



In a remote corner of Montana,
hikers and activists clash over
the future of a grizzly bear population
hanging on for dear life.

BY ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN ILLUSTRATIONS BY NIKOLAI SENIN

NO MAN'S LAND



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THEY SAW THE FIRST sign of bears near dusk, on the way up to their campsite on the broad slope of Davis Mountain in northwest Montana. Levi “Rocks” Mason spotted the track, a five-toed, long-clawed imprint in the garden-rich soil of the trail, dwarfing the span of his hand. A little farther on, when he and his girlfriend, Cara Foley, found a clearing flat enough to pitch their tent in the wildflower-dotted slopes below the 6,000-foot summit, they also noticed flipped-over rocks, furrowed dirt, and sizable piles of scat, unmistakable signs of grizzly bears.

The pair considered their options. It was nearly dark, the end of a 23-mile day on the Pacific Northwest Trail through the Yaak Valley. Neither wanted to hike on into the uncertain twilight. So they put up the tent, retreated several hundred yards to an overlook to cook dinner and hang food in Ursacks, like always, then crawled into their bags back at camp.

Mason wasn’t exactly surprised to see evidence of grizzlies in the Yaak. In fact, when prepping for his 2019 thru-hike, he’d heard a podcast about how a local group was fighting to reroute the PNT out of the region because of concern about hikers’ impact on the bears here. Mason had even considered leaving the official trail and hiking around the Yaak. “I love wildlife, and the last thing I want to do is jeopardize wild bears,” he says. When he reached the area, however, he decided that his and Foley’s presence would barely register against the logging activity and ATV trails they saw around them. They pressed on, following the trail.

That night on Davis Mountain, the grizzlies felt close—so close that Mason slept with his bear spray within arm’s reach. But chances were the bear that had been scratching for grubs in their campsite was long gone, fleeing for a spot that might not have the best food sources, but at least was free from humans. Backpackers might fear grizzlies, but to the four-legged inhabitants of these mountains, people are the real bogeymen.



We hikers tend to think of ourselves as the good ones: a quiet, unobtrusive presence in the wilderness that takes only photos and leaves only footprints. By virtue of travelling on foot, the reasoning goes, we impact the places we travel less than anyone else. That’s probably true, but it turns out hikers’ impact is still significant. A variety of studies conducted over the last decade on wildlife like elk, wolverines, coyotes, and bobcats suggests that *any* human presence—be that on skis, snowmobile, ATV, or even on foot—can change the way animals travel, forage, and live in their home ranges. As more people venture into the wilds, animals are subjected to stress and must expend additional energy to flee from recreating humans, which in turn affects reproduction rates and individual survival.

Grizzlies (despite the camp-raiding, hiker-mauling fears they inspire in some) shy away from people the same way that deer do. Research out of Yellowstone found that bears give backcountry campsites a wide berth when occupied, and other analyses show that grizzlies avoid trails, shift their activity to dusk and nighttime when pedestrians are around, and work hard to distance themselves from any people they encounter.

All that’s particularly notable in the 1,100-square-mile Yaak Valley ecosystem, which stretches across the far northwestern corner of Montana, roughly between the Idaho border on the west, Lake Koocanusa on the east, and British Columbia up north. Thick forests of western hemlock, larch, ponderosa pine, and spruce cover an expanse of glacially bulldozed peaks drained by the lazy Yaak River. Among the extensive logging operations and motorized trail networks, there’s an island of pristine lakes, high-elevation huckleberry patches, wildflowers, and snow-mantled summits. The area is home to just 25 to 30 grizzly bears, roughly half of what biologists would consider to be a recovered and stable population, and now, the PNT.

For decades, the Yaak’s trails have been traveled primarily by a handful of local hikers and hunters. But that began to change with the arrival of the national scenic trail. The PNT spans 1,200 miles of peaks, forests, and backcountry lakes from Glacier National Park’s Belly River to Olympic National Park’s Cape Alava, passing through the likes of Flathead National Forest, North Cascades National Park, and the Pasayten Wilderness. Sixty-nine of those miles traverse the Yaak on a combination of existing trails (65 percent of the route) and Forest Service roads. First proposed in the ‘70s, the route didn’t notch official national scenic trail



The view from Northwest Peak on the PNT above Yaak Valley.

status until 2009. The route has been slowly gaining recognition in the 11 years since. In 2014, about 20 people thru-hiked it; from 2016 to 2019, the numbers have held steady at 60 to 70 per year.

