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Silvertip survival

The grizzly: How many? Where? For how long?

by Geoffrey O'Gara

BOZEMAN, Mont. — Some time this month, biologist Richard Knight will climb into the passenger seat of a Cessna Supercub here and take off for Yellowstone National Park.

He will fly towards the western side of the park, gazing down at the rugged, snowclad forest, listening for a radio signal. The signal would be picked up on a receiver in the Supercub by two wing antennae from the radio collar of an early-rising grizzly bear below — an "insomniac," in Knight's words, who traditionally is the first bear out of his winter den.

When he hears a signal, Knight will know that 300 to 1,000 pounds of grizzly is up and moving among the trees, sleepily renewing the browsing habits he has foregone since October, perhaps rising on his hind legs to hunt for easy-to-kill animals weakened by winter or age.

Knight, a 20-year veteran of wildlife studies, has been researching grizzlies around Yellowstone since 1974 as head of the Bozeman-based Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team, a group of game experts from state and federal agencies whose work may in large part determine the future of the grizzly in the lower 48 United States.

But Knight's job is not merely to fly around tracking bears or merely to assemble data from the field crews he sends out to study the eating and denning habits of Yellowstone grizzlies. He must also spend a lot of time dealing with bureaucrats, competing naturalists, and journalists who want to sort out conflicting reports about the grizzly bear's future in this country.

The controversy surrounding the Interagency team is more political than biological — the issue most vehemently argued is whether state officials, federal employees or independent experts are best suited to gather data and make decisions on bear management. But behind the fight for research turf and professional respect lie crucial questions: How many grizzlies are left? Can man safely share the wild lands with them? And what is the best way to insure their survival?

The answers vary widely.

Fish and Game agencies in the three states surrounding Yellowstone National Park — Wyoming, Montana and Idaho — are pushing for a renewed grizzly bear hunting season, claiming the bear population is stable and growing, and that bears are creating prob-



Photo courtesy of the National Park Service

lems for ranchers and outfitters in the region.

But others — notably grizzly experts John and Frank Craighead — say that the grizzlies could be on the road to extinction in the Yellowstone area. Researchers trying to plan for the grizzly's future are thrown off balance by the rapidly changing environment in the Northern Rockies as well as by population uncertainties. Ever more humans, increased road-building, and expanding timbering and mineral exploration keep bulldozing their assumptions.

For example, the Forest Service has recently been considering a plan to set off explosives in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, a Montana grizzly haunt. Dr. Charles Jonkel, head of the Border Grizzly Project, which studies bears north of Yellowstone to the Canadian border, said, "We presumed all along we had these secure (wilderness) areas

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behind us. All the work we've done in less protected areas could be negated by this. We'd have to start all over."

THE CRAIGHEAD CONTROVERSY

Grizzly research started all over once before, in 1973, after officials at Yellowstone National Park terminated the

track bears were removed whenever rangers had the opportunity (the Interagency team later revived radio tracking).

Frank Craighead, Jr., who recently published *The Track of the Grizzly* (see review, p. 16), remains fairly bitter about his banishment and the subsequent transfer of Yellowstone grizzly research to a group headed by Park Service employee Knight. "You get an interesting project going, get a little recognition for it, and there's lots of professional jealousy," he said recently. "You're doing research in the park, and the rangers feel that's their bailiwick."

The Craigheads put their data on bear population trends, mortalities and reproductive rates through a computer and concluded in 1972 that the grizzly population was fast declining. They predicted extinction by 1990 if the trend continued. They claimed that the abrupt closing of the dumps — instead of a gradual phase-out — encouraged aggressive grizzlies to move into campgrounds for food, causing more injuries to humans, and leading to the destruction of more bears by park rangers.

The Park Service, on the defensive about management practices ever since two women were killed by grizzlies in Glacier National Park one day in 1967, argued otherwise. Conflicting statistics were bandied back and forth on the number of grizzly-human scraps in the years immediately following the dump-closings.

