



A grizzly bear walks along the snowy banks of the Kluane River at twilight. Kluane National Park, Yukon, Canada

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER MATHER, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

ANIMALS

Can these 'ghost bears' be resurrected? The U.S. may soon find out.

A half-century after the last known grizzly was killed in the Pacific Northwest, the government has a plan to bring these animals back to an ecosystem that needs them.

BY CRAIG WELCH



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For 27 years, experts have scoured the alpine meadows and granite ridgelines of Washington State's [North Cascades](#), looking for enormous stragglers. They've collected millions of photographs from wilderness camera traps, analyzed DNA from tufts of hair, and used dung-sniffing dogs to find and analyze critter poop. But, it appears, the grizzly bears are gone.

Across [6.3 million acres of forest](#) home to the nation's most imperiled grizzly bear population, there has not been a confirmed sighting of *Ursus arctos horribilis* since 1996.

So the [Biden administration](#) is working on a last-ditch effort to bring grizzlies back. Much as federal agencies reintroduced wolves to Yellowstone National Park, scientists hope in coming years to pluck

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them to the Pacific Northwest in a region where so few may now roam that researchers have given them macabre monikers: “ghost bears” and “the walking dead.” The hope is that those bears form a new self-sustaining wild population.

“This ecosystem evolved with grizzly bears; they co-existed with people for thousands of years,” says Jason Ransom, the wildlife program supervisor for North Cascades National Park.

Will we co-exist again?

Vanishing predators, mistaken identities

Some 50,000 grizzlies once traversed the lower 48 but were mostly killed off by fur traders and government-sponsored trappers before being listed under the Endangered Species Act in 1975.

Since then, federal scientists have worked to boost populations in five areas around the West, including Yellowstone, Glacier National Park, and other spots centered around Idaho and Montana, mostly by preventing humans from killing them.



SOURCE: U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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It has often worked remarkably: In Yellowstone alone, grizzly numbers have increased nearly eightfold to more than 1,000 from 136 in 1975.

The North Cascades hasn't fared so well.

A mostly roadless, wild alpine system more than twice the size of Yellowstone, where writer Jack Kerouac spent 63 days in a fire lookout tower in 1956, it is the only bear recovery region outside the Rocky Mountains. It's fertile ground, with some 3,000 plant and animal species that grizzlies can eat. The area around it once held so many bears that Hudson's Bay Company collected 3,188 grizzly pelts from nearby trading posts between 1826 and 1857.

By the mid-20th century, bears had been mostly wiped out. The last recorded grizzly killed in the North Cascades was shot in 1967. Confirmed sightings have grown sparse—footprints in snow near Mount Baker in 1989; a sow and a cub spotted in the Glacier Peak Wilderness in 1991.

There have been flashes of hope. In October 2010, mountaineer Joe Seville popped into a meadow above 6,000 feet near a craggy knuckle of ridgeline called Sahale Arm. There, nuzzling the shrubs in the distance, was an enormous beast with brown fur, a rounded hump, and the classic dish face of a grizzly. "It was just moseying up the ridge toward Forbidden Peak," Seville recalls. He watched it for an hour.

Seville took pictures which made their way to experts. All believed it was a grizzly, the first photographed since 1967. It was an exciting discovery—for a while. But months later more photos surfaced from another party that had been hiking nearby. Those were taken from closer and in better light and showed a bear with a similar odd hump from a different angle. "I was in the room when we were debating those photos," said Bill Gaines, a retired Forest Service biologist who has studied grizzlies for 40 years. This was clearly a black bear, and experts now suspect the two were the same animal.

Still, scientists kept looking. Paula MacKay, a carnivore specialist at Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo, spent countless hours over many years traipsing deep into the backcountry with other pros. They carried a foul-smelling concoction of fish guts and blood that they poured in small areas they then surrounded with barbed wire. That lured carnivores, who left behind fur. But despite collecting 750 hair samples, not one was from a grizzly. Hundreds were from black bears.

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A few bears have been spotted across the border in Canada but even if some remain. "What are the chances that they find each other and survive

and are male and female and can reproduce and have cubs that can survive?” Ransom says. “It’s not a good.”

The hardest part of grizzly recovery is us

Federal scientists are expected to release a draft proposal this summer outlining options for the North Cascades. Experts concede the only viable one is reintroduction. If all goes well it could be underway in two to four years.

While wildlife officials still have to put together a formal plan, Ransom and others said bears would likely have to be carted away by truck, radio-collared, then ferried into the mountains by helicopter. Where they come from would matter. They would have to be inland bears—not bears that grow up along the coast like those in [Kodiak, Alaska](#). “These are not bears that live off salmon streams,” Ransom said. “These are bears that live off huckleberries.” The most likely places to find good candidates are in British Columbia, near Wells Gray Provincial Park, northwest of Banff National Park, or near Montana's Glacier National Park. Both have healthy grizzly populations that could handle a few bears being relocated.