One group of local activists, the nonprofit Yaak Valley Forest Council (YVFC), fears the extra hiker traffic this trail might attract would be the last straw for a bear population that already has to contend with logging, encroaching development, and climate change. The YVFC was formed in 1997 over concerns about logging in the area and other threats, working to a contentious stalemate that saw no new logging but no new protected lands, either. Over the past six years, the YVFC has mounted an increasingly vocal campaign of local and national op-eds, community meetings, and lobbying to move the PNT south, out of the Yaak entirely, for the sake of the grizzlies. They've been met by an equally determined group of Yaak locals, some thru-hikers, and the Pacific Northwest Trail Association, which counters that hikers don't actually pose any threat to the bears, and that the YVFC is really just trying to keep people out of its backyard.

Just how much disturbance the Yaak bears—and the rest of the wildlife jostling for elbow room across public lands everywhere—can take remains an open question. But as a growing body of research suggests that we hikers aren't quite the innocuous force we thought we were, it raises hard questions about where, exactly, we should go for our wilderness fix.

In Yellowstone, where more than 700 grizzlies (in the greater ecosystem) roam 3,500 square miles of protected terrain, park biologists still seasonally close the best bear habitats, such as spawning fish streams and carcass-rich areas, to give grizzlies undisturbed access and prevent dangerous encounters. How much more critical might that kind of buffer be when the population numbers just 25?

"The recreation pressure in the northern Rockies is increasing exponentially," says John Waller, supervisory wildlife biologist at Glacier. "It does affect bears, particularly outside the confines of national parks, where bears are at risk of being shot," whether that's because of hunters

misidentifying their targets or hikers citing self-defense. "When you get to critically small population sizes, there's a lot working against you."

Wayne Kasworm spotted the grizzly sow and her cubs from above. It was late May 2019, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist was on a routine monitoring flight over the Yaak's Kingsley Creek drainage in a four-seater Cessna 185. Antennas on the plane's wing had picked up signals from the collar on this particular bear, a 6-year-old female, so he knew it was in the area—but actually getting eyes on it was a special event. The animal happened to be ambling across an open, grassy hillside at about 5,000 feet, trailed closely by two cubs, her first litter.

It was a welcome sight for Kasworm, the man in charge of grizzly recovery efforts in the Cabinet-Yaak ecosystem (the Cabinet Mountains, just south of the Yaak, also hold 25 to 30 grizzlies). Since 1983, he's been watching over the grizzlies of northwest Montana, collaring bears, monitoring their movements and reproduction rates, and

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transplanting new bears into the Cabinets to boost the population. It's likely nobody knows more about the Yaak grizzlies than he does. And these cubs represented one step closer to a full grizzly comeback.

Grizzlies are doing all right in some recovery zones across the Rockies. The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem's population is five times larger than it was when the bears were first put on the endangered species list in 1975; the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service even delisted them in 2017 (it restored the protection last June, following a 2018 court ruling that cited the lack of connectivity between the West's disparate bear populations that would ensure genetic diversity). And the grizzlies of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (including

Glacier and the Bob Marshall Wilderness) now number around 1,000 and have begun to expand into new territory along the Rocky Mountain Front. But in the remote Cabinet-Yaak, recovery has lagged.

Three weeks after his first sighting, as fresh grass greened up the high-elevation meadows, Kasworm spied the sow

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again—without the cubs, and with an adult male griz in hot pursuit. “Sometimes a female will lose cubs and come into estrus again, attracting a male,” Kasworm says. “Sometimes males do kill cubs. Sometimes reproduction fails. That’s disappointing, but we’ve seen it a number of times.”

Still, Kasworm says the Yaak bears are on an upswing. “The current growth rate we’ve projected is 1.2 percent, which is not much,” he says; at that rate it would take 50 years for the population to recover. But, Kasworm adds, more robust grizzly populations near Yellowstone and Glacier only have a 2 to 3 percent annual growth rate. “We’ve got some bears moving from the Yaak into the Cabinets now, so we’re seeing some expansion of the population, albeit slow.”

Kasworm doesn’t think hikers in the Yaak will do his precariously recovering bear population any favors. “If it were up to me, I’d prefer not to have a PNT,” he says, for two main reasons. One, displacement. “A lot of bears will avoid the habitat around campsites and trails,” explains Kerry Gunther, Yellowstone National Park’s bear biologist. “If the campsite is in really high-quality habitat, it reduces high-quality habitat [available to bears].” In a place like the Yaak, where huckleberry patches and undisturbed nature are in relatively short supply, being pushed to the margins could make a difference.