A National Academy of Sciences review of the dispute in 1974 found fault with both sides. The report questioned the Craigheads' methodology, at the same time praising their data as the best available. The Academy said there was "no convincing evidence" that the bears were on the verge of extinction.

But the Academy agreed that bears were more active in campgrounds immediately following the dump-closings. And it took note of a former ranger's contention that Park personnel were

killing more problem bears than they were publicly acknowledging.

The feud is ancient history now, but the repercussions drag on. Ultimately, Park officials say, the dump-closings have paid off: "There's a hell of a lot less bear problems than there were before," said Dale Nuss, a 34-year Yellowstone ranger.

THE NUMBERS GAME

Most experts now agree that while the timing might have been questionable, closing the dumps was a wise move. One of the effects of the policy is that the bears have spread out, and are no longer concentrated in dump areas, where the Craigheads did their studies. This also makes them harder to count — though Interagency team members insist the population is stable and growing.

Knight, with the support of other game officials in the region, sets the current grizzly population in the Yellowstone area at 300 to 350, and that figure — higher than grizzly population estimates in the 1930s and 1940s — forms part of the argument made by state agencies for renewing a hunting season.

But Knight doesn't have any hard data to back up his 300-350 grizzly estimate. "It's a tough deal getting population data," he said. "Hell, I don't know if we'll ever get good numbers."

Knight says the Interagency researchers have concentrated on studies of habitat and denning, but that they will shift to more intensive population research this year.

Part of the reason for the renewed emphasis on determining how many grizzlies are around is to provide guidance to Don Brown, a Montana Fish and Game Department employee who is putting together a "grizzly recovery plan" that will apply not just to the Yellowstone area but to the other remaining grizzly haunts in Montana, Idaho and eastern Washington. Brown is gathering data from the Interagency group, the Border Grizzly Project, Canada, and state agencies to put together a plan, which is expected to be completed next fall. Even Craighead calls it a step in the right direction.

HUNTING SEASON

But state game officials think they already know enough to make some changes — and the first change they want is to start up the hunting seasons that were dropped in the Yellowstone area when the grizzly was declared a threatened species in 1974.

What the three states have in mind, according to Bill Morris of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, is a "managed hunt" in which only bears that are preying on livestock or invading hunting camps would be sought. "We'd hunt the bears that got into situations where they would probably be killed anyway," said Morris. "That would at least provide a sportsman with a trophy."

Larry Roop, a bear expert with the Wyoming agency, said he was notified of 18 hunting camp incidents involving grizzlies last fall. Roop said his agency has to handle most of the bear problems in Wyoming, but is blocked from managing the animal properly by the Endangered Species Act. State officials dealing with the grizzly issue generally express the sort of frustrations with the federal government that have fueled the Sagebrush Rebellion.

But a Forest Service study of hunting

camps in the Bridger-Teton National Forest found the problems were more a matter of sloppy camping than aggressive bears. Game and camp food were left within easy access, and bears tempted by such factors should not be considered nuisance bears, the report concluded. A recent paper written by biologists at Shoshone National Forest suggests ways hunting camps can avoid bear confrontations.

Wyoming wants to set a ceiling of 12 known grizzly mortalities allowed in the state every year — in other words, if two bears died in car accidents, five were poached, and one died of natural causes, permits would be issued until four more bears were killed by hunters.

MORE NUMBERS

Here it is easy to get lost in a forest of statistics. Factors such as reproductive rates, unreported bear deaths by poachers, and the actual size of the present bear population all vary enough to make it hard to say exactly how many grizzlies can be killed each year without precipitating a sudden decline such as the Craigheads feared in 1972.

Even supporters of the hunting season, such as Roop, admit that the bear population is very sensitive to mortalities, and "highly susceptible to overexploitation." What data is available, and it is spotty, makes it hard to understand how support for the hunting season can be justified.

Roop estimates that "known" mortalities represent about half of the grizzlies that die each year, so a limit of 12 known deaths would mean roughly 24 grizzly deaths a year.

