

High Country News

For people who care about the West



Grizzly Face-Off

The Yellowstone grizzly population is poised to lose federal protections — for better or worse


By Gloria Dickie

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FEATURE BY GLORIA DICKIE





Every morning, David Mattson hikes up the steep hillside behind his house in Livingston, Montana. From there, he surveys the swath of Paradise Valley that unfurls before him, flanked by the northern terminus of the Absaroka Range. He can see the subdued trickle of Suce Creek, which threatened to flood last spring; a multi-million-dollar mansion — abandoned by a Florida lawyer who found the area too windy — and the pale gray barn that a mountain lion raided late one night, making off with a couple of goats. But Mattson usually focuses less on the valley below him, and more on the tree line above.

He seeks out a smooth, distant ridge covered in what appear to be spiky gray toothpicks. Not long ago, that ridge was host to a thicket of green and healthy whitebark pines. Today, more than 90 percent of the region's trees are gone. "Back in 2007, you could come up and watch the trees decline," he says, tracing the loss with a gloved finger. "Everywhere you looked during that period, whitebark pine was dying."

Mattson is one of the country's most eminent grizzly bear biologists, so he found the rapid decline especially worrying. In the summer of 1988, 28 percent of the whitebark pines in Yellowstone National Park burned in devastating fires. Later, in the 1990s, Mattson watched the region's whitebarks die from blister rust, a non-native fungus. So when the beetle-kill epidemic hit in the early-2000s, it devastated already struggling forests. And it also threatened everything that depends on those forests, particularly the Yellowstone grizzly bear, which relies on whitebark pine nuts as a key source of nutrition. Fresh off the endangered species list and without federal protections, the Yellowstone grizzly was suddenly facing an uncertain future. Citing Mattson's research on the relationship between the bear and the nuts, conservation groups fought hard in court to regain the bear's protected status. The strategy worked: In 2011, the 9th Circuit Court deemed the Yellowstone grizzly to be still in danger and relisted it as threatened.

But now Mattson feels like he's suffering from a serious case of déjà vu. In March, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced its plans to move forward with a proposal to delist the Yellowstone grizzly bear, citing the 700-some bears who currently live in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem as a victory for the recovery effort — the successful culmination of 41 years of struggle, and an indicator of the health of the grizzly population. With fewer federal restrictions, states would be able to restore trophy hunts and gain revenue, as well as more easily resolve livestock conflicts. But scientists and conservationists fear that the move to delist relies too heavily on uncertain science and is largely a response to state pressure. If the federal government had the bear's best interest in mind, they say, why wouldn't it wait to be sure the grizzly was truly recovered?

For Mattson, 62, who has dedicated much of his life to protecting these bears, another delisting would be a heartbreaking defeat. "It's been an incredibly fascinating career, observing these bears," he says. "And it's been a cause for grief."

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—David Mattson,
Montana bear biologist
and opponent of
delisting the grizzly

A collared grizzly bear stands to get a better view of a nearby grizzly sow and cub in Grand Teton National Park. MARK GOCKE



Chris Servheen, grizzly bear recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, center, talks with Frank van Manen, center right, of the U.S. Geological Survey and leader of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team, during a break at a Bozeman, Montana, public hearing in April over the proposed delisting of the Greater Yellowstone grizzly bear population. (Servheen retired later that month.) MIKE GREENER

“It’s not like the Wilderness Act, where places must forever remain listed after they’ve been designated. The ESA needs success stories to strengthen the law, and the Yellowstone grizzly bear recovery is the greatest success story of all.”

—Chris Servheen, U.S. Fish and Wildlife grizzly bear recovery coordinator

CHRIS SERVHEEN HAS SERVED as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service grizzly bear recovery coordinator since 1981 — long enough for his thick mustache to turn from brown to gray — working from his office at the University of Montana, where he earned his Ph.D. in wildlife biology and forestry. For more than three decades, his job has been to keep the Lower 48’s 1,800 grizzly bears alive and healthy; a delisting ruling would be the crowning achievement of his career.

“The objective of the Endangered Species Act is to get a species to the point where protection is no longer required,” says Servheen, who announced his retirement at the end of April. “It’s not like the Wilderness Act, where places must forever remain listed after they’ve been designated. The ESA needs success stories to strengthen the law, and the Yellowstone grizzly bear recovery is the greatest success story of all.”