And two, bear-human conflict. “A lot of it depends on how many people are going to be on the trail, and how those people act,” Kasworm says. He’s concerned that the PNT

could bring in hikers who don’t carry bear spray or follow proper grizzly country precautions, upping the chances for food-conditioned bears or close human encounters. Both scenarios tend to go south quickly for bears. (These concerns aren’t without precedent: The Forest Service initially rejected plans for the PNT in 1980, partially because the “trail would likely have a major adverse impact on the endangered grizzly bear.” But when Congress designated the trail, the Forest Service became obligated to create the route, despite its concerns.) And several other independent biologists, including David J. Mattson, Frank Craighead, and Wayne McCrory, back up his worries in recent papers and a YVFC-commissioned report, none of which have been peer reviewed.

“There’s a mortality risk associated with people,” Kasworm says, “people who would encounter bears and defend themselves, or frankly, just choose to kill bears.” Lest you think that a bit far-fetched: Last August, two backpackers surprised a griz in a huckleberry patch near Dad Peak in the Cabinet Mountains, a designated wilderness area about 50 miles south of the Yaak. Reportedly fearing for their lives, one

of them fatally shot the bear with a handgun. “Turned out to be an adult female,” Kasworm notes, shaking his head.

If Kasworm is the cool voice of science for the Yaak bears, then Rick Bass is their Lorax. Nobody personifies the argument against the PNT like the bespectacled writer, environmental activist, and long-time Yaak Valley resident, who speaks out the most in favor of the YVFC’s proposed reroute of the trail (he’s the chair of the group’s board of directors). And it’s clear he feels the issue viscerally: When discussing the controversy his group’s plans have generated, Bass twice checks his smartwatch to make sure his heart rate isn’t spiking too high.

The Yaak bears “have taken everything the 20th and now 21st centuries have to throw at them—mining, logging, clearcutting, second home development, goat ranches, chicken farms—to be winnowed to this 25,” Bass says. The YVFC has been pushing back against many of those threats, too, since its founding; the PNT is simply the latest, and one that presents a possible win-win scenario between hikers and bears. “As a community of environmentalists and recreationists, if we can’t protect a species that is the most charismatic, keystone foundational species in an ecosystem, what else has a chance? Where do we draw the line if not with grizzlies?” After all, the grizzly bear is more than just a symbol of the untamed American West; it’s also a sign of a thriving ecosystem.

Well, that line may be redrawn completely if Bass and the YVFC convince the Forest Service to move the PNT south. Where the current trail tracks west across the isolated Purcell Range, their proposed reroute (a modified version of one first identified by University of Montana grizzly biologist Charles Jonkel in 1978) jags south down the Salish Range, zig-zagging along trails and gravel roads to the towns of Libby and Troy before swinging north to follow the Kootenai River into Idaho.

Of course, it still crosses grizzly territory—there’s no way around that in northwest Montana. But the YVFC says the reroute minimizes the miles that track through the most critical recovery habitat. “This is the eye of the needle,” says Bass. “Keeping hikers out of those high-elevation meadows is a way to pay respect to the grizzlies and make ethical choices. I believe strongly that this gives both populations, the Cabinet and the Yaak, a fighting chance.”

That's where things get a little murky. Where the YVFC sees a gorgeous new hike that will protect a fragile population of bears on the brink of extirpation, fans of the current PNT see a clunky route with too much roadwalking. Plus, it's not even necessary, they argue: PNT hikers don't pose a threat to the grizzlies now, and they never will.

Even Kasworm, who's no fan of the spotlight the PNT shines on the Yaak, finds fault with the proposal. "The reroute goes right through the link between the Yaak and the Cabinets," he says, noting that the ability for those two bear populations to connect with each other and interbreed is crucial for their success. "We've already got a highway and a railroad, people living there. It's already kind of a tough spot for bears to get through." He leans forward, clasping his hands across his knees. "And if the trail is so bad that we have to move it out of the Yaak, then what are we doing to the linkage area?"

