

THREE STRIKES AND YOU'RE OUT

GRIZZLY BEAR MANAGEMENT ON THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN FRONT



FIELD NOTES FROM TRM RANCH

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Earlier in May of this year, I observed three bears on the ranch traveling alongside a riparian corridor a few hundred yards from where I was conducting a wildlife survey. Although probably not aware of my presence at that point, the bears were heading in my direction. I did not miss the opportunity to leave the area. By the time I had reached the jeep, the adult female and her two yearlings were about two-hundred yards away, still closing at a steady pace. At that point, it was clear to me that the family was well aware of my presence but did little to alter their traveling plans. I retreated further. By the time I drove off, the family group had moved within less than fifty yards, continuing to ignore my presence.

This and other previous close encounters on TRM Ranch and on other places make grizzly bear management on the Rocky Mountain Front so much more difficult. Although, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks has been successfully engaged over many years in a program assisting private landowners in redistributing livestock carcasses, problems with bears continue to arise. For as long as bears are not physically harmed, they will continue to roam the plains searching for food. As a consequence, most of these bears are dealt with on what I call a "Three strikes and you're out" management program.

It continues to mystify many wildlife biologists as to what influences a grizzly bear's travels. Measures of vegetation and topography, which greatly help predict the presence of species such as deer and elk, tell us little about where bears are likely to be found. Even more sophisticated clues such as the risk of human-caused mortality only weakly associate where bears are found and where they are predicted to be.

This makes some biologists question our ability to manage habitat to promote grizzlies using the traditional approach of wildlife-habitat relationships. In fact, habitat management in the federal recovery program for the threatened grizzly bear has been difficult along the Rocky Mountain Front.

As with other long-lived species such as our own, bears are guided partly by tradition and habituation, which affect each individual differently. For bears, the location of a protein-rich and palatable food source such as an ungulate carcass is a rewarding experience and is retained as a search image in subsequent searches. As a result, bears appear to search an area more according to experience than generalized, species-specific patterns of behavior. Developing these patterns is particularly important to bears during spring in order to most efficiently replenish depleted winter storage with protein-rich sources of forage before the summer breeding season. This is especially the case in years of a delayed growing season due to cold and wet weather conditions. The most rewarding sites for bears on the Rocky Mountain Front have been livestock bone yards and winter ranges of elk, bighorn sheep and mule deer. Here, bears often find abundant carcasses of wild and domestic ungulates. Information on the geographic location of these sites is passed on from one bear generation to the next.

TRM Ranch is one of those frequently remembered sites on the Front. Although, generally not remembered as a livestock bone yard, mainly due to the low stocking rate, the carcasses fallen from the large herds of mule deer and elk attract bears. Each spring, typically in May, bears descend from the mountain front to check on winter-killed ungulates on the ranch.

Bears also are

regular customers on most other ranches on the Front, since most of them also provide ungulate winter range, especially if properties also offer riparian areas and aspen patches for security cover. These bears have been reported to move as far out onto the prairie as Choteau and Dupuyer, often 20 miles and more away from the mountain front.

Needless to say, grizzly bears come into close contact with humans, especially during spring. Most of these encounters are harmless, however, since the prairie gives both humans and bears enough space to avoid one another. But each year, bears kill livestock; mostly sheep, but also damage beehives. These damages add up, especially in years of low winter mortality among ungulates and late green-up. In those years, bears do not keep their distance and create a multitude of management problems. In general, most bears damaging private property or creating a nuisance for the first time are captured and relocated to a more remote region along the Front. Some bears will avoid problems while others return right away. Frequent offenders are often given three strikes before captured and deported to a zoo. Here, these problem bears will stay for the rest of their lives. Undoubtedly the bear will have at that point lost part of its existence.

We visitors and inhabitants of the Rocky Mountain Front face a difficult task. Conserving the wild grizzly bears means minimizing any form of human contact, not only to prevent potentially harmful encounters but also to prevent further habituating bears to the presence of humans. There is however, little we can actually do in introducing fear to bears, besides physical harm. In the past, bears were subjected to hunting pressure that may have had two positive side-effects, first, bears retained some fear and learned to avoid humans and secondly populations were kept at lower numbers, by that reducing the odds of a bear-human encounter. This type of management has been eliminated since the late 80's and has since then been replaced with the alternative of a "Three strikes and you're out" relocation program. Judging which one of these alternatives and others is best suited for the long-term goal of conserving healthy and wild population of grizzly bears on the Rocky Mountain Front is difficult but needs to be evaluated in light of continuous management problems.

