

**Last week: How do we live with grizzly bears?**

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**This week: How do griz live with us?**

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U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

The young adult male grizzly known by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks personnel as Lingenpolter is captured on a game camera east of Sula on June 14, 2021, during the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's pilot hair snare DNA study.

# THE WAYWARD BRUIN

## Collared griz shows how bears use land, get in trouble

**MICHAEL CAST**

In a late August press release, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' western bear specialist, Jamie Jonkel, warned: "We've had enough confirmed grizzly bears to remind us to expect grizzly bears anywhere in the western half of Montana."

Lingenpolter's trying to prove it.

Weighing about 360 pounds at the time of his mug shot, the 4- or 5-year-old male grizzly bear is an explorer, a renegade, and a repeat offender with an uncertain future.

He's also a guide of sorts, showing bear managers and landowners where a young male grizzly bear might go and what trouble he might get into as the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem population expands towards the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem population.

His name comes from the Lingenpolter township where he first got into trouble near Gold Creek in October 2020. That area lies in between the two big ecosystems designated for grizzly bear recovery.

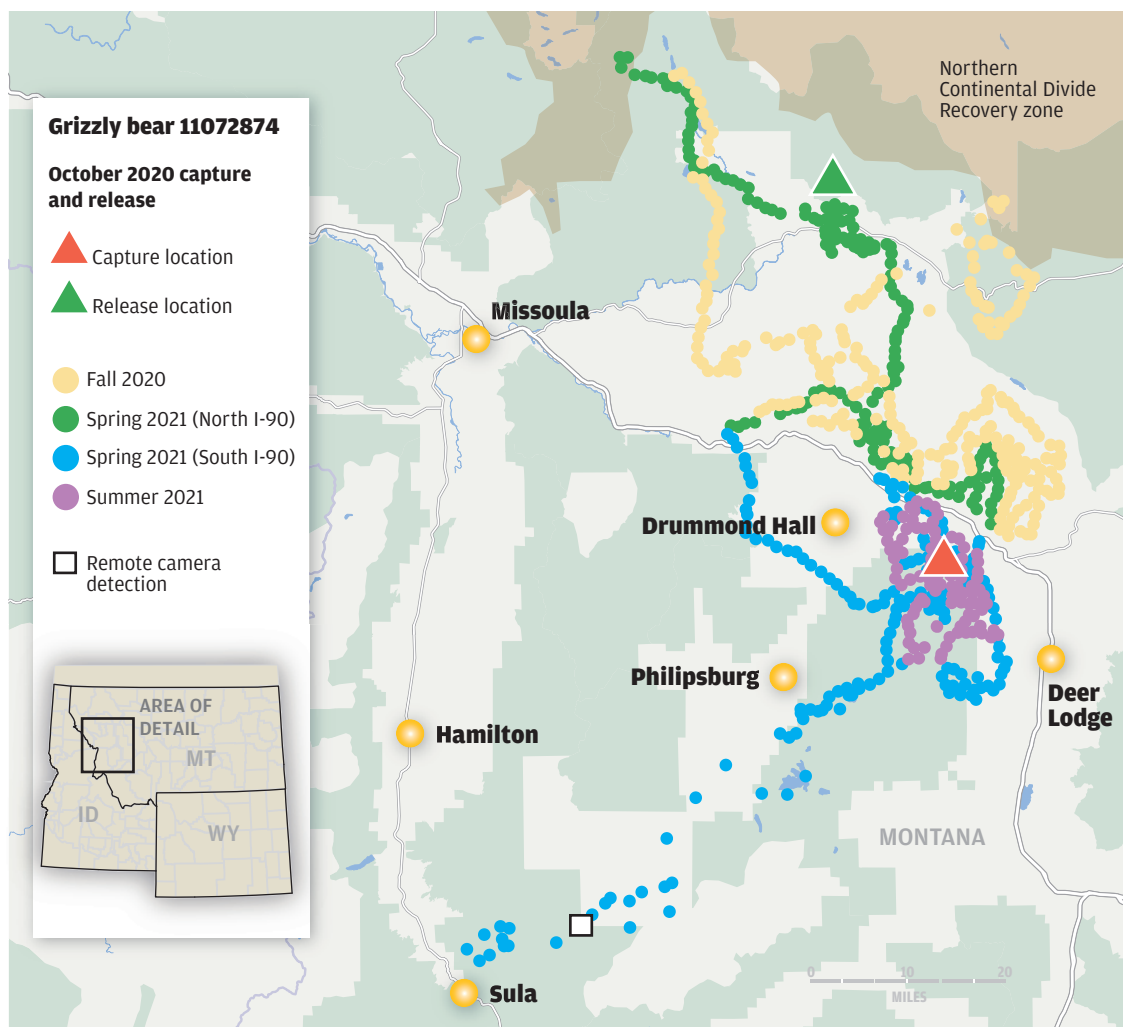
While the federal Endangered Species Act has given grizzlies protection throughout the Lower 48 States since 1975, their growing presence in places they haven't inhabited for more than a century have present-day humans on edge.