In 1975, with the grizzly bear extirpated from 98 percent of its former range south of the Canadian border, the federal government opted to protect the five remaining populations in the Lower 48 as threatened under the 1973 Endangered Species Act. The ruling triggered an array of protective measures for bears in Yellowstone, Bitterroot, Selkirk/Cabinet-Yaak, the North Cascades and Northern Continental Divide, including halting the grizzly hunting season. In the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, which includes

34,375 square miles in and around the national park, rangers worked to close open garbage dumps, a long-standing source of bear-human conflict, in hopes of “rewilding” the fewer than 312 bears that remained.

In 1979, nearing the completion of his master’s degree in plant ecology, Mattson joined the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team, working as a field technician and collecting habitat data. Then, in 1983, federal, state and tribal entities formed the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee to help boost the grizzly population, which had continued to decline despite the new protections. The committee, which would guide the bear’s recovery across all states, relied on the study team’s research to establish policies and alter land-management practices. Members worked with area managers to close grazing allotments that brought bears into conflict with livestock; changed garbage management in Yellowstone National Park; and limited road access. For 14 years, Mattson, who took over field investigations in 1984, contributed to the committee’s bear ecology research, counting bears and looking into the causes of bear mortality.

Much of this research came to fruition in 2013, 20 years after Mattson’s departure, when the study team released a report examining the impact of whitebark pine loss on bears — the reason the courts had earlier restored federal protection. The report noted that poor

whitebark pine production had caused bears to forage at lower elevations, creating a spike in conflicts with humans. And it found that lower cub and yearling survival slowed population growth in 2002. However, the study team also praised the bears’ diet diversity and ecological adaptability. Though omnivorous, Yellowstone grizzlies rely more on meat than other populations, the study team wrote, and many bears occupy areas with little or no whitebark pine habitat, and thus eat other foods. The reason more cubs and yearlings were dying, they figured, was not because of the whitebark pine declines, but because too many grizzlies were crowded into too small an area. Given that evidence, in 2013 the Yellowstone Ecosystem Subcommittee and Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee recommended that the Fish and Wildlife Service remove the bear from the endangered species list.

“We have three times as many bears occupying more than twice the range we did when we started,” says Servheen. That’s in spite of the fact that grizzly bears, or *Ursus arctos horribilis*, are the second slowest-reproducing land animal in North America, just behind the musk ox, taking two or three years to rear a single litter of cubs. And, unlike most other listed species, they sometimes kill human beings. Since 1872, grizzlies have killed eight people in Yellowstone National Park. “And yet we’ve done it,” Servheen says. “That’s a good story.”

Yet it’s a story with some hiccups. At the Yellowstone Ecosystem Subcommittee’s annual meeting in Teton Village, Wyoming, this past November, Frank van Manen, the bald, bespectacled Dutch ecologist who now leads the study team, walked up to the podium in Hotel Terra’s airy conference center and announced to dozens of grim-looking outfitters, photo safari guides and tribal representatives that the grizzly bear that Fish and Wildlife was so ready to delist had, in fact, declined over the previous year, from 757 to 714 animals. Van Manen quickly added that the number was within the range of variability, and that the long-term trends showed no evidence of decline, but that did little to dampen the palpable sense of frustration in the room.

And the most recent count doesn’t factor in all of Greater Yellowstone’s recent grizzly deaths — 61 in 2015, the most since records began. Instead, most of those deaths will be reflected in the 2016 count, when grizzlies first emerge from their winter dens. Last year, 37 bears were killed by humans, including the euthanization of the notorious mother grizzly who killed a hiker last summer. An additional 17 ursine fatalities are under investigation, the majority of which occurred during hunting season. Though they are much larger than their cousins and have distinctive features such as a dish-shaped face and shoulder hump, grizzlies can still be mistaken for black bears.

Fewer bears are living out their

roughly 25-year natural lifespan in the wild. Instead, bear and human conflicts are increasing “because bears are getting into areas where they haven’t been for decades,” van Manen said in a phone conversation a few weeks before the Teton Village meeting. “They’re moving into areas where people are not used to seeing grizzly bears.”

