



FIELD JOURNAL

Northwest Connections (NwC) is a non profit organization working to involve local people in the conservation of habitat linkages across rural lands. Staff: Tom Parker, Melanie Parker, Tiger Hulett, Andrea Stephens, Mike Stevenson, Lyndee Stevenson. Board Members: Roger Marshall, Agnes Beck, Bob Love, Sue Stone, Melanie Parker, Tom Parker, Gary Freyholtz.

BEAR DNA PROJECT THIS SUMMER

Bears will be snagging their coats on strands of barbed wire this summer and Northwest Connections staff, students and volunteers will be coming behind them to collect these important clues.

Working in collaboration with Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Plum Creek Timber Co. and the Forest Service, Northwest Connections will be putting field crews across the Swan Valley and into the Mission Mountains. Crews will consist of one local NwC staff member paired with one university wildlife biology student and possibly one additional volunteer. Together the crews will set and monitor over 50 hair traps, some of which will be combined with remote cameras.

The hair traps will provide DNA information that sorts grizzlies from black bears and determines the sex of the bears as well as individual identity. Identity will be used to determine the minimum



Local grizzly travels through a Swan Valley homestead and leaves this tell tale sign.

number of different grizzly bears still able to utilize this corner of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem. This data is important because if biologists and managers hope to remove the grizzly bear from the endangered species list at any time, they will need to show that the Mission Mountains subpopulation remains viable and is not shrinking.

Student Profile:

Casey Johnson loves hunting, camping, fly-fishing and anything else that gets him outdoors. He has contributed over 24 field days to the Wildlands Volunteer Corps, surveying roads, mapping stream morphology, inventorying whitebark pine stands, and helping track animals in the heart of winter. What does he enjoy about WVC projects? "Getting way back out there and doing something valuable," says Casey. Some of his best memories are from a trip into the Mission Mountains last October to help with a whitebark pine survey. He and his crew came across a site where a grizzly bear had torn up a squirrel cache for whitebark pine seeds. Later in the trip Casey discovered a swarm of hundreds of ladybugs under a boulder on a wind-swept peak—more food for bears! After high school (he currently is a sophomore at Hellgate High School) Casey plans to attend college and pursue a degree in wildlife biology. Thanks to Casey and all the other hardworking Volunteer Corps crew members who have devoted so much of their time to our conservation efforts!



Casey on road reconnaissance in the lower Clark Fork

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Special thanks to Bud Moore and Dan Pletscher, former board members who continue to support NwC and provide great advice and guidance!

FACT AND FIGURES

- 125 — the number of miles of roads and trails surveyed for tracks of lynx, fisher, marten, wolverine, wolf and other carnivores in 2001
- 250 — the number of volunteer days put in by the Wildlands Volunteer Corps.
- 50 — the percentage of whitebark pine in NwC plots that have died due to mountain pine beetle since first surveyed in 1998
- 145 — number of stream crossings surveyed for fish passage barriers

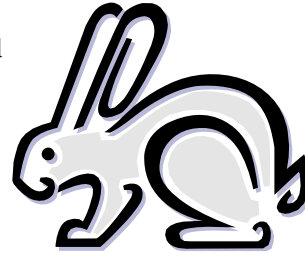
Lynx Update

Lynx in the Swan Valley are not as abundant as they are in the Seeley Lake area. During the past four winters Northwest Connections has consistently searched for lynx sign in formerly occupied lynx habitat and we have found a surprisingly small amount of sign north of Lindbergh Lake. These snow cats are holding on much better in the Clearwater drainage, possibly because of deeper snow that keeps competing carnivores such as lion, coyotes and bobcat more restricted.

This winter we do have one lynx who may be trying to reestablish itself along Mission

Mountain slope in the main Swan Valley. If all goes well, we will be able to assist lynx researchers in capturing and marking this individual to monitor its success.

Lynx are habitat specialists and are keyed into snowshoe hares and the thickets of young trees that hares prefer. Fire and logging techniques that result in dense regrowth of saplings and underbrush help create lynx habitat. As long as these regrown areas are not over thinned and they are adjacent to



Lynx need to eat at least one snowshoe hare per day to survive.

more mature forests where lynx can den, they provide excellent habitat for lynx.

This part of Montana is unique in that we are home to three different wild cat species: the lynx, bobcat and mountain lion. We exist in the overlap of the northern edge of bobcat habitat and the southern edge of lynx habitat. For lynx, though, this combination makes life a little more difficult as both lions and bobcats have been known to compete with and even kill lynx.

Perspectives: The Ethics of Wood Heat

How do you heat your home? No matter how you cut it, we use a lot of natural resources to keep warm in Montana. Recently NwC had the Wilderness and Civilizations program up from the University of Montana and while sitting in the midst of a 350 year old forest near Dog Creek, we considered the ethics of wood heat.

What is the cost to this forest of removing standing dead wood as firewood? Certainly, we concluded, if done across the landscape, snag removal denies a number of species their critical habitats: including pileated woodpeckers, flying squirrels, pine marten, as well as hundreds of insects and fungal species. Because of this and the subsequent loss of downed woody debris to help build the soil for the

next forest, some students proclaimed that they would certainly never harvest firewood from a forest such as this. How then would they heat their homes? In Missoula, many use natural gas. Is this any better we wondered?



