

# Could Colorado see the return of grizzlies, wolves and wild bison? Here's how Montanans coexist with them.

Up north, grizzlies are roaming in places they haven't been in decades and there are enough wolves that hunters are allowed to shoot five apiece

Published on Aug 8, 2019 5:01AM MDT [Environment Primary category in which blog post is published](#)

[Jennifer Brown @jenbrowncolo](#)

**KALISPELL, Montana** — The latest grizzly bear killed by Montana officials was a relatively small, 278-pounder who ate 40 sheep and lambs in a two-week span, unfazed by four guard dogs and a range rider on a four-wheeler who tried to chase it away.

The bear, euthanized July 19 outside of Great Falls, was the 20th grizzly so far this season killed by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks or hit by a car or train along the Northern Continental Divide.

The region's human-related grizzly deaths are on par with last year's record-setting season, a result of a growing population of both bears and people. "We've got bears right now in areas where we haven't seen them in decades," said Dillon Tabish, a Kalispell-based education program manager for the state wildlife department.

As Coloradans face questions about whether to reintroduce the grizzly — and fellow titan of the forest, the gray wolf — the state can look to its northwestern neighbors, where the native animals are making a comeback after decades on the brink of extinction. [A recently filed lawsuit demands the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service explore reintroducing grizzlies to Colorado, while a petition about to circulate in Colorado would put the question of wolf reintroduction on the November 2020 ballot.](#)

On their own, grizzlies have returned to the Bitterroot Mountains in Idaho and Montana, as well as the Rocky Mountain Front, where the Montana mountains meet the plains. They number close to 2,000 in the mountains of Wyoming, Montana, Idaho and Washington.

And the gray wolf, with a population estimated at about 300 just more than a decade ago in Montana, has rebounded so dramatically that [hunters there complain](#) the wolves are decimating elk and deer populations. Montana now has a hunting season on the once-endangered species — six months long with a five-wolf bag limit.

Wolves number about 850 in that state, and 315 were killed during the most recent hunting season. Still, irritated elk and deer hunters are packing the house when state wildlife officials come to town, protesting that wolves have hampered their ability to stock their freezers with wild game.

A gray wolf. Coloradans could vote on wolf reintroduction next year. (Photo provided by Grizzly Creek Films)

As for grizzlies, human encounters have increased enough in recent years that Montana Gov. Steve Bullock this summer created an 18-member [Grizzly Bear Advisory Council](#). The group of citizens, chosen from more than 150 applicants, is tasked with making recommendations about how to keep humans — and bears — safe in bear country.

The panel comes a few months after a man teaching a friend to hunt was mauled by a grizzly near Columbia Falls in northwest Montana. [Anders Broste told Montana Public Radio](#) he fell on his back while trying to get away and the bear got on top of him and started biting and tearing his arm and leg. He survived because the griz ran away after pulling off his boot.

Three years ago, in June 2016, U.S. Forest Service law enforcement officer [Brad Treat was mauled to death](#) by a grizzly bear, also in northwestern Montana, when he rounded a curve on his mountain bike and collided with the bear, which was startled and attacked him.

Any effort to reintroduce large carnivores to areas where they haven't lived in decades is met with fear — fear of human injury or death, and fear that a protected species could bring greater restrictions in logging, mining and access to public lands.

"It's really important to have the public invested and involved in the management," Tabish said. "If you just force it upon people, it doesn't end well. History has shown that recovery requires the public's investment. You can't just put grizzly bears on the landscape. You need to have public tolerance."

But fear of the grizzly, which can weigh more than 1,000 pounds, is part of the fascination.

It's one of the reasons millions of people drive to Glacier National Park every summer hoping to see one — from a distance. Hiking without bear spray, which only works within about 15 feet, is not recommended, and trailheads often are marked with a bright-red sign picturing a hump-backed, brown griz and an alert: "Do not approach or feed."

## Would grizzlies move to Colorado on their own?

It's highly unlikely that grizzlies would return to Colorado on their own, crossing highways and moving across populated flatlands, said Andrea Santarsiere, a senior attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity.

The group filed a lawsuit in June asking the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to initiate research regarding reintroduction of grizzlies to places they once roamed, including the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado. The last grizzly documented there was in 1979, when an outfitter leading a hunting trip stabbed it to death with an arrow.

