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From: Big Hole Watershed Committee

Grizzly Bears Spotted in the Upper Big Hole

Grizzly bear sightings have been confirmed on a few occasions this summer in the Upper Big Hole River area.

Kevin Frey of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks confirmed photographs and tracks seen this summer are grizzly bear. "It's hard to say if we are seeing one bear or multiple bears at this point, but the range has been near 40 miles across the Upper Big Hole. That's not surprising. These bears can roam a great distance."

The most recent encounter was this week by the Big Hole Watershed Committee Range Rider. The Range Rider program helps to alleviate conflict between predators and livestock on federal grazing allotments with both ground patrol and game cameras. This week the game camera revealed a new guest – one sub-adult grizzly bear crossing a stream.

The Big Hole River area is not a place people expect to see a grizzly bear and in fact, most people in the area operate under the assumption that grizzlies are not present. And this is for a good reason, since grizzlies have been absent from the Big Hole watershed for roughly a century. Grizzly populations to the north and south have recovered considerably in recent decades, leading to bears dispersing into historic range. The confirmed sightings this summer are the first that grizzlies have been documented in the Big Hole area.

It's possible to see more grizzly bear activity in the Big Hole area. If you encounter a grizzly bear activity, providing documentation with photos of bears or tracks and a location to Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks is key to confirming presence.

Bear sightings like these are a good reminder to always "Be Bear Aware" – be alert, hike or hunt with a partner(s), make noise, carry bear spray and practice proper food storage and carcass storage. These practices are known to lessen the chance of a serious encounter with grizzly bears. The Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest agency has a Food Storage Orders in place to help users avoid conflict with bears.

Beaverhead Deerlodge National Forest – Be Bear Aware & Food Storage Order

The grizzly bear presence in the Big Hole is a sign for their overall population recovery. The Big Hole River Watershed geographically sits between the two distinct grizzly bear populations - the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem in north-west Montana and Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem to the south. Genetic exchange between these two populations could be additional support for US Fish and Wildlife Service delisting from the Endangered Species Act.

The idea of grizzly bears re-appearing in our area can be unsettling. "We knew grizzly bear presence in our area was only a matter of time" says Dean Peterson of the Big Hole Watershed Committee and rancher in the Upper Big Hole. "We have had predator conflict programs in place for several years, including Range Riders, Livestock Guard Dogs, and removal of attractant such as carcasses. Our primary

focus has been with wolves, but these programs easily translate to living with grizzlies and are important for supporting producers living and working with predators.”

Human-wildlife conflict resolution programs operate successfully across the region where grizzly bears are present, aiding communities in coexisting with large predators such as grizzly bears. Kris Inman, Wildlife Conservation Society and partner in the Big Hole Watershed Committee Predator Conflict programs says “It’s good to be proactive and learn from other areas, like the Blackfoot, to be ahead of potential conflicts between predators and livestock.”

People and Carnivores Steve Primm adds "Living with grizzlies can be a challenge. Conflict prevention efforts built on local knowledge and local leadership are the best way for meeting that challenge."

The Big Hole Watershed Committee Wildlife program operates in partnership with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, US Forest Service, Wildlife Conservation Society, People & Carnivores, and many local ranchers.

For more information, visit Big Hole Watershed Committee at bhwc.org.