As Lingenpolter roams, wildlife managers and a non-profit are following in his tracks, trying to prepare people in the communities he visits for the time more bears arrive. In some of those places, Lingenpolter's the first grizzly they've ever met.

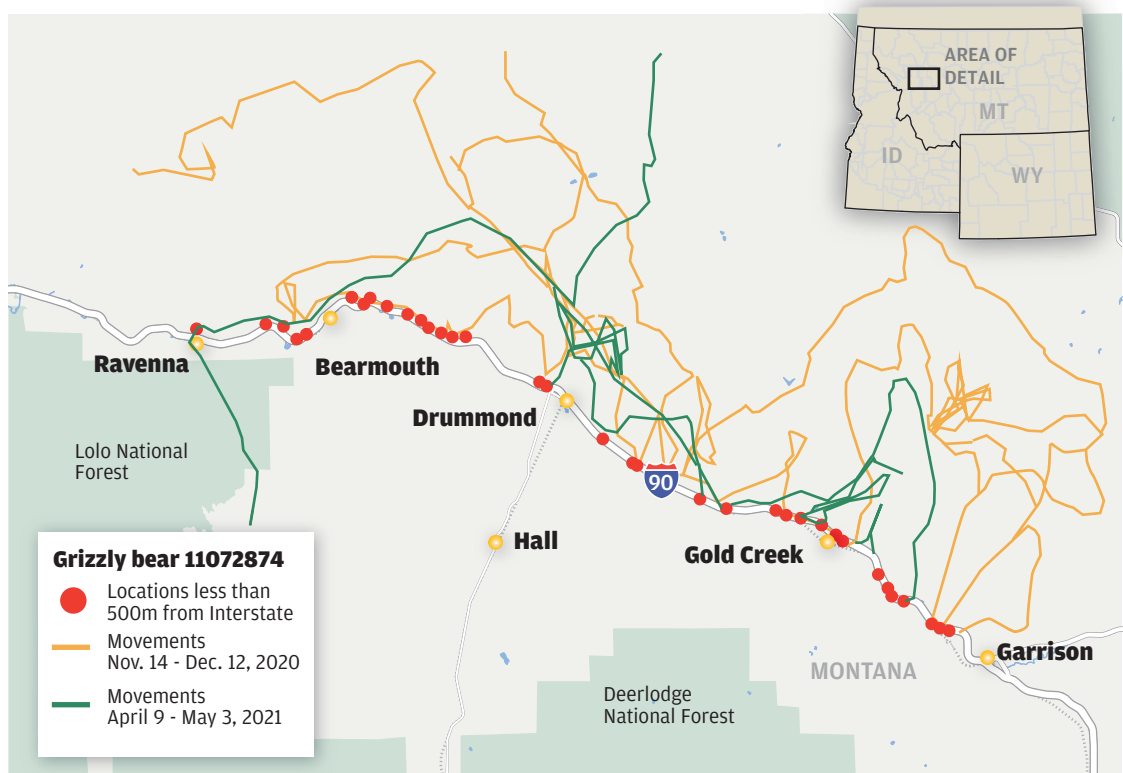
Lingenpolter introduced himself by raiding a birdfeeder, a gateway drug for bears, by a private home. Next, he fed on the birds themselves - domestic ducks.

Rory Trimbo, FWP's grizzly specialist in Anaconda, responded to the incident. The bear was trapped, fitted with a radio collar and relocated to the Scapegoat Wilderness northeast of Ovando.

Trimbo and U.S. Wildlife Services officials advised the landowner to consider securing the domestic animals with an electric fence, for which a cost-sharing program is available from agencies and non-profits. The landowner declined.



maps4news.com/CHERE, Lee Enterprises graphic



maps4news.com/CHERE, Lee Enterprises graphic

It wouldn't be the last time someone called about Lingenpolter.

Trimbo hoped that the collar's GPS signal would show Lingenpolter staying out of trouble in his new home. Instead, the bear wandered south toward Gold Creek a while. From his collar data, it appeared he made numerous attempts to cross back over I-90 but was unsuccessful. The bear turned tail and jetted way back up northwest of Seeley Lake to den for winter in the Mission Mountains.

