**Swan Valley Bear Resources 2023 Annual Report**

The mission of Swan Valley Bear Resources (SVBR) is to provide community resources to promote coexistence between people and bears. Since 2007, SVBR has been a collaborative working group including local non-profit conservation/education organization Swan Valley Connections (SVC) and community members working in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), Living with Wildlife Foundation, volunteers, and other natural resource entities. By pooling resources, experience, and expertise SVBR provides place-based solutions for minimizing bear conflicts on private and public property in the Swan Valley.

**Private Property Projects:**

SVBR focuses on private property projects that provide interested residents with materials, information, and conflict response needed to secure bear attractants and minimize risk of bear conflicts. SVBR creates site-specific solutions for each situation, and our collaboration with private property owners may come by a variety of different means such as landowner interest or response to a bear conflict. Some on-going examples of collaboration with private property owners in the Swan Valley include providing advice on securing bear attractants, loaning bear-resistant garbage containers, helping build electric fences around attractants, removing animal carcasses, helping remove ripe fruit from trees, installing motion-sensor activated cameras to monitor bear conflicts, and contacting FWP management specialists in the event of a conflict. In 2023, SVBR staff provided a variety of private property consultations that involved different methods for securing bear attractants.

*Bear-Resistant Garbage Container Loaner Program*

SVBR’s Bear-Resistant Garbage Container Loaner Program allows community members to check out bear-resistant garbage containers for free and on an indefinite basis, with a suggested donation. Bear-resistant containers are also available for purchase. SVBR has previously purchased containers for the program with a combination of funds pooled from SVC, the USFWS Grizzly Bear Recovery Program, the USFS, Defenders of Wildlife, the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, and private donors. The loaner container program provides local residents a means to securely store garbage. SVBR staff will deliver containers to residents’ properties free of charge and take the opportunity to offer advice on how to secure other bear attractants that may be present. In 2023, SVBR distributed 35 bear-resistant garbage containers to local residents. Currently, 440 containers and 28 dumpsters have been distributed to community members or businesses as part of the program throughout the Swan Valley. SVC placed an order for 40 bear-resistant Kodiak garbage cans in 2023 to replenish its supply for the loaner program. The total cost of the order with shipping was $18,810.

*Electric Fencing Program*

Since 2009, SVBR has assisted 45 private landowners with construction of permanent electric bear exclusion fences. SVBR assists with the entire fence building process including site identification, fence design, technical specifications, help to secure funding sources, purchase of materials, and final hands-on fence construction. Fencing projects are done opportunistically with interested landowners as needs and opportunities arise. SVBR has seen an increase in residents raising chickens and small livestock in the Swan Valley, and this has led to an increasing need for electric fencing projects to minimize bear conflicts.

In 2023, SVBR assisted three residents with construction of permanent electric fences. All three locations included residents eager to take proactive preventative measures to secure chickens, sheep, livestock grain, and orchard trees. Two out of three landowners utilized cost-share funding, either from Defenders of Wildlife or the USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. SVBR has also worked with two additional landowners on fence projects and has secured USFWS Partners Program funding for those fences. These fencing projects are ready for construction in the spring of 2024. Finally, SVBR offered advice to two additional landowners who then built their own fences to the proper specifications.

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In addition, SVC staff responded to multiple bear conflicts when FWP grizzly bear management specialists were overwhelmed with other conflicts or unavailable. In these situations, SVC staff installed temporary electric fencing and/or critter gitters, deployed trail cameras to monitor bear activity, provided bear resistant garbage cans, picked up garbage from broken trash cans, picked fruit from trees, and coordinated all conflicts and related activities with bear managers.

Attractants that have been secured by these 45 permanent electric fence projects are: chickens, turkeys, ducks, goats, sheep, pigs, rabbits, bees, miniature horses, outside chest freezers, livestock grain, orchard trees, compost bins, and gardens. Partners on these projects have included: SVBR, USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, USFWS Grizzly Bear Recovery Office, FWP, Defenders of Wildlife, The Vital Ground Foundation, People & Carnivores, volunteers, and landowners.

**Educational Events:**

Every year SVBR partners with various agencies, organizations, and businesses to provide educational events aimed at promoting human-bear coexistence. In April, SVBR hosted its annual Spring Bear Wake-Up Social in Condon and featured an educational presentation by FWP Bear Management Specialist Erik Wenum on grizzly bear biology, habitat connectivity, awareness, and conflict management. The presentation also reminded residents of SVBR’s services and encouraging efforts to contain their bear attractants as bears emerged from hibernation. About 50 people attended the event.

In May, SVC Conservation Director Luke Lamar also gave a bear awareness presentation to about 15 members at a Bigfork Rotary Club monthly meeting.