The National Academy of Sciences, in its 1974 report, suggested that "the total of man-caused removals should be held to about 10." And Knight, in fact, who has tacitly supported the hunting advocates, said in a paper delivered this year to the Bear Biology Association in Wisconsin that "the present mortality rate should not exceed five grizzlies per year."

Given these recommendations, both based on more optimistic population estimates than the Craigheads projected, the logic for a hunting season is murky. Opponents of the proposal question the game officials' ability to select problem

"It's a tough deal getting population data. Hell, I don't know if we'll ever get good numbers."

— Richard Knight, Interagency Grizzly Study



bears for hunting targets. And in his 1980 paper, Knight said the known man-caused mortalities among grizzlies over the last five years have averaged 11 grizzlies annually — a far higher mortality rate than he himself recommends, and not including the majority of poaching deaths. The recovery plan is reportedly considering a ceiling of six annual grizzly deaths for the Yellowstone area.

Whether all the numbers point to a declining or rising population of

"We're trying to manage the bears, but we really have to manage the people."

— Larry Roop, Wyoming Game and Fish Department



Craighead brothers' groundbreaking study of grizzlies in the Yellowstone ecosystem, the most concentrated grizzly habitat in the lower 48.

The Craigheads began their study of the grizzlies in the Yellowstone area in 1959. In a dozen years they pioneered wildlife radio-monitoring and collected a wealth of information on the giant bears' habits.

In the late 1960s, though, the Craigheads spoke out against a new Park Service policy that called for immediate closing of the garbage dumps in the park — long a primary food source for grizzly and black bears. When Park officials tried to silence them, the Craigheads objected, and they were unceremoniously shown the park gate.

The radio collars they had used to



Photo courtesy of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team
INTERAGENCY TEAM members drugged this grizzly near Winegar Hole in the Yellowstone Park area and fitted it with a radio collar to monitor its future movements.



Photo courtesy of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team

IMMOBILIZED GRIZZLY in the Yellowstone National Park area is tranquilized and then raised in a parachute-like cradle for weighing by members of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team.

grizzlies in the Yellowstone area remains a point of debate. But many, such as John Weaver, an endangered species biologist with the Forest Service at Teton National Park, say a hunting season is unthinkable without firmer population data.

Hank Fischer, Defenders of Wildlife's Montana representative, agrees. "If we're not sure what's going on with the bear population," he says, "they shouldn't be hunted."

GRIZZLIES TO THE NORTH

But in Fischer's state, grizzlies are hunted outside the Yellowstone area up to an annual limit of 25 grizzly deaths from any causes. Researchers refrain from estimating the size of the bear population outside the Yellowstone area, but the grizzlies are spread from the Scapegoat and Mission Mountains Wilderness areas north to Glacier National Park and on into Canada. There is also a small population in the Cabinet Mountains to the west.

Mining exploration in the Chicago Peak area of the Cabinet Wilderness has Fischer and Jonkel, head of the Border Grizzly Project, worried. More generally, Jonkel fears the effects of rapidly increasing population in western Montana and oil and gas exploration now under way in parts of the Overthrust Belt and the Rocky Mountain Front.

"A couple of hundred grizzlies doesn't sound like much to someone who studies fruit flies or antelope," said Jonkel, "but it's a hell of a lot of grizzlies."

Perhaps it's the relatively small number of grizzlies and the large amount of unfettered space they require to survive that has prevented more forceful preservation measures.

In 1976, the Fish and Wildlife Service proposed that 13 million acres, most of it in Montana and Wyoming, be declared critical habitat for grizzlies. This included the area around and including Yellowstone National Park, the Bob Marshall Wilderness-Glacier National Park area and the Cabinet Mountains.

The proposal was something less than what conservationists had pushed for, but considerably more than what the Forest Service or development interests in the Rocky Mountain region wanted. The public outcry against the declaration was strong and immediate, and the proposal never went anywhere.

"A public education effort was what was needed," said Michael Berger of the National Wildlife Federation. Berger and other conservationists say critics

wrongly believed that critical habitat would mean a big lockup of federal lands. But Berger points out that such a declaration would not have outlawed timber harvesting, for example — it would only have required that the utmost care be taken to protect the grizzly from its impacts.