"We are not proposing right now that we should introduce them tomorrow," said Santarsiere, who lives in Idaho and spends weekends hiking in bear country, bear spray strapped to her backpack. "We're not looking at dropping grizzly bears in Denver proper."

Grizzlies were listed as a threatened species in 1975 in the lower 48 states (Alaska and Canada have robust populations). A grizzly bear recovery plan identified six zones in the lower 48 states, places the bears still lived or had lived most recently:

- The Northern Continental Divide, including Glacier National Park and northwest Montana, which now has an estimated 1,000 grizzlies
- Yellowstone National Park and its surrounding area, with an estimated 700 to 800 grizzlies
- The Cabinet-Yaak in extreme northwest Montana and Idaho, which has 50 to 60 bears
- The Selkirk Mountains of northern Idaho and eastern Washington, with an estimated 50 to 80 bears
- The Bitterroot Mountains, mostly in Idaho but also Montana, an area that is just starting to see evidence of the grizzly's return
- And the North Cascades of Washington, which officially has no bears (although there have been reported sightings) but is the subject of a reintroduction plan now seeking public comment

One of the Denver Zoo's two grizzly bears sits in Harmony Hill, the zoo's new bear exhibit, on May 15, 2019. (Courtesy of Denver Zoo)

Grizzlies once roamed from Alaska to Mexico, from the West Coast to the Great Plains, and numbered in the tens of thousands. Today, there are an estimated 2,000 in the lower 48 states, limited to those five, isolated zones.

While the populations have increased significantly in recent years, exceeding the bar set by federal wildlife officials for some areas, "recovery is more than just reaching a certain numerical population," Santarsiere said. The Center for Biological Diversity wants the grizzly populations to connect, not live in isolated areas, for the genetic health of the bears.

## Restoring native animals to the landscape for future generations

On a recent July day, Wayne Kasworm, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologist and grizzly expert based in Libby, Montana, had crews in the woods measuring this summer's huckleberry crops. It's a decent season, which means the bears should have a good amount of food.

Kasworm's also got biologists collecting grizzly bear hair samples caught on tree branches as part of a genetic testing program to count the bears and see whether they are healthy. Several bears in the area are radio collared, so he can track their movements.

A grizzly bear is spotted by a resident of northwest Montana. (Sally Costello, Special to The Colorado Sun)

Natural migration is possible — he's seen it happen with grizzlies moving down from Canada, and into the Bitterroot range in Idaho — but not as far of a trek as from Montana and Wyoming to Colorado. Healthy grizzly populations expand their range by small amounts each year — a chart showing their growing range looks like ripples in a pond.

"I don't see that happening in my lifetime," Kasworm said. Young male grizzlies often roam far from their mothers when they set out on their own at about 2 years old, but female grizzlies typically stay on their mother's range or adjacent to it, he said. "Obviously, you need both sexes to create a population."

Even human-led reintroduction is a slow process, he said. To supplement the grizzly population in the Cabinet Mountains of Idaho and Montana, Kasworm and team have transferred 22 animals since 1990 from the backcountry of the northern Continental Divide.

Federal proposals to reintroduce grizzlies to the North Cascades in Washington, as well as a reintroduction plan for the Bitterroots a decade ago that fizzled out, called for bringing a minimum of 20 animals to start.

During a previous public comment period about the North Cascades proposal, those opposed to the reintroduction said federal officials should allow repopulation to happen naturally and spend tax dollars elsewhere. Others noted that if any grizzly left the designated recovery zone, authorities should return them deep into the mountains, and that ranchers should have permission to shoot bears if they threatened their livestock.

Because grizzlies are a federally protected species, it's illegal for ranchers to kill them. Instead, they are supposed to report a problem bear to wildlife authorities, who can relocate or euthanize the bear.

"When you have more bears and you have more bears expanding their range, ... and people haven't experienced bears in their lifetime, ... we have more livestock losses," Kasworm said.

Reintroduction makes sense in some areas, but not in others, he said, noting that it's not realistic to expect a return to the days when grizzlies roamed the entire West. Government intervention must strike a balance between wildlife preservation and human progress. "We seek to keep those things on the landscape not only for us but for future generations, rather than us making choices today that might be irreversible," Kasworm said.

## What about the wolf that wandered down from Wyoming?

A [lone gray wolf, an animal gone from Colorado since 1940, strode into the state last month](#), raising the hopes of some that the species might return.

