides of the U.S.-Canada border have long been concerned about conflict between bears and two particular groups—mountain bikers and trail runners. Treat's death confirmed their worst fears and added to the stakes of a predator recovery plan that, like all predator recovery plans, is controversial.

"If you come barreling around the corner on a mountain bike or you're running really fast [with headphones] and can't hear what's going on, you've got a much better chance of startling a species that has evolved to defend themselves when surprised," said Steve Michel, a human-wildlife conflict expert with Parks Canada.

It's difficult to quantify how often mountain bikers encounter grizzly bears. Many sightings go undocumented. One of the most authoritative reports on the matter is a 2000 study in Banff National Park in 1997 and 1998, which found that in ninety-five percent of incidents, mountain bikers didn't even notice the bear until it was within fifty meters. Half of those cyclists got injured. And even though hikers outnumbered bikers by three to one, roughly three times as many cyclists had bad encounters with grizzlies.

Following Treat's death, land managers questioned whether mountain bikers should be allowed in bear country at all. In Custer Gallatin National Forest, also in Montana and not far from Yellowstone National Park, Forest Service staff reclassified some of the country's premier alpine mountain biking terrain in critical bear habitat as wilderness, thus prohibiting cycling in the area. Patti Sowka, founder of Montana's Living with Wildlife Foundation, cited cases of "people traveling downhill at a pretty good clip and actually T-boning bears."

Greater scrutiny also fell on trail racing. Chris Servheen oversaw the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's national grizzly bear recovery program for thirty-five years until his retirement in 2016. After the attack on Treat, he spoke out against recreational sports in grizzly country and encouraged government agencies not to issue permits for several ultramarathons planned for Flathead National Forest in Montana. Since it launched in 2010, the Whitefish Legacy Trail Run had evolved from a short 10K race to a 50K ultra that funneled two hundred runners through national forest roads and trails during peak

grizzly foraging activity. "I recognize that agencies cannot tell the public they cannot run in bear habitat or tell the public they cannot mountain bike…at high speeds in bear habitat, but agencies can refuse to permit and thereby endorse such running and high-speed biking when doing so will contradict years of agency educational efforts to help the public recreate safely in bear habitat," he wrote to Forest Service managers.

Servheen's fears were not unfounded. During the Bird Ridge mountain race near Anchorage, Alaska, in June 2017, sixteen-year-old Patrick Cooper was fatally mauled by a predatory black bear—an animal considered far less aggressive than a brown bear. He had made it to the race's halfway point when he frantically called his brother to say that he was being chased by a bear. His body was found soon after. The Forest Service ignored Servheen's warning and issued the Whitefish Legacy permits anyway.

In summer 2020, as thousands took refuge from the coronavirus pandemic in the wilderness, conflict with trail runners, mountain bikers, and hikers reached a crescendo. Near Big Sky, Montana, a mountain biker was severely mauled by a bear. Too mangled to speak, he tried to explain what had befallen him by writing "bear" and "can't breathe" in the gravel where he collapsed. On the Huckleberry Lookout Trail in Glacier National Park, a trail runner collided with a young grizzly bear. Both the bear and the woman tumbled off the trail and the bear ran away, leaving the runner with minor injuries. Farther north, in British Columbia, a mountain biker riding through South Chilcotin Mountains Provincial Park was attacked by a surprised grizzly sow with cubs. The bear bit clean through his white Giro helmet and lacerated his stomach and leg. Near Yellowstone's Old Faithful geyser, a thirty-seven-year-old woman was attacked when she came across a grizzly sow and cub. By July, five others in the Yellowstone area had been attacked, obliterating past records for the time of year. Most grizzly attacks occur in September and October, when elk hunters are in the woods, but 2020 marked an alarming shift as more attacks occurred in spring and summer on people participating in other recreational activities.

The sudden spike troubled officials. In August, the National Park Service published a series of recommendations, tempering the severity of the message with some humor. "If you come upon a stationary bear, move away slowly and sideways," they instructed. "Do NOT run…Do NOT climb a tree…Do NOT push down a slower friend (even if you think the friendship has run its course)."