In March of this year, Lingenpolter was rearing to see some new country and try new things. He got into a chicken coop near Drummond in late April, spent some time in the Garnet Range east of there, and moseyed back to Interstate 90 now and then, apparently to consume road kill or attempt crossing.

Next, the born rebel crossed the freeway and made for the Flint Creek Range, where grizzlies are rarely sighted.

A 2017 study on potential grizzly corridors between the NCDE and GYE placed special emphasis on the Flints and ranges to the southwest of there. Those corridors might represent a way to connect the two recovery areas. But they also expose grizzlies to thousands of square miles of new habitat and new challenges.

Lingenpolter strolled south. He swung within 10 miles of Philipsburg and within a mile of Georgetown Lake to the East Fork Reservoir, and into the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness.

Lingenpolter then found the small cluster of homes at Moose Lake, some 20 miles southwest of Philipsburg.

Someone accidentally left the sliding door open on a barn. Lingenpolter slid inside and gorged himself on a bucket of horse pellets.

After landowners figured out what happened, they padlocked the door. When Lingenpolter came back, he ripped the door off. "Because he already got into that attractant, he knew what was in there," Trimbo said. "He knew it was worth it. It was a 100-plus-year-old barn. For him it probably took some effort, but it was probably easier than you might think."





LARRY MAYER, BILLINGS GAZETTE

Kerry Gunther said grizzly bears are an adaptable species, able to survive many challenges except humans killing them.

## Yellowstone

From A7

will seek out winterkill, often bison carcasses, to feed on after awakening from hibernation. The BMAs were created based on recommendations from park staff. The new study, expected to be completed by next spring, will pinpoint what habitat bears are using.

“Anything that restricts recreation use is controversial, so this will be helpful,” Gunther said.

At those backcountry campsites, the Park Service has made it easier for campers to safely store their food by installing metal “bear boxes” or poles to hang food out of a bear’s reach.

“If you make food storage easy and convenient, people will use it,” he said. “We’re trying to make it easier for people to do the right thing, which keeps bears out of trouble.”

The efforts have been largely successful, with few human-bear conflicts despite increasing visitation. Yellowstone visitors have a 1 in 63.4 million chance of suffering an

injury by a grizzly bear, which drops to 1 in 1.7 million for those who camp inside the park.

### Crowding

In his tenure in Yellowstone, Gunther has seen visitation double from about 2 million people a year to 4 million.

“The ecosystem used to be very remote and rural, and now there are a lot of people living in the ecosystem,” he said. “So the human-bear interface is becoming more of a challenge.”

Some of those people are building homes in what is now referred to as the wildland urban interface, or WUI, next to national forests and trout streams seen as amenities that increase a property’s value. Such development means fewer places for wildlife to avoid contact with humans.

In the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, which extends outside the park, more people visiting to hunt and hike has also increased the number of human-bear encounters. The leading cause of grizzly mortalities in the GYE is from hunters shooting bears in the fall, when bruins are actively seeking food

before hibernating. Some elk hunters joke that a rifle shot in the fall is like ringing a dinner bell for a grizzly.

“Currently, the highest proportion (30%) of all reported grizzly bear mortalities is associated with shootings by ungulate hunters (mostly self-defense kills), followed by conflicts with humans in developed areas (25%) and livestock depredations (19%),” according to the book “Yellowstone Grizzly Bears.”

Key to reducing these bear fatalities is greater education. Many hunters and hikers do not carry bear spray, a proven bear deterrent when successfully deployed. Even in Yellowstone, fewer than 30% of backcountry visitors carried bear spray, a park study found.

Finding a way to reduce bear-human conflicts will help build more social tolerance for the big animals on the landscape, Gunther said. The difficult part is that there are always some folks who are ignorant about how to recreate in grizzly bear country.

“They just don’t behave very well,” he said.

He cited three instances this summer when backcountry campers freaked out after seeing bears and abandoned all of their food and gear.

“That could have been bad for the bear and for the next people who camped there,” he said. “Just because you see a bear, it’s not going to kill you.”

### Population

Gunther said Yellowstone probably reached its ecological carrying capacity for grizzly bears in the mid to late 1990s. Since 2001, scientists have recorded slow growth, partly due to lower cub and yearling survival – two ages that are difficult for scientists to monitor.