That's unlikely anytime soon, Wyoming wildlife biologists say. The male wolf that roamed into Colorado wore a radio collar, so officials could see that he was part of the Snake River pack in Wyoming.

A wolf sighted in July in Jackson County, Colorado, was confirmed by Wyoming Game and Fish to be a lone male gray wolf from Wyoming. Under the Endangered Species Act, harming, harassing or killing a gray wolf other than in cases of self defense is unlawful in Colorado. (Photo provided by Colorado Parks and Wildlife)

It's not unusual for a young male wolf to travel several hundred miles looking for new territory, said Sara DiRienzo, public information officer for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. He's unlikely to stick around, though, if there are no female wolves. "It takes two wolves to breed," she said.

In Wyoming, the gray wolf has bounced on and off the endangered list for 40 years, and was delisted again two years ago. Wolves have exceeded the population goals set by federal wildlife officials, numbering 286 at the end of 2018.

Most of the wolves are in northwest Wyoming, and there is a hunting season on wolves — one per person — in a trophy game management area. If wolves leave that area, they are considered predators and can be shot without a hunting license. About 40 wolves were killed by hunters last season, and another 40 were shot as predators.

Wyoming officials were thrilled when the animal was delisted and moved under state management, allowing state officials to work with ranchers on wolf policies.

In Montana, Gov. Steve Bullock, a Democrat now running for president, knows the political potency of the wolf issue.

"When I was running in 2012 for governor, I probably heard more about wildlife than I did taxes and education," he told The Colorado Sun in July when he visited Denver for a campaign stop.

Returning to a frequent joke, he added: "There's two ways to become a wildlife biologist: one is to get your master's or Ph.D., the other is to run for office. And I think I see that time and time again."

Montana Gov. Steve Bullock stopped in Denver for an event and fundraisers for his presidential campaign. (John Frank, The Colorado Sun)

What's his advice for Coloradans who might get to vote on the return of the wolf next year?

"I won't tell Coloradans what to do, but it has worked pretty well in Montana," he said.

## Could Colorado reintroduce wild bison too?

Colorado has a thriving bison herd on public land north of Fort Collins, and another at Rocky Mountain Arsenal, but that might be as close as the state ever gets to restoring the iconic beasts to the plains.

At Soapstone Prairie, a preserve owned by the city of Fort Collins and Larimer County, the bison herd has grown from just 10 animals to 77 in less than four years. Most of that occurred through natural breeding, said Jennifer Barfield, an assistant professor with Colorado State University's biomedical sciences department.

The bison are descendants of the herd in Yellowstone National Park, the largest herd in the nation in which there is no evidence the animals were bred with cattle. "From a cultural perspective, that makes them very valuable," Barfield said. And unlike the Yellowstone bison, the Colorado herd is free of brucellosis, a nonnative bacterial disease that is found in about 60 percent of female bison in Yellowstone, according to the National Park Service.

Most bison living in Colorado these days are on ranches, raised for human consumption. And even the few herds kept for conservation purposes — including those at Soapstone Prairie — are not exactly free.

A buffalo in Yellowstone National Park. (Jesse Paul, The Colorado Sun)

A wildlife-friendly fence surrounds the animals, though they are left on their own to breed, become prey for wild predators (though that hasn't been an issue) and graze the natural grasses. Biologists feed the animals only when severe drought hampers food supply, Barfield said.

"They are living off the land. They are moving at their own will," she said. Still, they are a managed herd.

The preserve has given bison to zoos in California, New York and Minnesota, and to Native American tribes trying to restore wild bison on their lands.

Other parts of North America, including Alaska and Canada, have reintroduced wild bison that roam free without fences. There are no such plans in the works for Colorado, though.

For now, knowing the bison are thriving in the state — though not completely wild — is enough, Barfield said.

“We live in this very urban environment. We have social media. We have all of these not-natural things that bombard us in daily life,” she said. “So being in a place where you feel like you are closer to the earth in general is important. Knowing that those places are out there, I think it’s a bit of a romantic idea for people.”

It’s part of the reason, she figures, that some people want to restore native species — including the grizzly and wolf — to the landscapes they once walked. “People are recognizing the value of it,” Barfield said. “The health of our population depends on the health of our environment as well.”

*Colorado Sun reporter John Frank contributed to this story.*