



COURTESY PEOPLE AND CARNIVORES

The historic gold mine town of Virginia City sits below a heavily used wildlife corridor. With assistance from non-profit People and Carnivores, the town has taken steps to become “bear smart.”

VIRGINIA CITY

The model Bear Smart Community

MICHAEL CAST | Montana Standard

Stroll the historic ghost town boardwalk, and you might see chuckwagon dinners, vigilantes and gunfights.

You won't likely see a bear getting into the garbage.

Because Virginia City isn't just a national historical landmark, the site of the richest placer gold strike in the Rockies and the first territorial capital of Montana in the mid-1800s. The small bustling tourist town is also trying to become Montana's first Bear Smart Community.

Following a Canadian model that reduces conflicts between bears and people, the community a few years back teamed up with conservation group People and Carnivores to forge a harmonious coexistence with black bears by taking simple measures: bear-resistant garbage cans, hydraulic lids on the dumpsters at the local landfill, and efforts to manage the town's abundant fruit trees.

The precautions are especially urgent as grizzlies move back into their historic range. A grizzly was confirmed a few miles outside town in 2017, and residents expect more are on the way.

“We kind of all realize that we live amongst grizzlies, but that hit close to home,” said Justin Gatewood, the town's mayor.

Bears in town

The Virginia City populace prides itself on its character.

“We're not eccentric — we're eclectic,” said Bob Erdall, while hammering in new planks on the boardwalk. “I tell people that just because eccentric makes it sound like we're a bunch of nuts. And we are, but we don't advertise that.”

The “real” Virginia City community center is the historic Pioneer Bar.

Before the town went bear-smart, you could drink a beer at the Pioneer and watch a black bear mosey down the boardwalk, tipping over every 55-gallon garbage drum in a line, before the bear made its way around the

back of restaurants.

It happened every night for a week in 2016, and every year there were problems, Gatewood said.

Folks had near-misses in those days. Gatewood used to have conventional garbage cans outside his home. He won't soon forget the time his 1-year-old son ran out the door and almost smacked right into a black bear rifling through the cans.

Erdall has his fair share of bear stories from the days before the town took action. Mostly, they involve legendary elderly women who have since passed away.

There was Ida Blair, around 90 years old when she went

eyeball-to-eyeball with a great big black bear by her apple tree while holding a basketful of laundry. And Vera Romey, in her 90s when she chased a bear up a cottonwood for eating the cat food on her porch. She stood casually at the base of the tree until the police scared it down with a garden hose, and the bear plopped down beside her.

The local transfer station was the paramount problem. It often had to be closed for black bears working the dump in shifts.

Down the road in Nevada City, another relic from the gold rush days, the windows of the restaurant still have the claw marks from a hairy intruder that climbed inside to dine after hours.

It was all bad for the habituated bears. They were repeatedly captured to be relocated or euthanized.

That was then. Five years ago, People and Carnivores and the Virginia City community took action, first by putting hydraulic lids on the dumpsters at the transfer station and putting bear-resistant garbage containers in town.

Those steps made a huge difference.

“We've cut down dump closures and these incidents of bears in town almost to the point — knock on wood — of non-existence,” Gatewood said.

That's remarkable, because Virginia City is as rich in wildlife today as it once was in gold.

The animal highway

Kim and Greg Jorczyk, owners of the Rambling Moose Campground at the edge of town, call the hills immediately behind their operation “the animal highway.”

Grizzlies frequent the Gravelly Range to the south, as documented by regular hunter-grizzly conflicts. To the north, the



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One of many black bears captured on a game camera being the Rambling Moose Campground in Virginia City. Campground owners have worked with People and Carnivores to create a peaceful co-existence between campers and wildlife.

Tobacco Root Mountains aren't known to have grizzlies, but a 2017 study by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and the U.S. Geological Survey said the range “may be a particularly pivotal stepping stone” between bears from the Northern Continental Divide and Greater Yellowstone ecosystems' populations.

Virginia City rests right in the middle of the two ranges.

So far, there have been no confirmed grizzly sightings in the hills behind the campground or in town.

Other species cross in droves, however. Game cameras in the trees record the show.

Nights, a parade of black bears, deer, moose, coyotes, fox and mountain lions march the game trails within a stone's toss of the RV and tent sites.

“And turkeys,” said Kim Jorczyk, shaking her head with a laugh. “They were mating on camera yesterday.”

The campground removes the chokecherries as they ripen in summer to keep the bears away from the campers near the bushes, and uses bear-resistant garbage containers. People and Carnivores also leads a community-wide fruit picking effort to glean the apples before the bears arrive.

The owners educate campers on bear spray and garbage disposal. They don't use bird feeders because that could attract bears, and make guests clean and store their grills.

