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SEPTEMBER 2000

ENVIRONMENT

## The Return of the Grizzly



*Parts of the West are braced for a second coming*

by [David Whitman](#)

TOWARD the end of his life the novelist A. B. Guthrie Jr. would peer at the Rocky Mountains through the double picture window of his secluded Montana cabin and fume over the costs of progress. Behind him, on a wall of his second-floor loft study, hung testaments to the celebrated western writer: the [Cowboy Hall of Fame](#) certificate recognizing Guthrie as a charter member, the 1950 Pulitzer Prize for *The Way West*, the Academy Award screenwriting nomination for *Shane*. In

front of him, though, Bud Guthrie saw a chronicle of decline. Ear Mountain still towered in the distance, but the fields and streams surrounding his boyhood home of Choteau, Montana, had changed, and the land that Guthrie had memorably dubbed "Big Sky" country seemed smaller. When Guthrie was a boy, the Teton River ran full and pristine; he would drop on his belly to slurp its water, or take a dip in the bracing stream, studying the patterns on the minnows. Now irrigation had thinned and muddied the Teton. Ranches where Guthrie had picnicked and chased prairie chickens from the cinquefoil were being subdivided and outfitted with drills for oil and gas exploration. "A man finds few absolutes in this life," Guthrie observed. "But one that forces itself on us is this: Progress leaves no retreat."

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**From the archives:**

[\*\*"Winning the War for the\*\*](#)

Yet just a few miles from Guthrie's A-frame the son who shared his name, A. B. Guthrie III, known as Bert, welcomed the progress that his father so distrusted. Bert had a different dream for the Rocky Mountain Front, where the Great Plains run hard up against the mountains. From the time he was a child working on his grandfather's ranch, Bert had wanted to earn his living from the land. In 1959 he took over a 4,000-acre section of his mother's family's spread, ran sheep and cattle on it, and grew spring wheat. But unlike his father, who compared economic growth to a cancer, Bert saw development as a tonic for the community. "Dad sat in front of his window and pecked on his typewriter and said 'Aren't the flora

**West," by Perri Knize (July 1999)**

After fiercely battling each other over the best use of public lands, some ranchers and environmentalists are beginning to agree: letting livestock graze can benefit the environment.

**"The Butterfly Problem," by Charles C. Mann and Mark L. Plummer (January 1992)**

Because the government doesn't have the means to preserve endangered species, let alone a coherent plan, its decisions are haphazard -- and private landowners often find themselves paying for the preservation of species they've never heard of.

**"The Pig War,"**

and fauna beautiful'?" Bert recalls. "He never had to go out and face the storm -- and I did."

Father and son might never have publicly aired their differences had not something unexpected happened: one day, for the first time in the century, grizzly bears started coming down out of the Rockies and well into the plains. In 1983, a year before the forays began, Bud Guthrie had written a paean to the grizzly, calling it the "living, snorting incarnation of the wildness and grandeur of America." The "very thought of seeing a grizzly, of being in bear country, is an enticement and a thrill," he believed. But Bert Guthrie had little appreciation for ursine charms. No grizzly had been spotted on his ranch since his grandfather started homesteading it, in 1895. Now, suddenly, grizzlies were seizing his sheep by the throat in their powerful jaws or knocking them dead with a swipe of their claws.

The story of the Guthries and of the reappearance of grizzlies along the Front provides a preview of the obstacles the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service may encounter as it tries for the first time to reintroduce grizzly bears in an area where they have gone extinct. In March the Fish and Wildlife Service announced that it intended to introduce twenty-five or more grizzlies over a five-year period, starting in 2002, into the vast Selway-Bitterroot wilderness, in central Idaho and western Montana, with the hope that one day some 280 grizzlies

by **Kenneth Brower (August 1985)**

A small army of hunters struggles to control one of Hawaii's most destructive exotic pests.