Some wildlife managers actually worry that continued protection of the bears could increase conflicts with humans and livestock, resulting in yet more bear deaths. Brian Nesvik, chief warden of Wyoming’s Game and Fish Department, believes that the states could do a better job of managing delisted bears, reducing conflicts and removing problem animals earlier. “The bottom line is the core of the grizzly bear population has reached carrying capacity, and there’s not a lot of room left in the sardine can to put more bears.”

DRIVING THROUGH WYOMING’S RAIN-SOAKED BRIDGER-TETON National Forest, it’s hard to miss the yellow, diamond-shaped signs that warn of “game” on the roads, a not-so-subtle reminder of how the state sees most wildlife: as something to be hunted. That may soon include grizzlies, too.

If and when the Yellowstone grizzly is delisted, regulated hunting will be allowed inside the 19,300-square-mile management zone that surrounds the park. The bear population would not be permitted to drop below 600, meaning that, according to the latest count, about 100 potentially could be killed. The quota would be divided between Wyoming, Idaho and Montana, with Wyoming hunters getting the largest share.

Further riling bruin-lovers, one Jackson Hole outfitter announced that as soon as grizzlies are delisted, he intends to target Bear 399, the Yellowstone ecosystem’s most famous and beloved grizzly. First collared in 2001, Bear 399 and her several litters of cubs have frequented Grand Teton’s roadsides for more than a decade, delighting sightseers. The outfitter told the *Jackson Hole News&Guide* that he was motivated by a hatred for “the federal government, bear-loving environmentalists and the Endangered Species Act.”

Such vitriolic reactions, Mattson says, “go back to fundamental world-views, where the idea that there would be a species out there that’s not hunted is a literal moral offense,” a philosophy Mattson refers to as “domestic utilitarian.” The philosophy is “fully embodied in state wildlife management,” he says, with disgust. “Wildlife are there to be used and dominated — and the ultimate act of domination is to kill them.”

The delisting proposal “is very much responding to state pressure,” says Noah Greenwald, the Center for Biological Diversity’s endangered species director. “It’s just unfortunate, because some of these state game agencies are terribly regressive.”



Nesvik, the Wyoming wildlife official, notes that his state is a strong believer in the state-run “North American model of wildlife management.” Management decisions, he says, are best made by the folks on the ground who live near bears. After all, he says, other species, like black bears, are successfully managed by the state. “What folks need to remember is the states are fully committed to ensuring we have a healthy recovered population of grizzly bears that won’t ever be threatened again.”

Some say that, unlikely as it may seem, the domestic utilitarian approach could help the bear. Once wildlife becomes game, hunters — a powerful, mon-eyed constituency — gain a stake in the

species’ survival. The healthier the bear population, the better the hunt. In effect, the same people who want to shoot the bears could become their best stewards.

IT’S BEEN MORE THAN 20 YEARS since David Mattson arrived for work one morning at the Yellowstone Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team to find that his office had been invaded: His computer files deleted, research folders emptied and data confiscated. The jarring event, which would mark a turning point in Mattson’s career as a grizzly bear biologist, was chronicled in Todd Wilkinson’s 1998 *High Country News* feature “Grizzly War.” Later, Mattson learned that the apparent burglary had actually been a

Wyoming Game and Fish Department employees Terry Kreeger, Dan Thompson and Matt Huizenga admire the 23-year-old female grizzly 179 they had just re-collared, before releasing her back to the Bridger-Teton National Forest near Moran Junction. Data collected is used both by the state agency and the interagency team.

MARK GOCKE, WYOMING GAME AND FISH DEPT.

Bear biologist David Mattson and his wife, and fellow bear-activist Louisa Willcox, hike with their Australian shepherd, Tashi, along the hillside above their Paradise Valley home outside Livingston, Montana. The couple contends the grizzly population remains in peril and is fighting the delisting effort.

MIKE GREENER



“raid,” by the then-leader of the study team, Richard Knight, who stated in a memo that the incursion was “simply my retrieval of data that I am responsible for before it was used to further criticize the government.” Mattson had openly challenged the scientific basis for removing endangered species protections from the Yellowstone grizzly, something the federal wildlife service was eager to push along.