With sensational headlines such as "The Summer of the Bear" and "Night of the Grizzly," it's not surprising that people living in the North Cascades have some qualms about sharing their backyard playground with bears. Such a response is also why some officials don't want mountain biking and trail running in bear habitat. Every time a bloody attack receives a lot of media attention, public tolerance for grizzlies goes down. But to others, such hesitancy about grizzlies signals the need to question long-held beliefs about the role of wild places, and wild beasts, in our lives.

Joe Sebille was hiking high in the mountains of the North Cascades on an October day in 2010 when he spotted a large, dark shape ambling up a steep slope across from him. Sebille was used to the black bears that roamed the watershed of the Upper Cascade River, but this bear seemed bigger than the others. Its fur was more brown than black. And the animal's back arched into a distinctive hump at the neckline. He shot a few photos and didn't think anything more until he mentioned it to friends, who urged him to send the pictures to the National Park Service. The agency then showed his images to biologists dedicated to grizzly bear recovery in the area, who unanimously agreed that Sebille had captured the first photo evidence of a grizzly bear in the North Cascades ecosystem south of the Canadian border in more than two decades.

Federal scientists held onto this belief for the next four years until more photos surfaced of the bear. It turned out that Sebille had come across a very large black bear complete with the deceiving fatty shoulder hump considered the trademark of the grizzly. Yet many—even the park's own biologists—wanted to believe that grizzly bears had persisted in the North Cascades despite the odds. That they were out there, *somewhere,* reigning over the wilderness. The photo mixup forced many to reconcile an uncomfortable truth: Grizzly bears were never going to recover naturally in the North Cascades. There were too many obstacles—highways, cities, and vast riverine valleys—that prevented grizzlies from crossing over from other populations, like those in Montana. If people wanted grizzlies to return to the North Cascades, they were going to have to bring them back.

In 2016, the U.S. National Park Service developed a draft recovery plan for grizzly bears in the six-million-acre North Cascades ecosystem that runs south from the British Columbia border to Interstate 90. Though the plan had been prepared by the Obama administration, when Trump's Department of the Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke visited the communities of the North Cascades in March 2018, he surprisingly stated that the "winds are very favorable" for having a reintroduction plan finalized by the end of that year. "I'm in support of the great bear," he said unequivocally, despite the administration's attacks on the Endangered Species Act.

AARON TEASDALE

A backcountry area in Yellowstone National Park is closed to all human entry due to grizzly bear activity, a common occurrence there and in neighboring Glacier National Park.

One of those communities is Mazama, the last stop for hikers to fuel up before heading into North Cascades National Park, and it was here at a local watering hole, the Mazama Store, that I met Jasmine Minbashian on a September day in 2019. A Seattle native, she had recently moved to the valley to serve as the executive director of the Methow Valley Citizens' Council, a community outfit dedicated to protecting the region's environmental and rural character.

Sitting at a picnic table outside the store, Minbashian broke down how she saw the societal divide. "For me, grizzlies have been really interesting because they get at the heart of our relationship with nature," she said. "There's the people who really understand ecosystems and the value of nature for its own sake. They're fully on board with it. They get why we need grizzlies back on the landscape. They moved here because they love the wilderness and they've spent a lot of time pondering the wilderness and what it means as a refuge of sanctity and security."

And then there's the other camp. "They like getting outside. But it's more of a place for them to play. It's where they're going to master their rock climbing skills. Those people aren't sure how they feel about grizzlies. They're more conflicted. They understand why grizzlies belong here, but at the same time, they think, *That's going to be a really terrible inconvenience to me* because now they have to carry a bear canister or bear spray when they're trying to be ultralight."

While groups like the MVCC and the Seattle-based Conservation Northwest have been outspoken advocates of bringing back the grizzly, outdoor organizations often seen as allies on environmental affairs are "noticeably quiet on the issue," said Minbashian. Groups like the Washington Trails Association and Methow Trails, which

grooms more than one hundred miles of cross-country ski track, and have purposefully avoided taking a stance because their memberships are divided. When I reached out to those groups for comments, they declined.