**"A Year in Montana," by E. B. Neally (August 1866)**

"While welcoming all changes tending towards refinement and a higher civilization, the careful observer of the life of these remote people can point to some qualities among them which he would have unchangeable as their grand old mountains."

**Elsewhere on the Web**

Links to related material on other Web sites.

**Brown Bear Resources**

This nonprofit organization

will roam the region. The plan has kindled a confrontation between townspeople, environmentalists, and ranchers over an emotional question: Who really owns the West?

More than 24,000 individuals, organizations, and government agencies commented on the reintroduction proposal, which could eventually increase the grizzly-bear population in the lower forty-eight states by almost a third. Now Idaho's lawmakers are searching desperately for ways to keep the grizzlies out. Governor Dirk Kempthorne has stated that the reintroduction plan "is perhaps the first federal land-management action in history likely to result in injury or death of members of the public," and the Idaho representative Helen Chenoweth-Hage has likened the government's plan to "introducing sharks at the beach." In the town of Challis, Idaho, county commissioners have even enacted an "Unacceptable Species Ordinance," decreeing that grizzlies may be killed in the county, in defiance of the Endangered Species Act.

**N**O animal in the American wilderness inspires more fear and awe than the grizzly bear, *Ursus arctos horribilis*. Adult male grizzlies typically weigh 400 to 500 pounds in the summer, and stand six to eight feet tall when upright. Despite their heft, grizzlies can run forty-four feet a second,

seeks to inform the public about the grizzly bear, featuring an adopt-a-grizzly program and educational resources.

**State of Montana Homepage**

The official Web site for the state of Montana, with information about services, agencies, and tourism.

**Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee**

The Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) was created in 1983 to lead the recovery of the grizzly bear in the lower 48 states. Features grizzly bear facts and safety information.

easily outdistancing the world's fastest human being. Their jaws and teeth crunch through bones like a shredder through paper, and a blow from one of their forepaws can kill a horse. Yet the bears' wildness and fierceness are precisely what backers of bear-recovery efforts find so exhilarating and humbling. To them, grizzlies put the "wild" back in "wilderness."

Grizzlies do not generally prey on people, but they have killed several dozen hunters and backpackers in North America during the past century, in some cases feasting on chunks of their victims afterward. On average, grizzly bears killed two people a year in the 1990s in North America, and seriously injured five to ten, according to Stephen Herrero, the author of the classic 1985 study *Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance*. The most recent fatal mauling in the lower forty-eight states occurred in May of 1998, when twenty-six-year-old Craig Dahl, an experienced outdoorsman, was killed and half eaten by a grizzly while hiking in Montana's Glacier National Park. A Park Service investigation concluded that Dahl had most likely been killed by a bear named Chocolate Legs -- who was tracked down and destroyed, along with her two cubs. By unfortunate happenstance, a 1997 children's book from the Humane Society had featured Chocolate Legs as a heartwarming example of a grizzly who had successfully been relocated in Glacier after becoming too habituated to people. "This

bear is safe now," a park ranger explains in *Chocolate, A Glacier Grizzly*. "It looks like she'll stay in her new home and away from people."

In the early nineteenth century hundreds or perhaps thousands of grizzlies roamed the plains outside Choteau, a town that Bud Guthrie described as a "church-and-bar cluster, with wheat elevators and stockyards." Choteau, he wrote, "is wind and dust ... and small talk." Like the hardened trappers and mountain men in Guthrie's novels, Choteau's settlers shot grizzlies on private land and pushed them back into the mountains, to make way for sheep and cattle. No one is sure why the grizzlies started coming down into the plains again in 1984. It may have been drought, the whiff of feedlots outside town, or the lure of open livestock boneyards on some ranches. Regardless, an early target was Bert Guthrie's herd of 250 ewes.