The experience shook Mattson to the core. “I thought science drove the world,” Mattson recalls, chuckling at his naiveté. “I thought science was the fountain of everything that mattered to decision-makers.” The middle-aged scientist fled, seeking refuge first at the University of Idaho, where he finished his doctoral degree, then in the Canadian Yukon’s Kluane National Park and Reserve, where he continued to study grizzlies, and later, when the ursine reminders proved too much, in the dusty American Southwest, where he surveyed the predatory behavior of mountain lions.

Eventually, Yellowstone’s grizzlies pulled him back home to Montana — that, and a certain grizzly bear activist. “I came back to Louisa, and therefore I came back to grizzly bears,” he says with a shy smile early one morning at the home he and his wife now share.

“Louisa” is Louisa Willcox, long a force to be reckoned with. Where Mattson appears soft-spoken and reflective, Willcox is outspoken and determined, quick to denounce what she sees as social and political injustices. She’s on the “pointy end” of advocacy, her husband says. Having spent most of her professional life at the center of grizzly bear conservation in

the Northern Rockies, the 62-year-old, gray-haired activist is accustomed to controversy. She served as program director of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, then as the Natural Resources Defense Council’s senior wildlife advocate for nearly a decade, where she fought to relist the grizzly in 2007. Now semi-retired, she authors an incendiary email news bulletin, *Grizzly Times*.

Today, after what Willcox calls “a long, weird, wild ride” and six years of marriage, the couple constitutes what they term “the rebel bear force” in this corner of Montana.

ON A COLD NOVEMBER NIGHT, shortly after the first snow of the season, Mattson and Willcox pore over a draft of their latest *Grizzly Times* entry. It’s the day after the Teton Village meeting, and news of the population decline has traveled fast. Willcox and Mattson are in a bit of a tizzy. “Seven hundred and fourteen!” Willcox exclaims. The bookshelves in the couple’s home office, illuminated by the computer monitor’s harsh glow, overflow with skulls and specimens, books on bear biology and tomes of forest ecology. Their dog, Tashi, a black-and-white shepherd, sits patiently at their feet as they run through final edits before blasting news of the meeting’s revelations out to conservationists around the country. As the most persistent, and celebrated, auditor of the grizzly bear study team’s data, Mattson spends much of his time conducting external reviews and delivering presentations on his findings around the region to the public. The couple’s

work has drawn the ire of many delisting advocates. When Willcox started receiving death threats, the couple installed an elaborate external lighting system around their property.

Mattson’s audits go far beyond the whitebark pine nut research that made him famous. He examines population density and counting methods with a critical lens — because management decisions, and ultimately listing decisions, hinge on population figures — and he focuses on the bear’s diet of army cutworm moths, cutthroat trout and ungulate meat.

According to the best available science, 717 grizzly bears roam the Yellowstone ecosystem (a slight revision to November’s estimate of 714), the second-largest population in the Lower 48. But even van Manen, who has studied the world’s ursines, from sloth bears in Sri Lanka to China’s giant pandas, admits that the margin of error is large: Bears are notoriously hard to count. Still, he says, the agency has erred on the side of caution, and there may be as many as 1,000 bruins roaming the Yellowstone region’s woods.

Mattson, however, is not so sure. The traditional counting method, the Chao2 estimator, which extrapolates population estimates and growth trends from ground and aerial observations of females and their young cubs, is prone to overestimation, he says. And a newer technique, mark-resight, which uses a combination of radio-collar tracking and aerial observation, is also faulty, according to critics, in that it can generate population trends that would be biologically impossible.

Meanwhile, University of Colorado ecologist Daniel Doak found that the aerial “search effort” had increased substantially over the past 27 years, giving the false impression that the Yellowstone population was increasing. This leads folks like Mattson to believe the general population trend has remained stagnant, or even declined, despite the official counts.

The population impact of changing feeding behaviors can't be ignored, either. In Yellowstone, gender once determined diet: Female grizzlies ate a lot of white-bark pine nuts, while males consumed nearly twice as much meat. Now, more and more females with cubs are feasting on ungulate carcasses and livestock to make up for the loss of whitebark pine and cutthroat trout, which were a staple until the mid-1990s, when whirling disease and invasive lake trout devastated the Yellowstone Lake cutthroat population. The meatier meals lead to conflict not only with humans, but also aggressive male bears and wolves.