In June, SVBR hosted a bear awareness event at the Bigfork VFW that featured a presentation by FWP Stewardship Outreach Specialist Sabrina Bradford that included information about bear identification, living and recreating safely in bear country, and ways to mitigate human-bear conflicts. Following the presentation, participants were able to practice using inert cans of pepper spray on a charging remote-controlled bear. About 75 people attended the event.

Also in June, SVC hosted its second Landowner Stewardship Fair at the Condon community hall. SVBR tabled the event, providing education awareness, brochures and other informational materials, and bear pepper spray demonstrations to approximately 50 participants. The event included a presentation by SVC Conservation Director Luke Lamar about living in bear country and SVBR’s services and other bear-related resources for landowners.

In August, SVBR also hosted its popular summer event, the Bear Fair, at the Swan Lake community hall. It was the first-ever Bear Fair in the community of Swan Lake. The event brought together regional bear experts, organizations, and businesses to share information about bear ecology, behavior, research, conservation, conflict management, and different resources available to secure bear attractants. Presentations were given by FWP Bear Management Specialist Erik Wenum and FWP Research Biologist Cecily Costello, who gave informative talks on the most up-to-date grizzly bear research, biology, policy, and conflict management. In addition, representatives from SVBR, Vital Ground Foundation, Be Bear Aware, People & Carnivores, Wildlife Services, Bear Aware Bigfork, and Montana Land Reliance were also present, offering informative displays, educational materials, kids activities, and demonstrations about bear pepper spray use and effectiveness, bear-resistant trash cans, electric fencing, habitat linkage zones, conservation easements, and how to live in bear country. Approximately 75 people attended the event throughout the evening. Free food, beer, and other non-alcoholic beverages were provided. Flathead Lake Brewing Company donated beer and Rosa’s Pizza provided discounted pizzas for the event.

Members of SVBR also tabled at the Swan Lake Huckleberry Festival in August, reaching hundreds of interested participants.

**Outreach and Education:**

In addition to educational events, SVBR also provides outreach through other avenues. SVBR annually publishes Swan Valley Bear News, included in SVC’s fall newsletter, which reaches 3,400 of SVC’s subscribers. Swan Valley Bear News typically includes articles written by SVBR staff or local agency bear management specialists concerning annual natural bear food availability, research, biology, conflict management, new data, interesting bear stories, or SVBR activities. The goal of the publication is to provide another form of outreach to educate people about living in bear country. The publication can be viewed at <https://www.swanvalleyconnections.org/newsletters>

The Swan Valley Bear Ranger works to deliver educational messaging to recreationists at numerous USFS and DNRC developed and dispersed campsites throughout the valley. The position educates visitors about the importance of keeping a clean camp, containing bear attractants, USFS food storage orders, and picks up and hauls away trash that is left behind at campsites. In 2023, over 250 visitors were contacted, and proper bear pepper spray use was demonstrated to 29 users. The Bear Ranger is employed by the Living with Wildlife Foundation in partnership with the USFS Swan Lake Ranger District, who provides a vehicle and fuel.

For the second year in a row in 2023, SVBR partnered with the Bigfork Eagle to publish monthly bear awareness columns from April through October, featuring articles about bear-related information and education from FWP, SVC, USFS, People & Carnivores, Bear Aware Bigfork, and Living with Wildlife Foundation.

SVC’s Visitor Center contains a mounted grizzly bear, Counter Assault pepper spray and bear-related books for sale, and free SVBR and other bear awareness brochures and pamphlets. SVC’s full-time Office Manager staffs the Visitor Center year-round, providing answers to many bear-related questions, and tips about how to safely recreate, store food, and camp in bear country. New residents that stop by the Visitor Center can receive a free ‘Living with Wildlife’ packet that contains information about living in bear country, securing attractants, and resources available for minimizing bear conflicts. With help from SVBR staff, inert cans of bear pepper spray are also available for visitors to get hands-on experience with proper deployment. Some SVBR staff have office space in the Visitor Center and are readily available to answer any bear-related questions that may arise from visitors.

SVC also continued to coordinate the second year of its new volunteer arm of SVBR to focus efforts in the greater Bigfork, Ferndale and Swan Lake areas, called Bear Aware Bigfork (BAB). SVC and volunteers of BAB met monthly throughout 2023 to strategically focus efforts that will provide neighborhood education and minimize human-bear conflicts. Volunteers helped reach out to specific neighborhoods and HOA’s, coordinated the bear awareness event at the Bigfork VFW, volunteered at the Bear Fair and worked with local businesses to provide donations, provided articles for the monthly Bigfork Eagle columns, and more.

SVC also met with members of the newly formed Seeley Lake Bear Smart group, offering advice on SVBR’s history, successes, and challenges.

SVBR also provides ongoing outreach through SVC’s social media channels and website <https://www.swanvalleyconnections.org/swan-valley-bear-resources/>.