The Jorzyks even require guests to sign a liability release if they choose to roam the game trails on the animal highway. If

that sounds extreme, just watch the game cameras — a source of everyday excitement for the owners.

Kim gets an alert and a live feed on her wrist watch when there's an animal back there.

Once an alert came right after setting up a camera, and on her watch Kim saw a big black bear sow watching her walk away before it tried to claw the camera off the tree.

The Rambling Moose would be a dangerous sort of zoo had the owners not embraced the Bear Smart concept to the extreme, Kim said.

“It would be a free-for-all.” Instead, the bears and other wildlife largely leave the campers alone, and vice versa. There hasn't been a single injury due to wildlife since Kim and Greg bought the place in 2018, and no animals have been euthanized because of their operation.

Sure, a couple of campers woke to the sound of a screaming woman once, only to find it was actually a mountain lion screaming underneath their camper. And once a man from the Netherlands — so tall that his head bulged into the side of his tent — woke to heavy snuffling as a black bear nuzzled his head.

But a little excitement is unavoidable living close to wildlife, and the efforts have paid off.

“It's my property,” Kim said. “I want to make sure it's safe for everybody. It's simple things. This isn't hard. I'm going to keep conflicts to a minimum.”

“I don't want it to be my fault that a bear has to be put down,” Greg added.



Above: A black bear cub wanders the game trails behind Rambling Moose Campground in Virginia City. The campground owners have worked with non-profit People and Carnivores to make their campground safe for bears and people alike.

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Right: The Rambling Moose Campground in Virginia City
MICHAEL CAST, THE MONTANA STANDARD



This week: How do we live with grizzly bears?

Day 1:
Grizzlies
and us

Day 2:
Bears
on the ranch

Day 3:
Living
with grizzlies

Day 4:
Grizzly
science

Day 5:
Getting
bear aware

Day 6:
Love grizzlies/
Hunt grizzlies?

Day 7:
The recovery
process

Day 8:
Where
bears go

Day 9:
Indigenous
input

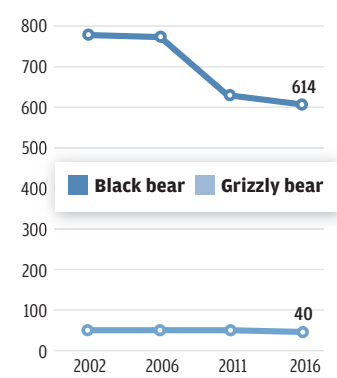
Day 10:
The way
forward

Next week: How do griz live with us?

Bear Smart program

British Columbia has seen a steady decrease in the number of bears killed annually in response to conflicts with people. Numbers below show the average number of black bear and grizzly bear killings going back almost 20 years.

Average numbers of bears killed due to conflict



Source: Bear Smart program brochure
Lee Enterprises graphic

Bear Smart vs. Bear Aware

MICHAEL CAST
Montana Standard

The Canadian Bear Smart program may sound a lot like Montana's Bear Aware campaign at first.

The difference is that Bear Aware is an educational campaign and sets regulations in public areas, while Bear Smart is an organized community effort, where the citizens of a town enter into a step-by-step process to achieve community-wide results.

First, a community decides to buy into the idea. Next, bear-related hazards are assessed, a bear-human conflict management plan is made, an education program is put in

place, a bear-resistant waste management system is implemented, and policy is put into local law.

Communities that do it all become Bear Smart.

In British Columbia, the provincial government operates the program.

Montana non-profit People and Carnivores' Kim Johnston introduced the idea to the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, and it was well received. It may soon be adopted throughout grizzly country in the Lower 48.

The program has a good track record in British Columbia, where there are now eight designated Bear Smart com-

munities.

The program has significantly reduced the number of bears destroyed due to conflict in the province.

Nearly 800 black bears were killed annually 15 years ago when the program started. In the last five years, the annual average has dropped to just over 600, according to data from British Columbia's Bear Smart program.

The average number of grizzlies killed has dropped from 45 to 40 over the same time frame.

After seeing what a difference the model made in his town, Virginia City Mayor Justin Gatewood believes the IGBC can take the example and run

with it.

"You can scale this out," he said. "These are not big investments. They are not huge steps. They are relatively small and benign steps that have a wonderfully giant impact that any town or city, regardless of size, could implement and see similar if not the same successes."

Virginia City is still working to fulfill its Bear Smart objectives. Next up, the community is putting more bear-resistant garbage containers at residences. Gatewood looks forward to the day the community gets the official designation, and the town is well on its way.

"We're going in the right direction," he said.