One fall morning Guthrie, then fifty-one, discovered that a grizzly had killed eight of his sheep the previous night. The bear had swatted the ewes with its forepaws or bitten them across the throat, and then ripped out and eaten the mammary glands of several of them. The grizzly returned on subsequent nights to kill half a dozen more sheep, most of which were left in their bedding ground after dying from a casual swat. "This was killing for the fun of it," Guthrie says. "It was like having a shoplifter who wouldn't stop coming back."



Guthrie wanted to shoot the grizzlies that preyed on his sheep. But he knew that the bears were listed as a threatened species, and that he could face jail time and a fine of up to \$25,000 for shooting one. All he could do legally was ask state officials to try to trap the predatory grizzlies and then hope that after being relocated they wouldn't return. Soon Guthrie wasn't the only rancher losing sheep and patience. At the same time, grizzlies had been sighted in the creek bed of the Teton River, where children had fished for decades, and the bears demolished two commercial apiaries. At town meetings Fish and Wildlife personnel were shouted down by residents who feared for their children's safety.

Communal alarm finally peaked during the Fourth of July parade down Choteau's Main Street in 1985. One float featured a mound of dirt with a shovel stuck in it and a sign that said THE THREE S METHOD -- shorthand for the "shoot, shovel, and shut up" school of grizzly management. Another pithy parade entry consisted of two children pulling a red Radio Flyer wagon holding a young child in a cage and a sign that read CAGE YOUR CHILDREN. THE BEARS ARE LOOSE.

Meanwhile, in his cabin, twenty-five miles from Choteau, Bud Guthrie was dismayed by the anti-grizzly "hot heads" in town. Although Bud lived near the Teton River, he had never seen a grizzly and thought the locals' fears were exaggerated. Guthrie, in the spirit of Oscar Wilde, had once said that

a theme linking his novels was "each man kills the thing he loves," and now it seemed that the people of Choteau were living out that tragic theme: they loved the West for its wildness and vastness, yet wanted to tame and shrink it.

A "sort of hysteria, promoted by extremists, has pervaded Teton County," Guthrie warned in a letter to Montana Senator Max Baucus. "It might be called the grizzly bear syndrome." The aging but still energetic writer opted to fight the hysteria by becoming a spokesman of sorts for the grizzly. When a veteran schoolteacher and rancher named Ira Perkins started circulating a petition to remove the "horrendous and monstrous" grizzly from the protection of the Endangered Species Act, Guthrie responded that the real problem was not the bear but ranchers' careless disposal of dead livestock. "Do you want to pasteurize Montana?" Guthrie scoffed in a letter to the Choteau *Acantha*. "Where is your pioneer spirit?"

Guthrie's challenge -- just a few adjectives short of fighting words in Montana -- irked Perkins and Bert Guthrie, both of whom felt that their pioneer spirit was more genuine than that of the octogenarian author. Inadvertently, perhaps, Bud Guthrie had inflamed a suspicion that lurks in almost every environmental controversy in the West: that environmentalists are egghead elitists, typically from the East, who naively impose their ways on true westerners. In a



retort in the *Acantha*, Perkins implied that he, unlike Guthrie, knew how to find where postholes dig easy or hard, and how to set a bronc. He wrote, "I'm certain that we [ranchers] fit [the pioneer] designation much more aptly than do these 'window Westerners' who see it all through the windows of their four-wheel drives and then hasten to their studies to write about it."

Bud Guthrie's support for the grizzly only seemed to encourage his son's opposition. While his father emerged as a defender of the bear, Bert became a leader of those who wanted the right to shoot marauding grizzlies. He helped to form the Organization in Defense of Grizzly Menace, a group of residents whose letterhead depicted a small girl fleeing in terror from a huge bear. He was also one of three sheepmen who filed suit to halt enforcement of the Endangered Species Act, claiming that it denied stockmen the right to protect their property.

