

The Story of Windfall, Her Three Cubs, and Lessons Learned

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Windfall was first captured in 2017 by Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks personnel, while they were catching and radio-collaring grizzly bears as part of the Population Trend Monitoring Program. Her name came from the drainage in the Swan Valley where she was caught and radio-collared. Her estimated age at capture was five years old, and she was fitted with a GPS collar that acquired her location every 3.5 hours. During the 2017 field season, she spent quite a bit of time in the Swan Valley and was not known to have caused any conflicts.

In 2018, after emerging from her den, Windfall was observed with one cub of the year. Later that spring her cub was not observed with her, and she was seen near another adult grizzly bear. The trend project continued to obtain GPS downloads from her radio collar, and there was no indication at that time that she was causing any conflicts.

During the fall of 2018, we started to receive reports of bears getting into garbage north of Condon. In coordination with Swan Valley Bear Resources, efforts were made to secure the trash and remote cameras were set up and got photos of a very large adult male grizzly bear who was tipping over a dumpster. There were also reports of a grizzly bear getting into garbage in the Charles Road area. At that time, we didn't know if we were dealing with just the one large male or multiple bears. Traps were set at two different sites, but no captures occurred.

In 2019 we began getting a few reports of a female grizzly bear with three small cubs who were seen near homes in the Condon area. To ensure the bears would not become habituated, we told residents to make sure attractants were secured and to yell and bang pots and pans to make the family group leave the area.

On July 22nd I received a call from a man who had a family group of grizzly bears get into some food that had been stored in a shed that partially collapsed and became exposed to the weather. The landowner had cleaned up the food but was concerned the bears would return. Some of the food needed to be hauled away, which I did in addition to setting a trap on the property. As it turned out, the female grizzly we now knew as Windfall had dropped her radio collar a week earlier, so her movements were unknown. A short time after setting the trap, an adult female grizzly bear was captured, and the remote camera indicated there were also at least two small cubs present.

We took the captured grizzly bear to the Swan Valley Connections office to get some help with drugging, collaring, and putting the grizzly bear back into the trap. The captured grizzly bear was Windfall, based on the microchip reading that we got while radio-collaring her. Since she was a known bear, had the three new cubs with her, and the attractants had been secured or removed, the decision was made not to try and capture the cubs, and to release her on site.

with the permission of the landowner. She was fitted with a new GPS radio collar that would acquire locations every 30 minutes. This allowed us to keep closer tabs on her movements, but we could only download the data every other day.

She quickly reunited with all three of her cubs, and we started to monitor her movements. Initially, she moved toward the Mission Mountains, but quickly returned to the valley. We started getting reports of a female with three cubs being seen often near houses and in yards.

On August 7th we received a call from a resident near Condon Loop Road; she reported that a grizzly bear had entered her back porch early in the morning, and when she heard the noise and went into her kitchen, the bear had pushed open her door and its head was inside the kitchen door. She pushed the door shut, hitting the bear in the head. The bear instantly backed out and left. We immediately responded and set a trap, put up both a camera and a motion-activated noise maker (Critter Gitter) on the back porch. The bear showed up at the trap that night, and photos revealed it was Windfall and her three cubs, but none of the bears went into the trap.

Following this incident, we received reports of a female with three cubs getting into unsecured dumpsters, garbage cans, and orchard trees at numerous locations around Condon. Swan Valley Bear Resources attempted to help some residents contain their attractants with bear-resistant garbage cans or electric fencing. Despite those efforts, the family group continued to visit residences and get food rewards. Due to the number of residents in some of these areas or being next to the highway, there weren't any good options for attempting to capture the family group. We are always concerned about catching a cub and having the adult female become defensive. We had to select places to trap that were safe for both people and the bears.

On September 10th a landowner in Condon called and said a female grizzly with three cubs had broken into his barn and tack room to get into horse grain. The bears had tried to go through the outer wall of the tack room but then ended up opening the sliding barn doors and pushing open the door to the tack room. Based on the more remote location of this site, we decided to set traps at this residence.

The adult female was captured the first night in one trap and one female cub was captured in the second trap. We moved the traps back into the woods and reset. We captured a second female cub that night. The third cub was at the traps but would not go in. We drugged the two cubs and put them in the front of the family trap and reset. The third cub continued to come to the traps but avoided going in for the next two nights and subsequently never returned.

While we were attempting to capture the third cub, we spent time looking at Windfall's GPS locations to determine where the bears had been visiting residences, including ones that may not have been reported. We then went to several of those locations to talk with

landowners about their experiences with the bears. Unfortunately, the bears had been receiving many uncontained human attractants than we had known about. As it turned out, people did not want to call us because they didn't want anything bad to happen to the bears. We understood their concerns, but by not contacting us, the bears continued to cause conflicts, became more bold in trying to get food, and ultimately became food conditioned to human attractants.

We discovered that they had gotten into a lot of garbage in unsecured containers, had gotten into several barns, outbuildings, and chicken coops to get livestock feed, had attempted to go into two different kitchens, and were causing conflicts more during daylight hours when people were active. Fortunately, when confronted by people they moved away, but having a family group spending so much time around residences and trying to get into structures, including occupied residences, the decision was made to euthanize the female and send the two female cubs to the Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center in West Yellowstone.

We decided to leave the third cub in the wild, unless it showed up and caused conflicts. We have found that grizzly bear cubs that are in good shape and orphaned after the first of September can survive in the wild and den for the winter. The third cub appeared to be more wary of people, and it avoided going into the culvert traps. We did receive one report in October of a single cub near a road-killed deer, close to where the family group had been captured.

In hindsight, we hope the removal of these bears can be used as an educational opportunity about the importance of securing attractants to minimize human/grizzly bear conflicts and not have to remove grizzly bears in management actions. The two female cubs were safely transported to the Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center, and they are adapting to their new surroundings. They will be allowed to go into an outside enclosure in the near future.

Dealing with a situation like this is one of the hardest parts of our job. Removing healthy grizzly bears from the wild is not what we want to do. Preventing bears from getting into conflict in the first place is what we strive for. If you have bear-resistant dumpsters that are old or failing, contact Republic Services, and ask them to fix or replace them with good bear-resistant dumpsters. Make sure your livestock and chicken feed are properly stored where bears can't get access to them. Properly erected and maintained electric fencing is a great way to protect your poultry, livestock, and attractants.

Contact Swan Valley Bear Resources for free bear-resistant garbage cans, property consultations, or electric fencing services. Too often people wait until after a bear gets into unsecured feed to put it into a secure location. Don't put out bird feeders when bears are active. (We used to say this was from April 1st to December 1st, but now we are seeing bears out from mid-March to late into December). Finally, if you are having conflicts with bears, please contact MT Fish, Wildlife, & Parks to report the situation. The last thing we want to do is

remove bears, but if the situation isn't corrected, the bears will just get worse and our options become more and more limited.

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