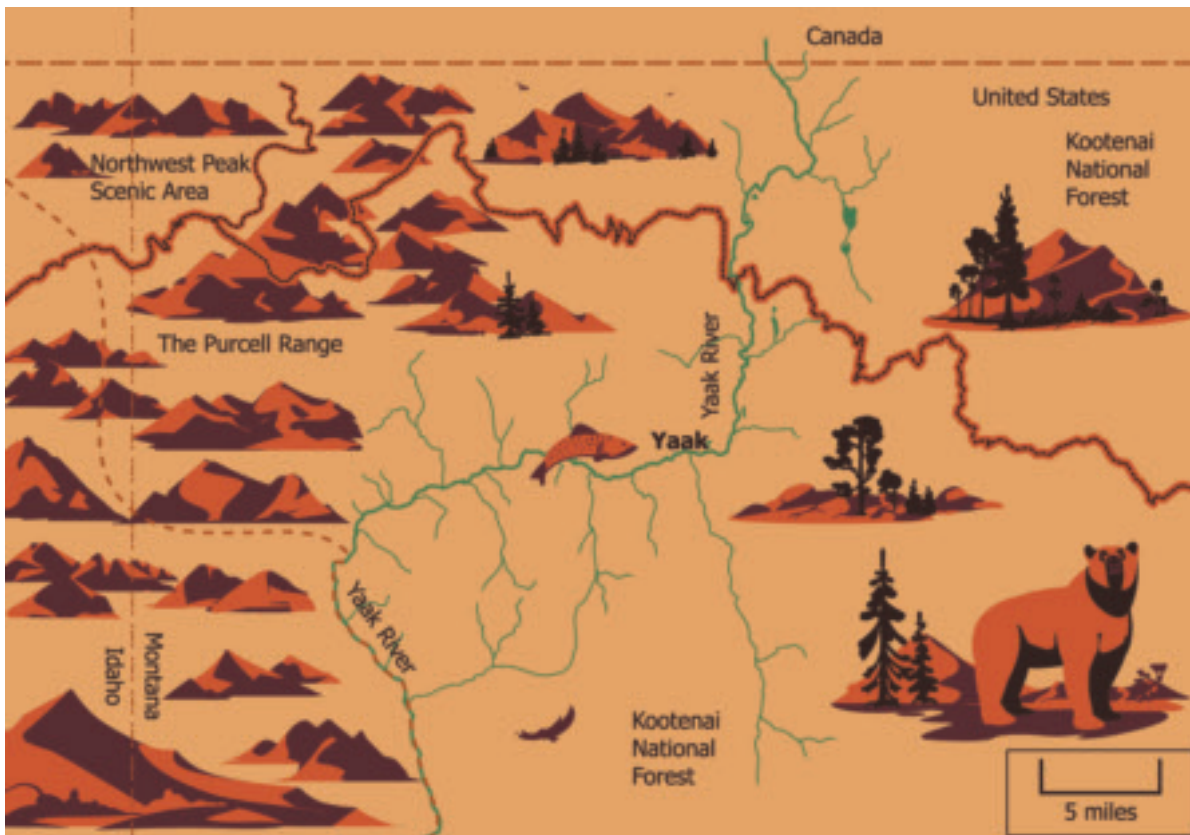
A handful of times a season, a PNT thru-hiker strolls down to Randy Beacham's place. Beacham, the area's only official trail angel, lives on a wooded acre-and-a-half right on the trail, where he offers weary travelers rides to town, internet access, and a woodshed-turned-shelter. Usually, talk eventually turns to the Yaak grizzlies and the reroute proposal.

The PNT first piqued Beacham's interest a decade ago, when he was working at the Yaak Mercantile and started meeting thru-hikers picking up resupply packages. "The majority of these thru-hikers were very

experienced and savvy about traveling in backcountry areas," he says. "And they are literally walking ambassadors for our roadless areas in the Yaak. Not many people who live here actually get out and hike, and they make comments like, 'Wilderness is land of no use,' or 'It's only used by rich elitists.' But when [thru-hikers] walk into Yaak and talk about their experiences, they listen up and understand why people value backcountry areas."

Beacham considers himself an environmentalist, worked for the YVFC in the late '90s and early 2000s, and served on the board around the same time. "I have been and always will be an advocate for grizzly bears," he says. But he's opposed to the PNT reroute. For one, he believes thru-hikers travel through grizzly habitat responsibly. "From what I can tell, there hasn't been a single bear that's lost its life due to an unarmed backpacker in more than 30 years," he says. (Kasworm's research into bear mortality in the area from 1982 to 2016 doesn't definitively confirm or deny this,

The Yaak Valley covers 1,100 square miles in the northwest corner of Montana.



showing that of 51 human-caused deaths documented, 30 could be traced to poaching, hunters mistaking grizzlies for black bears, train collisions, or management-related actions. The rest are chalked up to self-defense or unknown circumstances.) Plenty of thru-hikers agree, arguing that most other user groups—from ATVerS to mountain bikers—have a higher impact on local wildlife than they do.