Wayne Brewster, the Fish and Wildlife Service endangered species manager for Wyoming and Montana, says the FWS will now await the grizzly recovery plan, due out next fall, before they try again to delineate critical habitat for grizzlies. If critical habitat proposals are not approved within two years, they are withdrawn.

The general public impression seems to be that grizzlies are making a comeback. Ranchers in areas such as Montana's Mission Mountains say the bears are taking livestock more often. There were mauelings in Yellowstone and Glacier parks last year, and in Colorado, where the silvertips were thought to be extinct, a hunter wrestled and killed with an arrow an old sow grizzly last September.

Hunters hungry for grizzly trophies, ranchers fearful for their livestock, and many people who simply don't like the idea of sharing the wilds with the mighty grizzly, can be expected to resist the next attempt at establishing critical habitat.

The recovery plan may be easier to sell, given its broad support among bear management officials, but even it may

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not resolve the problem. One bear expert, who asked not to be named, worried that too much was being allowed to hinge on the recovery plan. "Someone's going to try and take it and run," said the researcher. "If it's not drawn up right, and it may not be, the timber industry or someone's going to take one wrong word in it and run."

Others, however, expressed confidence in the work Brown was doing.

Almost every official interviewed who is involved with the grizzly issue expects bear management to be more difficult in the future.

"It's going to cost more every year," said Jonkel. "Research is going to be never-ending as the (human) population rises, and there will have to be more restrictions on people. Otherwise, we could be rid of grizzlies real fast — we could pull the plug in two years."

"We're trying to manage the bears," commented Larry Roop of Wyoming Game and Fish. "but we really have to manage the people."

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Park on trial for bear mauling incident

by Philip White

SALT LAKE CITY — A trial arising from a 1976 bear mauling incident at Fishing Bridge campground in Yellowstone National Park is expected to begin in a U.S. District Court here in June.

The suit could have far-reaching impacts on Yellowstone bear management and on the extent to which the Park Service is held responsible for protecting park visitors.

Melvin Ford of Salt Lake City filed the suit against the United States in 1978 alleging that the National Park Service had negligently failed to control park bears and to warn visitors of bear dangers.

Ford's suit alleged that at 3:29 a.m. on August 16, 1976, the plaintiff "was dragged from the doorway of his camper and pulled to the ground by a grizzly

bear." The suit claimed that the bear bit and mauled the plaintiff and dragged him 60 feet into the forest.

Ford charged in his suit that beginning in 1968, the Park Service had negligently closed garbage dumps where bears had grown accustomed to feeding on human foods, forcing grizzly bears, "not being able to support themselves on their natural fodder," to invade campgrounds. Ford's contention echoes the claim of grizzly researcher Frank Craighead, Jr. (see story page one).

Ford's suit describes him as a "business invitee" of the United States. The Park, alleges Ford, "owned, harbored and maintained" the bear that attacked him and the United States had a duty "to keep the premises safe and harmless for the plaintiff."

Ford is asking for \$225,000 in general damages and for special damages to be proved at trial.

The government has denied liability, claiming that the Park Service was not negligent, that plaintiff had voluntarily assumed the risks of camping in Yellowstone and that the plaintiff had caused his own injuries by leaving a cooler containing food outside the camper, despite warnings from rangers and in violation of park regulations.

The government further claims that its actions were "discretionary acts" for which it is not liable under the Federal Tort Claims Act.

U.S. District Judge Aldon J. Anderson recently denied U.S. motions for a judgment in its favor prior to trial.

In a similar case in 1975, the family of Harry Walker, a 25-year-old Alabama man who was killed by a grizzly in Yellowstone in 1972, sued the Park Service for negligence and won. The decision, however, was overturned on appeal.



Photo by Tom Mangelsen

MAULINGS BY BEARS over the years have made some backcountry travelers fearful and have shaken park officials' confidence in management techniques.