Though the study team found no significant effects from whitebark pine loss, changes in grizzly populations can take over a decade to manifest. “Van Manen’s estimates are averaged essentially over the past 10-plus years, which completely masks the fairly dramatic changes that have gone on,” Mattson says. “Looking in the rearview mirror doesn’t have any sensitivity to what’s unfolding in real time.”

Other scientists are cautious too. For her master’s thesis, Ohio State University student Harmony Szarek surveyed the world’s foremost grizzly bear experts to determine how many were in favor of delisting. Of the 234 respondents, more than 60 percent believed the Yellowstone grizzly should remain listed as threatened or be upgraded to endangered.

“This was shocking to us,” says Jeremy Bruskotter, Szarek’s advisor and a professor in OSU’s Terrestrial Wildlife Ecology Lab. “We had anticipated that if the Fish and Wildlife Service was moving this proposal forward, then other scientists were probably going to be on the same page.”

Tom France, senior director of the National Wildlife Federation’s Northern Rockies Regional Center, is one of the few environmentalists willing to defend delisting.

“We have many, many species under the ESA and a limited set of federal resources. As we achieve success, like the Yellowstone grizzly, we need to redirect those federal resources to other more imperiled fish and wildlife.”

France says he’s looked closely at scientific audits done by Mattson and others, and believes “it doesn’t overcome the tremendous body of research that has been developed around the Yellowstone population. It’s indisputably one of the most studied populations in the world, and the body of evidence speaks loudly to recovery targets being met.”

Still, he adds, much of his support ultimately comes down to what happens

afterward. He’s OK with the Yellowstone grizzly being delisted, provided Montana and the Fish and Wildlife Service make strong, clear plans to link grizzly populations across the state.

OUTSIDE THE ENTRANCE OF HOTEL TERRA, Jim Laybourn clasps a white plastic sign between wooden claws. A gaping grizzly mouth covers his mustachioed face; fangs protrude over his eyebrows. A bodysuit of brown fur protects him from the November wind.

Laybourn, a photo guide, outfitter, and hunter in the Yellowstone valley, is here in bear costume to send a message to the Yellowstone Ecosystem Subcommittee: We grizzlies are worth more alive than dead, and there’s a very real economic reason to keep protecting us under the Endangered Species Act.

“Our tourism economy here is so based on bears,” says Laybourn, who ends up acting as doorman to the members of the study team as they search for the correct entrance. In 10 years working as a guide, Laybourn has taken hundreds of people into the dense coniferous forests of Yellowstone in search of grizzlies, not geysers. “Every single person I have ever taken out asks, ‘Are we going to see a bear today?’ For some people, it’s a life-changing experience.”

A 2014 study published in *The Journal of Environmental Management* entitled “The Economics of Roadside Bear Viewing” found that Yellowstone visitors would be willing to pay an additional \$41 if it ensured spotting roadside grizzlies. But if bears were barred from roadside habitat, the study noted, 155 jobs and more than \$10 million to the local economy could be lost.

At the end of January, Grand Teton National Park officials publicly spoke out against the potential delisting decision. “We are concerned about the potential harvest of grizzly bears adjacent to Grand Teton,” park spokesman Andrew White said. “This is a very important issue that may negatively affect grizzlies using the park as well as bear-viewing opportunities for visitors.”

Down the road, the bears’ charisma is on full display at the Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center, nestled between an IMAX and a McDonald’s in West Yellowstone, Montana, the park’s tourist hub. As many as 100,000 people visit the center each year when the wild disappoints. On a chilly November day, Kimberly Shields, a young naturalist with dark brown hair and maple-leaf-red winter coat, talks to the few off-season visitors. Behind her, resident brother and sister grizzlies Kobuk and Nakina tussle in their enclosure. Their mother and another sibling were caught raiding a chicken house 17 years ago in Alaska and shot by a farmer, who left the two remaining cubs for dead.

Now lumbering, full-grown bruins, they awe, even as they fight over pumpkin snacks. When asked what it was about grizzlies that inspired him,

Mattson made no mention of their brute force or 400-plus pound presence. Rather, he gave a scientific answer: “They’re more intelligent, adaptable, omnivorous. The ways they plug into the environment are unending. Frankly, they just do that many more interesting things.”

When it comes to delisting, Shields says, “we try to provide a neutral stance and let people decide for themselves. Unfortunately, she adds, few of the people who come through understand delisting, or are even aware of the pending decision.