"They don't want to upset anybody," Minbashian shrugged. Visitors walked past us with fresh-baked baguettes tucked under their arms, loaded up their Subarus, and sped off into the mountains for the day. No bear bells jingled. "Is North Cascades National Park our giant playground that we get to manicure for all the fun things we like to do?" she asked. "Or is it inherently part of a huge ecological reserve that's going to be the foundation of our survival on the planet? I think there's a really deep meaningful conversation to be had with the recreation community about our responsibility as stewards of this place."

At the North Cascades Visitor Center, someone had unhitched an educational trailer in the parking lot. It was splashed with an illustrated diagram explaining how to tell a brown bear from a black bear, breaking down their coloring, shoulder hump, and claw length. "Color and Size Can Be Misleading," the trailer noted helpfully. I thought back to the debacle around Sebille's photos. That seemed, to me, an understatement. On the rear of the vehicle, a map informed visitors that the North Cascades had been designated as a grizzly recovery ecosystem.

In 1975, with fewer than a thousand grizzly bears left in the Lower 48 occupying less than two percent of their former range, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service placed the grizzlies under protection of the Endangered Species Act. Subsequently, the Fish and Wildlife Service identified the North Cascades and five other areas—Yellowstone, Cabinet-Yaak, Bitterroot, Selkirk, and the Northern Continental Divide—as grizzly bear recovery zones. Many zones have since seen steady bear population growth thanks to strong federal and state management. The North Cascades remain an exception.

The park's ill-fitting relationship with grizzly bears continued inside the visitor center, where families of tourists milled around a high-ceilinged room and surveyed dioramas of native flora and fauna. In a windowed corner, a stuffed black bear and grizzly bear were perched on fake rocks. The display seemed to suggest that both animals inhabited the park. People ignored the black bear and posed for photos with the grizzly. Across the room, behind a blue velvet rope, another small stuffed grizzly with blonde fur stood on his hind legs. His arms swung at his sides as though he was staggering after being hit by a bullet. In small print, a placard noted the bear wasn't from Washington, nor even from the Lower 48. He had been illegally shot in Alaska. The poacher had mounted and stuffed the bear, though the sign didn't explain how it had found its way to the North Cascades—technically, the only successful grizzly reintroduction of the decade, albeit of a dead one. The last, bolded line of the placard asked: "Do you think grizzly bears live in the North Cascade?" There was no answer.

A short drive away, I stopped at the Diablo Lake overlook. The lot was full of Labor Day weekend stragglers lounging outside their RVs in folding chairs. Speedboats etched white lines on the surface of the turquoise waters below. Jack Oelfke, chief of natural and cultural resources for North Cascades National Park, strolled toward me with a friendly wave. His wispy gray hair extended to his shoulders and his narrow brown eyes widened only when he spoke of bears. Oelfke had grown up in Minnesota and worked in Glacier National Park—his first exposure to grizzlies—before arriving in the Cascades in 2003. In 2014, he was tasked with overseeing grizzly recovery for the Park Service.

I posed the visitor center's cliffhanger question to him. "We have a number of wildlife cameras out in the ecosystem that pick up some pretty cool things, but no grizzly bears," he said. "No Bigfoot. When you couple that with all the people out in the ecosystem recreating, my personal opinion is there aren't any grizzlies here. Maybe a stray comes down from Canada occasionally." When Sebille's photos were eliminated, the last confirmed grizzly sighting south of the Canadian border returned to bear biologist Paul Paquet, who spotted a bear near Lake Chelan in 1996.

Oelfke was pragmatic but persistent about grizzly recovery. Counting on short-term success and consistency across administrations didn't jibe with the realities of conservation in the North Cascades. At the time I met him, the state had just canceled fourteen public hearings on wolf recovery in Washington due to threats of violence. They had previously warned the Park Service against trying to

BY THE NUMBERS

900,000	55,000	1,500	11
Black bears in North America	Grizzly bears in North America	Grizzly bears in the Lower 48	average attacks per year, North America

AARON TEASDALE

A female grizzly bear is released in a remote corner of Montana's Whitefish Mountains by state bear biologists after it was captured near a well-used river pathway just outside the town of Eureka.