Of course, that might change if thousands of adventurers start tromping through the Yaak every year, like they do on the Pacific Crest Trail or the Appalachian Trail, and as Bass and Kasworm fear they will. But many argue that won't happen. According to Jeff Kish, executive director of the Pacific Northwest Trail Association, thru-hikers

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will always be limited by the number of backcountry permits available at Glacier, the trail's eastern terminus. Others say the trail's allure won't ever build to those levels because it's too difficult, too remote, even too ugly. "There's no way the PNT will ever receive the number of visitors the PCT does," says Mason, the thru-hiker, bluntly. "It's not a pretty trail. You walk hundreds of miles of roads. It's devastated forest after devastated forest from logging and forest fires, strung together by tiny islands of beautiful, undisturbed forests."

And besides, say some, a few simple management tweaks are all that's needed to prevent hiker-bear conflicts in the Yaak. "They could have designated campsites with places we can hang our bear bags, or bear boxes," says Dyana Carmella, a 2019 thru-hiker. "And more warning signs—I think I saw *one*. It's more about educating backpackers and setting us up to succeed."

Discussions between the two sides in the Yaak tend to get mired down quickly in management-speak and the nitty-gritty: designated core grizzly habitat, FOCA committees, comprehensive management plans, the exact definition of a "high-volume trail." But above it all, sits the fact that there are

grizzlies in the Yaak. There are hikers in the Yaak. Everyone agrees that right now, under current use levels, they can probably coexist. Nobody's arguing for restricting existing access. But if the PNT attracts more hikers—then what?

It's unclear when the top brass will settle the question of where, exactly, the PNT should go. In August 2019, the YVFC sued the Forest Service over its failure to produce a comprehensive management plan for the trail on time, and it's likely that case will have to work its way through the courts before anyone makes any rerouting decisions. (The Forest Service declined to comment on the route proposal, citing the ongoing lawsuit.) For now, the only people in the position to make a difference are PNT hikers themselves.

By pushing the southerly reroute, Bass hopes prospective thru-hikers will voluntarily opt out of the Yaak. "No hiker goes out to harm or stress a grizzly bear," he says. "I believe that when hikers are presented with the information, they'll make the ethical choice."

The PNTA's Kish doesn't see that happening. "When [hikers] see an open, legal route with a 42-year history, which has 100 miles less roadwalking, the choice they'll make is obvious," he says. "If you want to move the users, you need to offer them a suitable alternative." And then there's Kasworm's view, that no National Scenic Trail at all is what's best for these bears.

Mason, the thru-hiker who decided to pass through the Yaak despite some reservations, isn't sure he'd make the same call again. "I understand the conflict between the bears and the PNT, because they don't have a lot of territory," he says. "There's logging all around it, and all the roads and infrastructure that support that. These bears appear to have this little island in the sky, and the PNT goes right through it." He pauses. "I don't know how to feel about it."

Other hikers will have to ask themselves the same thing: What lasting impacts might our passage make here—or in any wild place where wild animals are trying to go about their business far from the threats we humans represent? We already accept that some fragile ecosystems shouldn't be overrun by our footsteps, through strict visitation caps in places like the Grand Canyon's Colorado River corridor. Are still more access limitations, like seasonal wildlife closures and trail-use quotas, the toll we owe for sharing these ever-shrinking habitats?

We're all used to considering our own impact when it's notable in the presence of something—a trail eroded by footsteps, say, or ashes left behind in a campsite—not its absence. But that's the heart of the wildlife issue. Anyone would notice a grizzly (or a wolverine, bighorn sheep, or even squirrel) on the trail ahead. But when's the last time you've consciously thought, "Huh, I don't see any bears out here," and considered that problematic rather than happenstance?

Future thru-hikers might indeed spot signs of the Yaak's grizzlies as they travel the area's piney ridges: clawed grooves on a tree trunk, serviceberry-laden scat. Maybe they'll even see a grizzly itself—but probably not. Hikers will approach, and the bear will catch their scent on the breeze. It will pause for a moment, swiveling its head toward the intruders, considering. Then it will fade back into the trees, disappearing in search of a quiet place. 🐻

Elisabeth Kwak-Hefferan would like to apologize to the three grizzly bears she displaced in Montana's Flathead National Forest while hiking with her family last fall. She deeply appreciates their retreat.