She’s less worried about hunting than about the potential loss of habitat under delisting. “Right now, the grizzly population seems like it’s at a really healthy level,” she says, “but it’s ultimately an island population.”

Under the draft Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy most development is restricted in the 5.5 million-acre conservation area. But more than half of the habitat outside the recovery zone is open to oil and gas development and timber cutting, with even more land available to road building.

“We like to tell people, you don’t need to save hundreds of thousands of acres to save these bears. You just need to save the right spots,” says Shields.

The Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, which spans 9,600 square miles in northwestern Montana and includes Glacier National Park, is home to an estimated 960 grizzly bears. A century ago, Yellowstone’s grizzlies mingled and procreated with these northern neighbors, and one goal of the 1993 Recovery Plan was to re-unite the two groups. But today more than 150 treacherous miles of farmland and roadways still separate the populations.

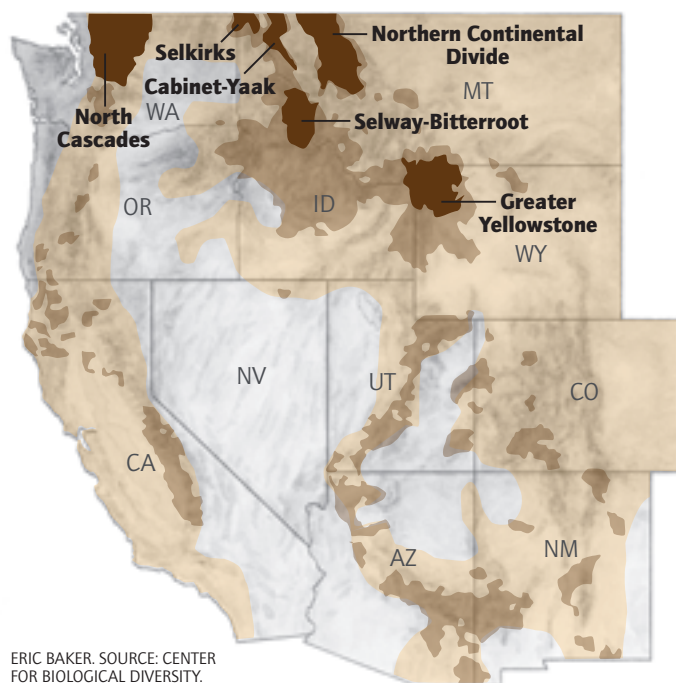
Servheen, however, is confident the two populations will soon connect, aided

“We had anticipated that if the Fish and Wildlife Service was moving this proposal forward, then other scientists were probably going to be on the same page.”

—Jeremy Bruskotter, speaking about a study that was part of an Ohio State University master’s thesis that found more than 60 percent of grizzly experts were against delisting

Grizzly bears in the West

■ Current recovery areas ■ Potential habitat ■ Historic range



ERIC BAKER. SOURCE: CENTER FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY.



Grizzly 399 and her triplets navigate a bear jam in Grand Teton National Park. One Jackson Hole outfitter has threatened to target 399, if grizzlies are delisted.

THOMAS D. MANGELSEN/
WWW.MANGELSEN.COM

by projects to help the animals bridge highways, like I-90, which cuts the two populations in half. Even without connectivity, the Yellowstone population is genetically healthy, says Servheen. “It’s not a small isolated population; it’s a large isolated population.”

Mattson confirms that the divide is shrinking. “They’ve covered about half the distance going down — the gap, at this point, is not huge.” But he worries that once the Yellowstone grizzly is delisted, the progress will cease. Suddenly, bears will be hunted on the fringes, or euthanized for moving into agricultural land. “There’s a predictable geography to where death rates are going to escalate first,” he explains, “and it’s going to be on the periphery.”

IN 2007, DAVID MATTSON knew the “rebel bear force” had a good chance at getting grizzlies back on the endangered species list; the possible impacts of whitebark pine loss were clear. But this time, he says, will be tougher.

On a crisp, winter morning, while Mattson sips coffee out of a Grizzly Bear X-ing mug, a knock, followed by Tashi’s barking, echoes from the front door.