Age and sex matter, too. “We need more females than males,” Ransom says. “Within that we’d need younger bears.” Ideally, the bears would be just old enough that they were just starting to spread out and find new homes. “If they’re young and just sort of establishing their home range, they’re already kind of looking for a new place to live,” he says.

We've done some of this before. [Wayne Kasworm](#), a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist, has helped trap bears to augment a small population in Montana's Cabinet Mountains. Since 1990, his agency has released 22 grizzlies and watched their numbers expand.

"It's slow, it takes time, they don't all stay where you put them, and they don't all live," Kasworm says. "But you can build a population."

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In the North Cascades, Kasworm's computer modeling suggests, introducing six bears a year for eight years might jump start a population that could eventually reach 200 bears.

In fact the biggest barrier to grizzly recovery isn't logistics—it's us. The Obama administration started recovery efforts in 2014 but those were spiked by President Donald Trump. While the vast majority of the more than 150,000 people who commented on those plans were supportive, some rural ranchers who raise cattle and sheep were hostile to the predators' return.

Not long after wolves found their way back to the same region in the mid-2000s after a 70-year absence, three members of a ranching family pleaded guilty to poaching several of the canines after they were caught attempting to FedEx a bloody pelt to Canada.

Ransom points out that while grizzlies do kill livestock occasionally in Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana, bears and wolves are quite different. “Wolves are obligate carnivores—every week they’re killing deer or elk,” he says. “We expect 90 percent of grizzly bears’ diet to be plant-based.”

Just last month, MacKay, while working at Woodland Park Zoo, saw a woman and a baby watching two rescued bear cubs, [Juniper](#) and [Fern](#), one of which was a grizzly from Montana, splashing in water and wrestling like kids. MacKay heard the mother say, “We’ve waited our whole life for this moment.”

“For many of us, the same can be said for grizzly bear recovery in the North Cascades,” MacKay tells me. “And their survival is largely going to be linked to our ability to tolerate them.”

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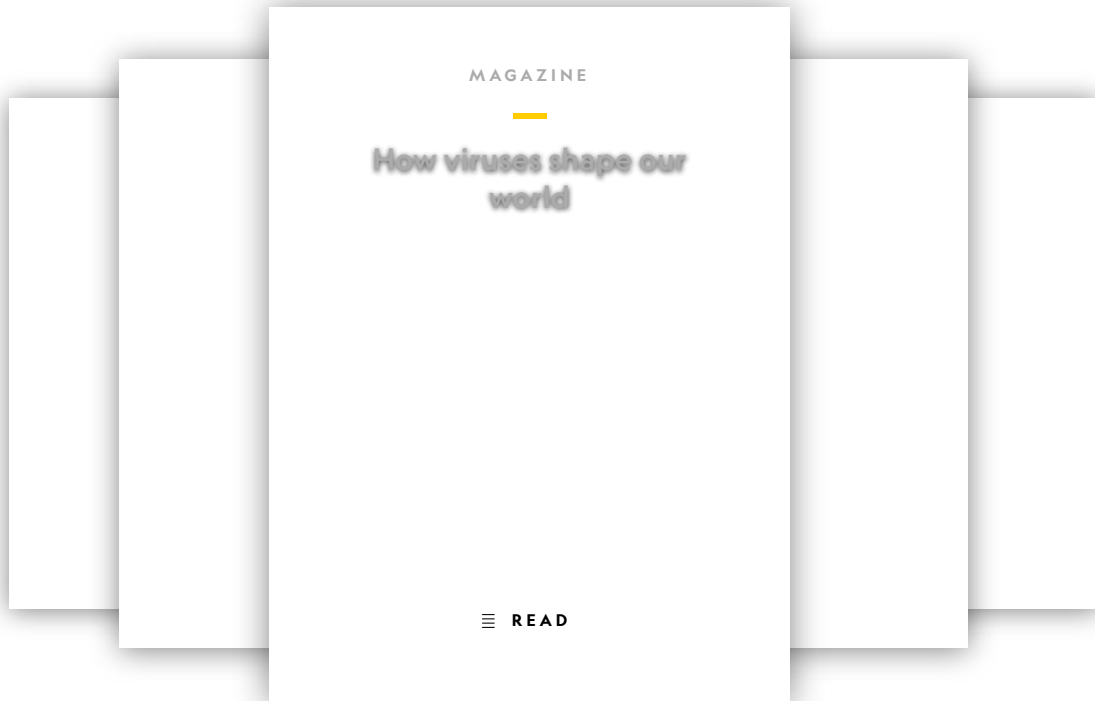
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