Bert lost his lawsuit -- but soon he was hinting that he would secretly shoot and bury predatory grizzlies anyway. He says he once wrote his father a letter that read, "I'd like you to know that the score is thirteen sheep and zero grizzlies, but that score is going to change." Bud never responded. In fact, father and son never seemed to make any headway when they talked about grizzlies, whether they were arguing at Bud's cabin or over steak sandwiches at the Circle N restaurant. "The arguments got

heated enough that we knew we had to stop," Bert recalls. "We got along all right -- we just didn't talk bears." The public rift between the two men was especially awkward because Bud had also suffered a falling-out of sorts with other townsfolk. He prided himself on his hometown roots, and had written in the mid-1960s that though he was "part bookman, part aborigine," the "core of me [was] Choteau, Montana." After he spoke out in behalf of the grizzly, Bud told the *Dallas Morning News*, he and his second wife, Carol, became "pariahs" in his home town.

**S**TILL, by the time his father died, in 1991, Bert and most other residents of the Front had concluded that they had little choice but to learn to live with the bears, and to minimize the enticements that drew grizzlies to the plains. Bert, it turned out, was one rancher who didn't have much luck with bear-management reforms. Since the first attack, sixteen years ago, he has lost sheep to grizzlies every year but one. He experimented with different guard animals: First he bought five peacocks, for \$500, but the noisy birds didn't scare off bears at night. Then he bought a guard llama for \$1,000; it wasn't aggressive enough to drive away a kitten. Next he bought three Great Pyrenees dogs, at \$300 apiece. The dogs would at least get within a few yards of a bear and bark, but they wouldn't confront a grizzly and drive it off.

In 1996 Guthrie reduced his flock to 150 ewes and started bedding the sheep down around his house. He turned on floodlights and a 100,000-lumens light at night, illuminating his lawn like the main drag in Las Vegas. It didn't matter. Fifty yards from his front door a grizzly killed a sheep. Several days later, on a Sunday morning, Guthrie and his wife, Peggy, were sipping coffee when they saw a 280-pound female grizzly in a cottonwood stand about 200 yards away; she was in a snare set by the animal-damage-control officer. Spooked, Peggy cut back the walks she had always taken around the ranch in favor of a new indoor treadmill. An exasperated Guthrie rejected an offer from the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Department to pay for an electric fence around a bedding ground, claiming that it was too much work to herd the sheep inside each night during grizzly season. Just last fall Guthrie, his herd now down to eighty head, lost ten more sheep to a grizzly and her two cubs. One night he found a ewe that could no longer stand because a bear had broken her front legs; he shot the ewe in the head to end her misery. "As I'm shooting her," he says, "I'm thinking to myself, 'Why the hell should I have to do this?'"

Nonetheless, the cry "The bears are coming to town" has faded in Choteau -- even as the bears have come to town. The shift in attitude was first evident in May of 1995, when a 400-pound male grizzly strolled into Choteau after midnight and was chased

away by a police officer, who nudged him across the mayor's lawn using the spotlight in his cruiser. That incursion prompted no civic alarm -- nor did an incident the following year, when two grizzlies were captured at a feed plant in Choteau while a group of families camped in the city park for a Little League tournament. "If we had had a grizzly in town in 1984 or 1985, you would have had the Army Reserve in here," says Michael Madel, of the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Department. "By 1995 people were making jokes about it. They were saying maybe the grizzly was just checking to see if he had mail, or that he was looking to hook up with a single woman."

The new attitude is due in part to good luck: no person has been hurt or even chased by a grizzly since the bears emerged on the Front. That the bears continue to be wary of people is fortunate, because government officials can do only so much to "manage" wild predators. Government pamphlets provide advice about how to deal with grizzlies, but following their recommendations can require a fortitude that some people find hard to muster when face-to-face with a large bear.

The Forest Service pamphlet "Living With Grizzlies" suggests that if you encounter a grizzly, you should not run but "stay calm, drop something like your hat or gloves on the ground in front of you and slowly back away, speak[ing] in a soft monotone."

