

Wandering grizzly leaves Bitterroot, returns to Idaho



A grizzly bear roams near Beaver Lake in Yellowstone National Park. - Associated Press, file 17jul19 by PERRY BACKUS / Missoulian

Update: On July 15, the grizzly bear was due west of the Hamilton on the Idaho side in the Big Flat Creek area.

A 3-year-old male grizzly bear that has gone walkabout since leaving the Cabinet Mountains this spring crossed the divide last week to visit the area around Big Creek Lakes about 15 miles west of Stevensville.

No one can say for certain that he'll settle down in the Bitterroot National Forest.

Equipped with a satellite tracking collar, Grizzly 927 has been on the go since he was first released into the Cabinet Mountains last year. The bear moved into Idaho, where he was captured and returned to Montana in the fall of 2018.

This spring, it headed south. Avoiding humans by traveling high on the ridgetops, it made its way to the northern end of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness on the Idaho side. It kept moving south, including a visit to the Kelly Creek area where a mature grizzly was killed by a black bear hunter in 2007.

Last Friday, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Wayne Kasworm reported the bear had crossed the Divide and moved onto the Bitterroot National Forest by about a mile near Big Creek Lakes.

Bitterroot Forest biologist Dave Lockman said that while the distance traveled by the bear is impressive, it's not unprecedented to see one move that far.

"Male grizzlies do tend to disperse further than females," Lockman said. "It's kind of atypical to have a bear travel that far, but it's something we've seen before."

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In 2014, a female grizzly bear that biologists named Ethel wandered through the Florence area before turning back around and heading north to the Mission Valley.

"She was last heard of somewhere north of Flathead, where her transmitter quit," Lockman said. "She was a little bit different because females don't usually go quite that far."

Last October, a young [grizzly bear was captured](#) at the Whitetail Golf Course near Stevensville. It was relocated out of the valley.

Lockman said it's anyone's guess whether Grizzly 927 will find Montana to his liking.

"He's already covered quite a lot of territory," Lockman said. "He's spent some time in different areas in Idaho. I don't think there is any reason to think that he will set up camp and live in Big Creek. I think it's more likely that he will continue to explore."

Lockman said there was a 1990s environmental impact statement that proposed introducing grizzlies into the Bitterroot Grizzly Recovery Zone as a "non-essential experimental population."

"Had that happened, it would have given managers more control, but that effort, even though it was approved, was defunded and never occurred," Lockman said. "It took a little bit longer, but they are here now."

Having a grizzly bear in the Bitterroot Mountains shouldn't cause anyone to change how they use the area, he said. There are no official food storage orders on the Bitterroot National Forest other than in the Anaconda Pintler Wilderness.

"I would encourage people to use [bear-safe techniques](#) to keep black bears away," Lockman said. "While people might get a little more emotionally wound up because it's a grizzly, there are a lot more people killed and injured every year by black bears than grizzlies. They can be a problem, just like a grizzly, if you don't keep your camp clean or make lots of noise while you're out in the woods."

"I think it's kind of exciting to see one show up in the recovery zone where they are supposed to be," he said. "The Bitterroot is the only one out of six recovery zones that is yet to be occupied."

Grizzly bear captured Saturday at golf course near Stevensville



The grizzly captured on the Whitetail Golf Course north of Stevensville on Saturday. - Courtesy photo

29oct18 by [Perry Backus](#) / Missoulian

STEVENSVILLE — A young male grizzly bear was captured and relocated from the Whitetail Golf Course north of Stevensville Saturday.

The golf course's pro, Jason Lehtola, said the first indication that something was amiss at Whitetail came after they saw a broken flag stick on one of the greens. The next morning they found two more snapped off at their base.

“We thought it was probably a vandal at first,” Lehtola said. “And then we saw some tracks in a bunker and some scat piles. I couldn’t tell that it was a grizzly, though, at that point.”

The decision that something needed to be done about the flagpole snapper came last Wednesday when they found another flag stick broken on the seventh green — and this time, the bear had dug a large hole in the manicured grass.

A biologist would later say the bear was after worms.

“I figured that was enough,” Lehtola said. “We called Fish and Game on Wednesday. They brought out a trap Thursday.”

There had been a lot of golfers on the course over the past few weeks, but none reported seeing a bear lurking about. The course set up a trail camera, but it never did get a photograph of the bruin.

Lehtola arrived early Saturday morning to open up the course. He was walking into the shop when he heard an odd noise coming from the direction of the trap that sat about 100 yards from the clubhouse’s front door between the seventh green and eighth tee.

“I could tell we had something in the trap,” Lehtola said. “I started walking over there to take a look. I got about 30 yards away, when it must have smelled me. It was facing the other way in the trap and then all of a sudden it turned. It hit the end of the cage and gave me a growl.

“I turned around and went back and hopped in my car,” he said. “I pulled around the back side where there was a bigger screen.”

At that point, Lehtola could actually get a good look.

“I knew right away that it was a grizzly,” he said. “Its claws were really big. Its head was massive. It was standing in there and I could see the hump on its back.”

When Lehtola called the local warden to report what he’d seen, he said Justin Singleterry wasn’t so sure.

“I told him, ‘You’re not going to believe this. I think it’s a griz,’” Lehtola said. “He just kind of laughed at me and said he hears that all the time.”

Lehtola said the warden changed his mind right away after the bear hit the side of the culvert trap when he arrived to take a look.

“It was pretty scary,” Lehtola said. “I’m feeling pretty lucky we didn’t have anyone hurt. We’ve had tons of people out golfing. ... I know that it scared the hell out of me when it smacked up against the cage. It’s not something that I want to run into the wild.”

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Wildlife Specialist Jamie Jonkel said the 249-pound bear was probably about 2½ years old. It was released in the lower Blackfoot, east of the Rattlesnake Wilderness.

This isn’t the first time that grizzly bear has found its way to the valley floor in the Bitterroot Valley.

In 2003, an unmarked grizzly bear came over the Sapphire Mountains from the Rock Creek area.

Jonkel remembers following its tracks down a cow trail to a road near Sunset Bench northeast of Stevensville and finally to the place where he saw its dusty tracks cross the pavement on the Eastside Highway.

It stayed down in the river bottom for a couple of weeks. Jonkel received several reports of sightings of the bear in the Stevensville area before it trekked back over the mountains to Rock Creek.

Three years ago, the famous traveling grizzly bear called Ethyl tried to cross the valley just downstream of Florence as part of its 2,800-mile walkabout.

“She got hung up there,” he said. “There were too many houses so she backtracked.”

Jonkel said it’s not uncommon for bears to head to the river bottoms this time of year.

“Most of our black bears in the Bitterroot come down off the foothills in the fall to follow the drainages down to the river,” he said. “They want to try to spend time in the river bottoms where the lushest habitat is located.

“Sadly, along the way they have to go through 300 to 400 backyards with all their apple trees, garbage and bird feeders,” Jonkel said.

The bear biologist said the message hasn’t really spread far and wide in the Bitterroot that landowner can do more to keep bears at bay.

“Once an area get urbanized and fractured by a lot of development, it’s just hard to get organized,” he said. “We’ve had some good luck around Lolo Creek and Missoula in getting that message out. We could use a group to spread the word in the Bitterroot about being bear aware.”