

Hiking News »

Wolves and Grizzlies

Two rare wild creatures are making a comeback in the Cascades

Story by Erik Neumann

Last October, hiker Joe Sebille snapped a photo of a large bear in the North Cascades. He was hiking in the Upper Cascade River watershed, where black bears are common, and didn't think much of it. He showed the photo around to friends, and it eventually landed in the hands of a National Parks Service bear biologist and would soon be confirmed as the first photo identification of a grizzly bear in Washington's Cascade Range in fifty years.

"It could be one of the last sightings of the Cascades grizzlies, or one of the first of a new generation," says David Graves. As a staff member with the National Parks Conservation Association, a group that advocates for the maintenance and improvement of America's national parks, he's hoping it's the latter.

News of the confirmed grizzly sighting came out this spring, followed not long after by a wolf sighting, when a new pack of gray wolves, dubbed the Teanaway pack, was identified roaming near Cle Elum.

Both wolves and grizzly bears are incredibly rare in the Cascades. Throughout Washington, grizzly bears are considered threatened by U.S. Fish and Wildlife and endangered by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. Wolves are federally listed as endangered in

the western two-thirds of the state, federally de-listed in the eastern one-third, and state listed as endangered throughout the state.

The appearance of these endangered fauna has inspired celebration from conservationists, and while the presence of both animals will mean little change for hikers, they provide a lens to look at long-awaited recovery plans for Washington's wilderness.

A photograph of the mythic North Cascades grizzly provides proof to back up recovery plans that were started up to thirty years ago to protect this hypothesized, but rarely seen species. It reaffirms that there are grizzlies in Washington to consider for wildlife management. Graves hopes that the evidence of a North Cascades grizzly will encourage more funding for grizzly recovery projects, which were previously based on hypotheses about bears.

"We need to not manage for the minimum," said Joe Scott, international programs director for Conservation Northwest. "We need to allow them to get to ecologically effective numbers."

In 1997, a coalition of agencies including the U.S. Forest Service, National Parks Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Geological Survey established the



A member of the "Teanaway pack." Photo by the Western Transportation Institute.

North Cascades Grizzly Bear Recovery Area. The recovery area is managed according to a mutually agreed-upon set of priorities, making it easier for the multitude of different agencies that manage land in the North Cascades to effectively cultivate grizzly habitat.

Covering 9,565 square miles, the North Cascades recovery area is one of the largest contiguous blocks of federal land remaining in the lower 48 states. Bear habitat also extends north into the Canadian Cascades, creating a rare piece of land ideal for animal recovery.

Grizzlies pose little danger to hikers in the Cascades, due to the sheer unlikelihood of running into one. Estimates of grizzlies in the North Cascades range from 10 to 20 individuals. Glacier National Park, one of the most hiked-in parks in the United States, is home to around 750 grizzly bears. The sighting in October is the first photo documentation of a Cascades grizzly in fifty years, so don't expect a wildlife safari the next time you hit the backcountry.

Despite the unlikely odds of seeing a grizzly in the Cascades, hikers should be taking precautions to avoid negative encounters with the 25,000 black bears currently living in Washington.

"Hikers in the North Cascades should already be prepared to encounter bears," said Scott of Conservation Northwest. There are slight differences between precautions taken against grizzlies and black bears, but, overall, the rules are about the same.

Precautions include making noise and avoiding surprise encounters around streams and blind corners. Also avoid walking into the wind when a bear could not smell you. Bears will defend their space, young and food sources. Avoid hiking with dogs in the backcountry, as this can aggravate bears and draw them directly to you. Carry bear spray, the most effective tool for a bear encounter.

The recovery of gray wolves in Washington is a more noticeable and contested issue than the phantomlike image of a grizzly silhouetted on a hillside. Several wolf packs have been making news around Washington in recent months.

In early July, volunteers from Conservation Northwest's wildlife monitoring program discovered the Teanaway pack. Later in the month, biologists from state's Department of

Fish and Wildlife (DFW) caught members of the state's fifth known pack, named the Smack-out pack. In what amounts to a conservation public relations person's dream, the packs' arrival occurred in near perfect timing with the completion of the DFW Wolf Management Plan. The plan has been in the works since 2007 and the decision to approve the plan or not is due in December of this year; the arrival of the new packs created a catalyst for state residents to weigh in. According to Graves, the draft management plan drew an impressive 65,000 comments from around the state.

Hikers concerned about wolves should rest assured that wolves, like most wild animals,

avoid humans. "In 100 years, there have only been two confirmed kills by wolves in North America," said Graves, "These have been in very remote places." The biggest conflict a hiker could expect to get into with wolves would be having a pet dog attacked or possibly even killed. According to Doug Zimmer at the state DFW, "Wolves treat dogs as competitors and will kill them on sight." But that's the extreme. More likely, the presence of wolves in the Cascades will allow hikers the goose-bump-inspiring



Hiker Joe Seville captured this image, the first confirmed grizzly photograph in the Cascades in fifty years.

privilege of hearing a chorus of wolf song at night. Hearing animals at night is one of the most tangible sensations of the mystery of wilderness, whether it be owl hoots, elk bugles, coyote chatter or wolf howls.

While their numbers are still low in comparison to those in neighboring Idaho and British Columbia, Washington's wolves have rebounded significantly faster than bears. "Most wolves come back and recolonize very efficiently," said Scott. "Grizzlies do not. They're very slow to come back once eliminated."

The presence of both grizzly bears and gray wolves in Washington won't have a great impact on how and where people hike, but their return marks a new chapter in the Cascades' natural history, a time when the range is slowly returning to its historic, ecologically complete past.

According to Scott, "All these pieces have come together to form one of the largest, most protected areas in the country. It's a very successful story that's been authored by hundreds of people, from governments, to conservation groups, to individuals, to private groups." ♦