Despite a relatively small population when the animals were listed as threatened, studies have shown Yellowstone grizzlies have maintained genetic diversity. One of the goals of bear managers, however, is to increase the animals’ genetic diversity to help it withstand future challenges that climate change may pose. To do that without human intervention, grizzlies from the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem

need to migrate as far south as Yellowstone, or vice-versa. So far, that hasn’t happened, but Gunther remains optimistic that it could occur someday soon. If not, bear managers have the option to capture and release animals from each ecosystem to manually attempt to increase genetic flow.

One of the main complications is for a bear to successfully navigate the landscape between Glacier and Yellowstone national parks requires crossing highways, rivers and human development without running into conflict.

“Right now our genetic diversity is not at risk, but eventually if they don’t connect it could be,” Gunther said. “In the next decade or two, it could happen.”

Suggestions by park critics that bears are abandoning Yellowstone because of critical food shortages are unfounded, he said. Instead, the increasing bear population is what motivates some animals to leave the protection of Yellowstone.

“Our counts are pretty stable,” Gunther said. “Collared bears haven’t moved.”

## Griz

From A8

Trimbo wrapped the barn in electric fencing, and he doesn’t believe Lingenpolter returned.

The bear wandered southwest almost to Sula, not far from the Bitterroot Valley. During the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s pilot DNA and camera study across southwest Montana this past summer, grizzlies were only caught on camera at one of 140 sites. Two separate grizzlies smiled for the camera at the same site just east of Sula at the headwaters of the East Fork Bitterroot River. One of them was Lingenpolter. That was on June 14.

The timing of Lingenpolter’s trip toward the Bitterroot may have biological significance, said Jennifer Fortin-Noreus, grizzly bear biologist and project lead for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

“What’s interesting is that his points are fairly localized the majority of the season, except during the month of June, which is also breeding season,” she said.

Lingenpolter then turned around and headed all the way back to the township of his namesake, and hit the same property where he’d found the ducks. This time he dined on chickens in early July.

He came back two nights. But unlike in 2020, he didn’t fall for the culvert trap Trimbo set up.

He then returned to the Flints. Trimbo stopped receiving a satellite signal from the bear’s collar on Aug. 12. By driving around in



MEAGAN THOMPSON, THE MONTANA STANDARD

Rory Trimbo, a grizzly bear specialist with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, stands in front of a bear trap used mainly for black bears in fall 2020.

the area and using a handheld VHF receiver, Trimbo finally picked up a signal Sept. 17.

Lingenpolter was still out there in the Flints, and Trimbo was relieved.

Hunters reported a grizzly wandering into their camp in the Flints earlier that month. Could it have been Lingenpolter?

“Possibly,” Trimbo said. “It sounds like they jumped in their truck (for safety). And once the bear left, they ended up moving camp out of there.”

In late October, FWP again picked up a VHF signal from the collar, this time from aircraft, and Lingenpolter was still in the Flints. What looked like a possible den was observed in the vicinity.

Lingenpolter’s journey demonstrated how an NCDE bear might end up in the Bitterroot Ecosystem, another recovery zone where bears are occasionally sighted but there is no known resident population. And he wasn’t far from the Big Hole Valley, equidistant from

the NCDE and GYE populations.

What’s more, Lingenpolter crossed I-90 in his journeys. That freeway is perhaps the greatest obstacle for bears between populations. FWP bear biologist Cecily Costello estimated that he made at least 46 attempts to cross over a total of 53 days during fall 2020 and spring 2021.

“This suggests the I-90 transportation corridor, which also includes a railway, is at least a partial barrier to movement of wildlife,” she said.

Costello also noted that DNA analysis following Lingenpolter’s capture suggests his mother and father are bears that were known to live in the Missions, which likely explains his choice to den there. His movements away from his place of birth is an example of natal dispersal, she said, typical for young males.

“This is one of our first opportunities to document a natal dispersal event, technically outside of the NCDE ecosystem,” she said.

Additionally, the bear roamed 51% public land north of the highway, much of that related to his den site. The percentage of public land rose to 65% south of the highway, Costello noted.

In most of the areas he traveled south of I-90, there have been few or no confirmed grizzly sightings in a century.

Wildlife managers are learning where bears may show up and where landowners should be educated on the basics of living in grizzly country, because it’s unlikely Lingenpolter’s alone out there. In Moose Lake, where residents had never seen a grizzly bear, non-profit People and Carnivores is busily distributing bear-resistant garbage containers.

Now, Trimbo is sounding the alarm that it’s time to prepare for grizzlies – for safety, property and bears alike.

“We say anywhere in western Montana you could potentially run into a grizzly bear. And I think that kind of proves it right there with what he’s doing.”