However, if the grizzly then charges you, stand still, because it may turn out to be a "bluff charge." If the grizzly does not turn away, roll up in a cannonball and play dead -- making sure not to look at the grizzly if it tries to attack you. If, however, a grizzly tries to maul you at night in your tent -- well, in that case it's a good idea to fight back right away.

Madel, the area's grizzly-bear management specialist since 1986, has enlisted local ranchers in initiatives to deter bears from becoming habituated to people. Instead of leaving garbage out on their porches, ranchers have started putting it in sheds. Some have bought guard dogs for their herds, and some have run electric fencing around their apiaries and sheep bedding grounds. Numerous boneyards were closed or cleaned up, and Madel began distributing more than a hundred cattle, sheep, and calf carcasses a year on remote government land and private sanctuaries for the bears. The talk-show host David Letterman, an avid hiker who bought a 5,000-acre ranch on the Front last year, has already informed Madel that his property may be used for the relocation of problem grizzlies.

Ironically, the grizzly-bear recovery effort may become a victim of its own success. The Front now has at least 136 grizzlies, according to Madel, and their burgeoning numbers are nudging them into residential areas, particularly in years when for some reason their natural food supply falters. In

1998 a record 263 confirmed grizzly-human encounters were reported in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, which includes the Front. In more than half those incidents the bears were near people's residences. They occasionally popped up on front porches looking for food, and one left a paw print on a couple's bedroom window. In May of last year a grizzly killed a family's pet ewe about half a mile from Choteau.

The grizzly's recovery is so marked that the bear could soon be a candidate for delisting under the Endangered Species Act -- a change that Madel would welcome. Much to the horror of some of his fellow environmentalists, Madel thinks that the state should sanction a limited spring hunt to thin the grizzly population and encourage more wariness of human beings. "As a biologist and a manager," Madel says, "I can't just run around and modify bear behavior. But we do know that spring hunts alter behavior."

In Idaho grizzly-bear reintroduction has met with a response from residents near the Selway-Bitterroot wilderness very much like what happened on the Front. The same shouting matches have erupted at town meetings; ranchers have voiced the same frustrations about potential losses of livestock; many townspeople are convinced that reintroduction is propelled by eastern "enviros"; and people are frightened. At a public hearing in Salmon, Idaho, which had

to be postponed until the police could be present to ensure the safety of agency officials and grizzly supporters, Mayor Stan Davis told the Fish and Wildlife officer, "If I or someone in my family is injured by one of your bears, I'm holding those behind reintroduction personally responsible for murder." Idaho's congressional delegation has introduced legislation to stop the reintroduction plan.

If reintroduction proceeds as planned, the likelihood that someone will get hurt is in fact small. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that it will take at least fifty years, and perhaps 110 years, before a "recovery level" of 280 grizzlies thrives in the Selway-Bitterroot wilderness. And the recovery area itself is vast -- larger than the states of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Rhode Island combined. According to USFWS estimates, a population of 280 grizzlies will cause less than one injury a year and less than one fatality every few decades, leaving the odds that a person in the area will be injured at one in several million. More people die in grizzly country as a result of drownings, climbing accidents, and heart attacks than as a result of grizzly-bear attacks.

Is it worth it for even one person to die in order to repopulate the species? The answer depends on the value one accords the grizzly. Eventually grizzlies will start coming down out of the Selway-Bitterroot Mountains in search of spring range. Like



the grizzlies on the Front, they will kill sheep, calves, and pigs. Amid the carnage nature will appear a little less benign. And parents will order their children to stop fishing the stream beds for fear that a grizzly may maul them.

Melody Martinsen, the editor of the *Acantha*, says, "No one has died in Choteau or along the Front because the grizzlies reappeared. But the grizzlies have caused a lot of heartache, fear, and bitterness." Grizzly bears make the outdoors wilder. But they may also make it less free.

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Illustration by Chris Duke.

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