“Oh, that’s Kelly,” says Willcox, rushing to greet a young woman with bright red curly hair, whom I immediately recognize from the meeting at Hotel Terra. Kelly Nokes was the only one who managed to make the Fish and Wildlife Service squirm, when she asked Richard Hannan, deputy director of the agency’s Pacific Region office, if he was familiar with the case of gray wolves in the Great Lakes region.

Hannan, who seemed to have been brought in as a quasi public relations handler, cleared his throat and gruffly replied, “The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service does

not agree with the decision of the Department of Justice when it comes to the gray wolf and is appealing their decision.”

In 2013, the Humane Society sued to overturn U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s final rule to delist the Great Lakes gray wolf. The U.S. District Court ruled in the Humane Society’s favor, calling the agency’s decision “arbitrary and capricious.” Judge Beryl Howell ordered the immediate restoration of endangered species protections in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan, halting the controversial hunts.

Nokes, who has a J.D. and master’s in environmental law and policy from the Vermont Law School and is now the WildEarth Guardians’ Carnivore Campaign Lead, plans to use a similar angle of attack against the Yellowstone grizzly delisting: The law does not allow for the piecemeal delisting of species by distinct population segments.

“The plain language of the Endangered Species Act is that a listed species may be delisted in its entirety only,” she says. “The Service, in effect, is really thwarting the very purpose of the ESA and undermining efforts to recover the grizzly as a whole.”

In other words, since the grizzly bear was listed in 1975 in all of the Lower 48 states, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service cannot slice the population into different subgroups, like Yellowstone or Bitterroot or North Cascades, simply for the purpose of delisting them one by one.

Not long after the Great Lakes gray wolf verdict, Michigan and Wisconsin filed an appeal, which is pending. The outcome of the case could very well determine the grizzly bear’s future.

B BAR RANCH, marketing itself as an “organic working guest ranch” that focuses

on environmental stewardship, lies about 40 miles from Willcox and Mattson’s home. On my last day in Montana, Louisa suggests we stop in for a visit. Rumor has it that grizzlies have been seen foraging in nearby fields.

Indeed, says Trina Smith, the ranch’s guest services supervisor, cars clogged the ranch’s private roads all summer long. Some visitors even held tailgating parties while they waited for the grizzlies. By mid-September, Smith had counted 18 bears at once feeding on what the ranch presumed to be wild caraway root (an exciting new dietary discovery, if true), not far from the ranch’s cattle. What might horrify some ranchers is more than tolerated at the B Bar — it’s celebrated.

“The West is changing,” Willcox concludes at dinner later that night, pulling apart a piece of chicken as we discuss the day’s events. “Whether it’s Bozeman or Yellowstone, or Colorado. There’s a new kind of people living here, and they are not reliant on agriculture, logging and mining.”

Instead, newcomers tend to be more interested in recreation, tourism and simple mountain living, far away from the highways and high-rises that plague cities. They have different value systems, says Willcox. But that doesn’t mean the grizzly is out of the woods.

“The bears are still adjusting to a world without whitebark, trout and fewer elk. They can’t withstand too much killing,” says Willcox. Moreover, the new people moving to the mountains aren’t as vocal or as engaged in the political process, leaving the microphone open for hunters, loggers and miners.

The Yellowstone grizzly remains in a perilous position, despite the hints of change. Perhaps only when the old value systems give way, and the rebel bear force is rendered obsolete, will Willcox and Mattson support delisting.

“The Old West knows it. They know they’re going down. And they’re just putting up the last, biggest fight they can over the thing they can fight over — grizzly bears.”

As I head to bed that night, snow beginning to fall again in Paradise Valley, I have to wonder: Just how many grizzly bears is enough? How many bears will the people of Montana, Wyoming and Idaho truly tolerate? Once described by *The Milwaukee Journal* as the “king of the wild beasts of the Rocky Mountains” after the mauling of legendary frontiersman Hugh Glass, grizzlies were and are one of the few animals in North America considered “really dangerous.” As much as Mattson and Willcox would love to see thousands of grizzlies in their home state and beyond, is this a feasible goal? Can grizzlies roam from Yellowstone to Yukon? Or is 717 bears the best we can hope for? Ultimately, it’s an answer that will only emerge once the bear is delisted, and the states and the people are left to decide just how far the monarch of the wilderness will be allowed to reign. □



Gloria Dickie is a freelance environmental journalist and former HCN intern who writes from Boulder, Colorado.

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