Wood in our woodshed...at what true cost?

Isn't gas a non-renewable resource, where as wood is more renewable? And what about the environmental and financial cost of trucking and piping fossil fu-

els to your home. The students didn't warm up to this idea either.

Our conversations turned to building efficient structures that require very little heat and using solar and other alternative heat sources. Our conclusions were wholly inconclusive and it made us realize that all solutions have their costs. What I felt best about was that sitting in that old growth forest we ceased to be apart from it. No more were we talking about its fate in isolation from our own. We were considering the intermingled fates of this mammoth grove and our own well being.

Send us your ruminations on the ethics of wood heat and we'll print a few in the next newsletter. Email them to nwc@montana.com

Living with Bears

Spring is the season when residents can begin to expect seeing many of the Swan and Blackfoot Valleys' native wildlife including black and grizzly bears. Northwest Connections has initiated a welcome wagon program for new residents offering them information about these bears to reduce the chances for negative encounters.

Spring is the most vulnerable time for bears.

They emerge from hibernation emaciated and in need of green forage to start their digestive systems.

Green-up

occurs first in the lowest elevations so bears are concentrated closest to people during the April-June period. As summer progresses most bears move up the mountain sides in search of insects, huckleberries and other foods.

To minimize the danger to people and bears, community members need to take steps to prevent attracting bears to their property. By keeping pet food, grain, garbage, bird seed and other food stored inside a secure building and resisting the temptation to feed deer and elk, most people successfully avoid attracting bears.

In the past, some new residents have had bear problems during their first season or two here. More often than not, these problems resulted in damaged property and the death or removal of a bear. We are hoping that by providing better information about bears and bear attractants we can help prevent such incidents.

Please let NwC outreach coordinator Lyndee Stevenson know if you or someone you know would like to receive our packet of living with bears information.



Black bear foraging on spring dandelions



Field Notes

While driving up a residential road this winter I stopped for a crossing critter. It was long and sleek and bounded across the road like a ten pound slinky. My first thought, was, "Wow, a fisher." No. I looked again. As my brain caught up with my eyes I realized that this was an otter. I was nowhere near a stream and this took me by surprise. I watched it cross the road in front of me and then head off through an open stand of larch. I decided that time permitting I would come back and track it later that day.

That afternoon my niece and I donned snowshoes and headed out on the forward track. Had I only seen the track crossing the road, I would have wondered if I were really seeing fisher sign, what with the 2x pattern of weasel bounds. But soon the silly downhill slides began to show the unmistakable sign of otter travel.

My otter bounded along parallel to the highway for over a mile. It tried to cross the pavement twice, but decided better of it. It took the long way around private meadows that were too open to provide safe cover and finally found a stream and slithered in beneath the ice.

I've since learned that otters quite often make long overland journeys during the winter. Juveniles in particular are searching for good fishing waters to call their own. Fish, Wildlife and Parks is interested in the condition of aquatic mammals like mink, otter, muskrat and beaver. If you see any sign of these critters please let us know.

"It was long and sleek and bounded across the road like a ten pound slinky."

by Melanie Parker

Events Calendar

April

6-8
International Wildlife Film Festival
showing in Condon

27—29
Blackfoot-Clearwater Winter Range
Survey a.k.a. “the carcass count”

May

12 Bear Day
Free workshop for local residents covering
bear ecology and identification

18-20
Wildlands Volunteer Corps
Bear Track Surveys

June

10-17
Bear Ground: UM Extended Studies
course, Wildlife Biology 395

18-22
Wildlands Volunteer Corps
Amphibian Survey

27
Frog Day
Volunteer monitoring of ponds in the
Swan Valley in conjunction with the
Forest Service and the Swan Ecosystem
Center

July

9-13
Wildlands Volunteer Corps
Bear DNA study in the Mission
Mountains

14
Wildflower along Napa Ridge
Free interpretive hike for local residents on
alpine plant identification

23-27
Wildlands Volunteer Corps
Weed Survey in Welcome Creek
Wilderness

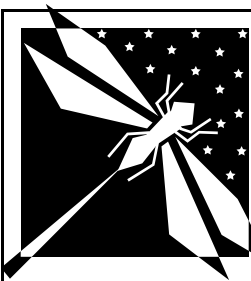
August

6-10
Wildlands Volunteer Corps
Grizzly Bear DNA and Whitebark
Pine Surveys in Mission Mountains
Wilderness

20-28
Wilderness First Responder
Taught by Aerie School for Backcountry
Medicine at NwC education center

Northwest Connections

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I want to support
Northwest
Connections' efforts
in community based
conservation and
education.

I'm sending ...

- \$10
- \$25
- \$50
- \$100
- \$500
- \$1000

to be used for...

- wildlife monitoring
- student scholarships
- community outreach
- general support

Donations help us employ local people in the mapping and monitoring of key plant and animal species and support the involvement of students and volunteers in these field projects as the context for their learning. Your donation is deeply appreciated whether it buys a roll of film for our remote wildlife cameras or a scholarship for a Landscape and Livelihood Field Semester student.