RYAN BERRY PHOTOS, BILLINGS GAZETTE

Kylie Kembel, a human-bear conflict specialist with FWP, speaks with passersby. A large portion of her job is to educate the public about bears in the Red Lodge area to keep humans and bears safe.

Technician spreads grizzly education

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Although she's moved from black bear management issues in the forests of northwest Montana to the Beartooth Front in the state's south-central region to deal with grizzlies, Kylie Kembel said the work remains much the same.

"Everyone struggles with bears all across the state," she said.

Kembel was one of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' 2017 hires to beef up its bear program, now composed of 11 experts spread across the state. As a bear management technician, she mainly deals with educating the public about how to live and play safely as black bears and grizzlies become more common along the Beartooth Front. These teaching efforts stretch from civic and school groups to local landowners.

"My role is to work with the people in Region 5 who have questions, concerns, struggles with bears," she said. "People who request me to come to a group event typically have some understanding, but some of the more detailed aspects they have questions about."

Kembel attended the University of Montana majoring in wildlife biology. That led to her working in wild places across the West, including as a volunteer outside of Lander, Wyoming, and in the Flathead Valley next to Glacier National Park and the expansive Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex.

Red Lodge was picked by FWP as a location to place Kembel because of an increasing grizzly



A grizzly bear hide with its claws attached is one of the education tools Kembel uses.

bear presence in an area that for decades only had to worry about black bears. Grizzlies began regularly showing up in about 2011, possibly following the mountains up from Wyoming. Two years later a pair of bears were captured after wandering into the Red Lodge region. They were relocated as reports of eight to 10 bears spread across the landscape trickled in to wildlife officials.

More grizzlies along the Beartooth Front is due to the success of their protection under the Endangered Species Act, as well as the animals' population growth in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, the core of which is Yellowstone National Park.

Along the Beartooth Front, grizzlies often use drainages as travel corridors, following creeks down from the mountains onto the foothills where they are more

likely to run into homes, ranches, towns and farms.

"They're just out searching for food everywhere," Kembel said.

Her main focus is conflict prevention, helping people to understand what bear attractants are and how to stay safe in bear country. The themes have been widely circulated for years.

Property owners should pick up fruit from trees in their yards, keep barbecue grills inside garages and avoid putting pet food outdoors. Hikers should travel in groups, make noise on the trail, carry bear spray and know how to use it. Campers need to secure their food inside of a hard-sided vehicle when not around or at night.

Backcountry hunters need to hang the carcass of a deer or elk they kill out of a bear's reach. Backpackers are also advised to hang their food in bear coun-

try or keep it inside bear-proof containers.

Kembel also works with the larger Yellowstone Ecosystem Subcommittee on its information and education outreach for the entire region. She works in partnership with other officials from Yellowstone National Park and Wyoming Game and Fish, to name a few.

The goal is to prevent bears from associating humans with food. That's safer for bears and humans. The old adage that a fed bear is a dead bear often holds true. When problems arise and a bear needs to be removed or killed, Wildlife Services – a branch of the U.S. Department of Agriculture – is called. Wildlife Services also partners with FWP to investigate livestock depredations, sometimes trapping problem bears for relocation or, when bears are repeat offenders, to euthanize the animal.

The increased education effort has been paying off, Kembel said, with more people in the community reaching out to her for advice on living safely in an area where homeowners had previously never seen grizzlies. Her work isn't limited to just spring, when bears wake up from hibernation, and fall, when they eat heavily to pack on calories before their long winter nap. Instead, she said she's busy the "entire time bears are awake."

That's OK because Kembel enjoys what she's doing.

"There are a lot of fun aspects to my job," she said. "Working with people who are just first-time experiencing bears

and helping them understand there's ways to be here and enjoy Montana with the bears, helping people understand that is very rewarding."

Bears are also a very charismatic species, she noted, as well as adaptable.

"We try to understand bears, but in the end they are wildlife."

Her role, along with others in FWP, similar agencies and conservation groups to spread the word about living with bears will be key to the big animals surviving on a landscape that is seeing increasing development in what used to be largely rural areas. Also, bears are encountering more hikers and campers using forests since the COVID-19 pandemic, some of whom have no knowledge of how to recreate responsibly in bear country.

"There's no place you can go in the Beartooths that you shouldn't be thinking about grizzly bears," said Shawn Stewart, FWP wildlife biologist in Red Lodge. "And with COVID, the people are everywhere."

Kembel's education efforts have the additional effect of informing the public in hopes of increasing understanding and acceptance of the species.

"I think we need people to support the bears if they are going to stay," Kembel said.

If anyone is worried about bears, she encourages them to contact her for more information.

"People can reach out any time they have questions and concerns."

Her phone number is 406-850-1131.