

A Toast to the GYE Grizzly Recovery

Wildlife conservation is filled with roadblocks, setbacks, and delays. That’s why we need to stop and celebrate when conservation puts one in the win column.

That’s certainly the case with grizzly bears in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE). The recovery of that population is one of the greatest large carnivore success stories in North American history. When the grizzly bear was put under federal protection in 1975, the GYE population was just 150 bears. The federal recovery goal then was 400 bears, later increased to 500 bears to make sure the population would be healthy and viable before delisting. The population reached that goal in 2002, more than a decade ago. Today it’s estimated at more than 700—a remarkable wildlife conservation achievement.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) agrees. Recognizing that all recovery criteria had been met, this past March the agency

year, officials from the three states would review total grizzly bear mortalities from vehicle collisions, natural causes, and removal due to killing livestock. If mortalities exceeded previously agreed-upon limits, no hunting would occur the next year in any state.

Another thing to remember: Before any hunting would even be considered, the grizzly first needs to be delisted, and even then there would still be opportunities for public comment on any hunting season proposals.

For proof that the GYE grizzly population would fare well under state control, look no further than our record with other large carnivores. Five years after Montana’s wolf population was delisted in 2011, the population is at least 536. That’s five times greater than the federal recovery goal, even with managed hunting and trapping. Similarly, our mountain lion population, managed with regulated hunting, is robust, with more than 5,000 of the big cats. Hunting hardly dents our healthy population of roughly 13,000 black bears.

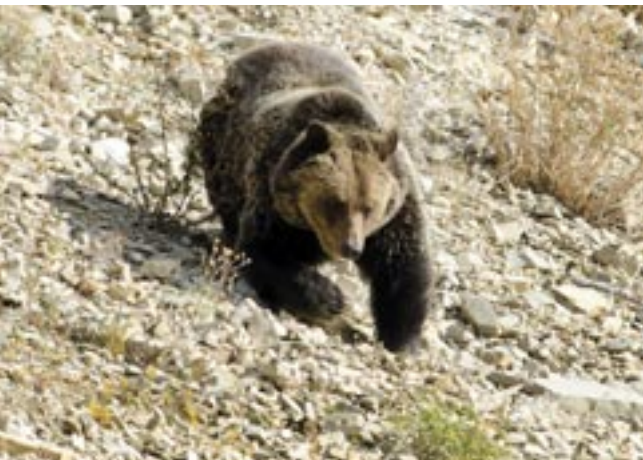
The goal of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is to recover threatened and endangered species and then, with adequate monitoring and safeguards in place, turn management over to the states. The ESA wasn’t created to permanently keep species under federal control. Doing so when a population has far exceeded recovery goals undermines public support for this essential wildlife conservation legislation. If grizzly delisting is blocked by lawsuits, writes outdoors author and TV host Steven Rinella in a recent editorial in the *New York Times*, “the credibility of the Endangered Species Act will continue to erode.”

The GYE grizzly population has been recovered for years. Protections that got it there won’t go away. Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho will continue monitoring GYE bear distribution and mortalities, females with cubs, and genetic variation. What’s more, if the population ever were to drop below the recovery goal, the grizzly could be put back on the list of federally threatened species.

The numbers are there. Safeguards are in place. It’s time to delist.

Those of us who care about grizzly populations should continue discussing the bear’s biology, ecology, and management. Let’s keep talking about how best to ensure the species’ future—including the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem and Cabinet-Yaak populations, which we are trying to recover and also delist. But at this important moment in the grizzly’s history, we should pause and celebrate reaching an important recovery milestone. Let’s give a toast both to the people who’ve helped recover the GYE population—including grizzly advocates and the many ranchers who tolerate grizzlies on their land—and to the great bear itself.

—**M. Jeff Hagner**, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Director



Let’s celebrate reaching this important grizzly bear recovery milestone.

proposed removing the grizzly bear in the GYE from the federal list of endangered and threatened wildlife. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks fully supports the delisting proposal.

Much of the press coverage since has focused on the possibility of grizzly bear hunting seasons. One reason hunting is in the spotlight is that the USFWS requires, before it decides to delist, that all three states in the GYE (Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho) outline the structure and framework of any possible hunting seasons. Reasonably, the USFWS wants to ensure the population stays viable after states take over management.

What the three states have shown with their outlines of proposed seasons is that if any hunting seasons took place, they would be extremely conservative and affect only a small percentage of the population. In Montana, we would set season dates to run when females are usually still in their dens, and we wouldn’t allow hunters to shoot a grizzly with another bear, to prevent accidentally shooting a sow with cubs. We’d also make sure that hunting was conducted under fair-chase conditions.

Some years we might not even have a season. At the end of each