AARON TEASDALE

bring grizzlies back at the same time. "If you add another large carnivore into the mix, people are going to conflate the species and their recoveries," said Oelfke. "But part of me feels we've waited over twenty years to even start this grizzly thing. We could wait forever. There's always going to be some argument as to why it's not a good time."

He was aware many hikers—not just livestock owners afraid of a double order of wolves and grizzlies—didn't think it was a good time, too. He tried to alleviate those fears when he could. "Yellowstone and Glacier have healthy grizzly bear populations and get millions of visitors per year. Yet attacks are very rare. People die from lightning, traffic accidents, drownings. Grizzlies are way down the list." Still, he acknowledged people would need to be more careful—not hike alone, make noise, carry bear spray. All of the land within North Cascades National Park was designated as wilderness, which meant mountain biking was already *verboten,* but it's still allowed on national forest land within the ecosystem.

Before I left, I asked Oelfke if he thought the recovery plan would finally go through. He thought for a moment. "I suspect I won't see a grizzly bear here before I retire," he said. "But as long as it happens some day, I hold out hope."

Ryan Zinke resigned in December 2018 under allegations of ethical lapses while in office. For a year and a half, the North Cascades grizzly recovery plan stalled in limbo, and no one knew what was happening behind closed doors until July 2020, when Zinke's replacement, David L. Bernhardt, visited Omak, Washington, an agricultural community one hundred miles east of the North Cascades. With all the pomp of a Sunday social, he announced he was scrapping the recovery plan. "The Trump Administration is committed to being a good neighbor, and the people who live and work in north-central Washington have made their voices clear that they do not want grizzly bears reintroduced into the North Cascades."

Well, maybe. Of the fifty-five hundred people who live in the Methow Valley of north-central Washington, many work in agriculture and don't want bears threatening their livestock or orchards. Most support Republicans. But there's also a large contingent of left-leaning, ex-urbanites who moved to the North Cascades for their love of the outdoors. On weekends, day hikers, backpackers, and trail runners converge on the nearly eight hundred square miles of protected wilderness in the national park. Mountain bikers load their roof racks and head to the singletrack snaking through Mount Baker-Snoqualmie and Okanogan-Wenatchee national forests.

In such places, the grizzly has been relegated to memory. The release of the draft recovery plan in 2017 forced many outdoor recreation enthusiasts to confront the limitations of their conservation ethos. They were self-proclaimed environmentalists and yet had grown accustomed to enjoying the great outdoors without having to worry about an apex predator in their midst. Grizzlies roaming the backcountry preyed upon the human psyche. The bears would also necessitate changes in human behavior. In Yellowstone and Glacier national parks, which are home to hundreds of grizzly bears, many adventure sports are off-limits altogether. In the parks' bear management areas, hikers are required to travel in groups of four or more. Trails are often closed during bears' annual calorie binge in late summer and early fall. And in some areas, overnight camping is banned. Montanans have little choice but to take such precautions, as they've lived alongside grizzlies for hundreds of years, but in the North Cascades, such restrictions would require a new mindset.

Three weeks after Bernhardt made his announcement in Omak, environmental groups sued the federal government. First, they sued based on the rules of the Endangered Species Act—the Fish and Wildlife Service was legally required to restore grizzly bears in the Lower 48. And then they sued again, because the agency hadn't made its decision-making documents public. Despite Bernhardt's speech, it wasn't clear that most Americans were against grizzly bears in the Cascades.

"Really, the big surprise was how long it took them [to halt recovery]," said Joe Scott, who leads trans-boundary grizzly recovery efforts between the North Cascades and British Columbia for Conservation Northwest. "But it's just another hiccup on the road to grizzly bear recovery. We're certainly not going to give up."

Besides, Scott added, even if two hundred grizzly bears were popped back into the North Cascades tomorrow, the chances of running into a bear would be exceptionally low across the ten-thousand-square-mile ecosystem. "Grizzlies are icons of wilderness. And these are wilderness areas. We can't sanitize everything."

Multiuse trail: Harold Teasdale pedals past fresh bear tracks on an abandoned logging road in the Flathead National Forest of Northern Montana.