

Timber in Transition: Development of Plum Creek Land Creates Roadblock for Wildlife

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CONDON - Nature in the Swan Valley has unfolded its rich story one footprint at a time for Tom Parker. Over the course of 30 years, Parker's passion for everything wild has carried him deep into the thick woods of the Swan following tracks of predators, ungulates and a variety of varmints. He's learned their habits and discovered their haunts during his years guiding hunters, trapping and working as a wildlife researcher. The 53-year-old Parker has seen firsthand what critters do when temperatures plunge and the snow grows deep. When times get tough in the Swan Valley, elk and deer and the predators that follow them migrate through the deepest and darkest woods on their way to winter range. Animals know the snow will be shallower under the heavy, multistoried canopy and that it's best to avoid the drifted deposits stacked high in meadows and clearcuts. The snow-covered trees also provide a bit of thermal relief from frigid temperatures.

Those are lessons passed from one generation to the next. But a doe deer or sow bear can't comprehend the kinds of changes coming for the Swan Valley, where large tracts of land are being cleared off to make way for million-dollar homes. When their trails through the timber disappear, new generations of wildlife are on their own. "Every animal that I've tracked - and I don't even want to try and guess how many that might be - has taught me something about their relationship to the land," Parker said. "They've taught me what they need during the different times of the year and why they need it." In normal years - not like these aberrations of late - snow comes early to the Swan Valley and piles deep. "The travel routes wildlife use are handed down from doe to its offspring," Parker said. "Over generations, they've found ways to pass through the deep snow, but what they can't do is cross big openings. Meadows are almost impermeable. It just takes too much energy to buck through that deep snow." Not far from Parker's home, developers are busy blazing a large new subdivision on land once owned by Plum Creek Timber Co. along the edge of the Swan Mountains. A strip almost three miles long is being carved out of the forest to make room for people searching for a nice summer getaway. "When the snow returns, animals are going to run into those big openings on their way to winter range," Parker predicted. "It's going to be like hitting a wall. They won't have any option but to drop down into the highway corridor." What they'll find waiting for them are higher-density subdivisions, neighborhood dogs and plenty of traffic. "Basically, that's going to mean more dead deer along the highway as these animals try to get where nature is compelling them to go," he said. "They just don't have any other options." In turn, dead deer attract bears and eagles, which also aren't that adept at dodging Dodges, Toyotas or Chevrolets.

"Outside of Glacier Park, we enjoy one of the highest concentrations of grizzly and black bear populations in the NCDE (Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem)," Parker said. "They are here because this place is unique. It offers them what they need, especially in years when the berry crop is poor. Nobody has told the bears the place they've come for generations is now off limits because there's a house there now." "The bears really don't have much of a choice during the lean years," he said. "For

them, it's really do or die. Many of the people moving here view bears showing up in their backyard as a violation of their space. "They point toward the mountains and say, 'Why don't they just stay up there?'" More residential development is coming to the Swan Valley. Plum Creek plans to sell about 10,000 of its 80,000 acres in the valley for private development. Another 14,000 is earmarked for sale to other timber companies or conservation buyers. That change in company strategy has the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service scrambling to revise the 1995 Swan Valley Conservation Agreement between the company, state and federal agencies - a document intended to provide some protection for grizzly bears. The agreement was supposed to "integrate timber management, recreational management and bear management practices in a manner that is both ecologically and economically sound in a mixed ownership pattern." But Friends of the Wild Swan and the Swan View Coalition said the agreement didn't address residential development in the valley. Those two groups threatened to sue if the agencies didn't step up and take some action. So the Fish and Wildlife Service is finalizing environmental documents and beginning work on a new biological opinion that will eventually lead to an amended conservation agreement. "This revision is long overdue," said Arlene Montgomery, program director for Friends of the Wild Swan. "Finally, the increased impacts of real estate development on bears, bull trout and lynx will be addressed. We are glad to see that the public will be involved in the revision process and we hope that our concerns will be taken seriously."

Plum Creek has worked for years with the federal government on grizzly bear research in the Swan Valley, said Kathy Budinick, Plum Creek's communications director. About 70 percent of the company's land in the Swan Valley is included in designated linkage zones between the Mission Mountains and Bob Marshall Wilderness. The company has ensured any of its land sold within those linkage zones went to a conservation buyer, Budinick said. Covenants designed to protect bears have been placed on company lands sold for real estate in the Swan, she said. Those covenants include things like refraining from growing fruit trees or having open barbecue pits or managing garbage in bear-resistant containers, Budinick said. "Plum Creek owns land in 18 states and our extensive ownership and diverse forest types provide habitat to a wide range of wildlife in various states, including the northern spotted owl, marbled murrelets, grizzly bears, gray wolves, bald eagles, red-cockaded woodpeckers, bull trout, Pacific salmon, and much much more," she said. Everyone knows the Swan's likely to grow, but there's hope it can be done in a manner that doesn't put wildlife at risk. "It's really the nature of the change that we're all worried about," Parker said. "We could absorb some level of population growth, but it's really how that growth occurs and the kinds of changes to the landscape that are different this time around." People have been moving into the Swan Valley for more than a century. Typically, they carved out a small spot in the woods and called it good enough. But many of today's newcomers have a different idea for their dream home and the land surrounding it. "People want something different than what's already here," Parker said. "Apparently, when they think of Montana, they think of wide-open vistas - maybe something similar to what you'd see in southwest Montana." The newcomers want to be able to see the rugged Swan Mountains. They also don't want to have to worry about losing their home to wildfire. And so, they simply get rid of the trees. "We're seeing a conversion of large tracts of land - a section at a time turned into pasture lands," he said. "There is a very heavy-handed removal of trees. I don't think people even realize the kinds of impacts they're having on wildlife. "I've spent the last 32 years of my life trying to understand this thing. I've just begun to put together the story of this land. I'm worried the new

people moving here won't understand the implications of their activities on the landscape." The Swan Valley isn't alone in facing the challenge of new development cropping up the middle of prime wildlife habitat. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Region 2 wildlife manager Mike Thompson said all people need to do is take a look at a land ownership map of western Montana to realize the challenges facing wildlife in this part of the world. The corridors that animals like grizzly bears, lynx and wolverines need to move between the Bob Marshall Wilderness to places like the Garnet Range, the Sapphires and on to the Bitterroot often contain large tracts of Plum Creek lands, Thompson said. "Those Plum Creek lands hold the whole system together that allows western Montana to be a place where large, wide-roaming critters can survive," he said. "In some areas, the most important linkage zones involved private lands, which are vulnerable to development." "Once those dominoes start to fall, it could change all of that forever," he said.