



MEAGAN THOMPSON PHOTOS, THE MONTANA STANDARD

Jami Murdoch opens the gate for sheep on the ranch she and her husband own near Glen. The couple uses livestock guardian dogs to protect their sheep from predators.

# RANCHING CHALLENGES

## Keeping grizzlies out of trash saves sheep, by getting rid of the real problem - ravens

MICHAEL CAST

**B**lack bears, mountain lions, coyotes, foxes, wolves and eagles have killed a few sheep over the years on Erik Kalsta's ranch on the Big Hole River.

Ravens, though, have massacred his lambs. And in a strange roundabout way, it may be grizzly bears that actually help solve Kalsta's raven problem.

"I would not hesitate to say we lost at least 50 lambs last year to ravens," Kalsta said.

The ravens come for the newborn lambs in the spring, when heavy snow immobilizes the flock. The large, black birds have even been known to peck out the eyes of the ewes.

For context, throughout all of Montana, sheep producers were reimbursed for a total of 15 confirmed depredations by grizzlies in 2020. Occasionally, grizzlies do kill large numbers of sheep on a single ranch. For example, a grizzly was euthanized after killing 40 sheep on a Toole County ranch in 2019.

Kalsta's ranch is situated near a garbage dump, where the open containers beckon ravens in droves. Before the dump went in, Kalsta said there were just a few ravens in the area at a time, but the lure of garbage later increased that count to anywhere from 30 to 40 birds.

"That open food source in that dumpster keeps the ravens from migrating, and when the lambs start hitting the ground, it gets pretty ugly pretty fast," Kalsta said.

Beaverhead County teamed up with the nonprofit People and Carnivores to secure the dump with hydraulic lids at the end of the summer. That was done, at least in part, to prevent the dump from drawing grizzlies.

"As grizzly bears are expand-

ing, especially here around the Beaverhead County area, we just wanted to get ahead of the game and get these sites secure," said Kim Johnston, field project manager for People and Carnivores.

In fall of 2020, a grizzly was sighted 6 miles west of the refuse site as the raven flies.

The ironic thing about the raven predations is that Kalsta and his wife, Jami Murdoch, have taken extraordinary proactive measures to mitigate predation from larger, furred carnivores.

By working with People and Carnivores, and using game cameras and livestock guardian dogs fixed with tracking collars, the ranchers have become experts on predation and how to avoid it.

The couple purchased Judge, their first guardian dog, primarily to deal with coyotes 11 years ago. Kalsta said attempts to manage coyotes by lethal means often fail. For example, area ranchers killed some 140 coyotes one fall, but the predation didn't go down.

"If you start impacting the coyote population too much, then they go into a hyper breeding rate," he said.

Instead, he looked into prevention methods. And that method's name was Judge.

Judge would cover an incredible amount of ground to protect the flock. When he was just a young pup, he was ambushed by a coyote pack and returned with a limp. But Judge kept doing his duty.

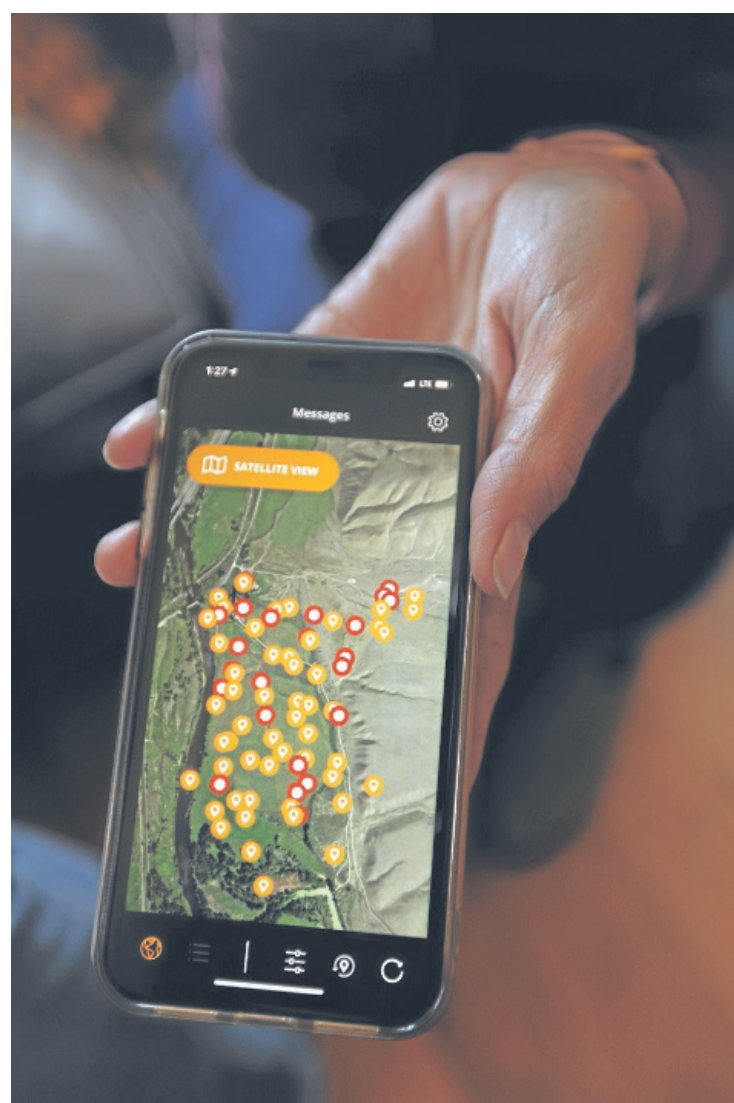
"And then all of the sudden, there was no problem," Kalsta said. "He didn't have to chase the coyotes. They didn't come in. It's been pretty good since."

Judge, however, has since died.

To replace him, Kalsta purchased two female dogs, Winter and Storm, six years ago, and a puppy named Chinook—a Judge in training. All three dogs are Akbash-Anatolian Shepherd mixes, bred to protect livestock from predators. Another dog, Laloush, guards the area around the ranch buildings.

But their pack of loyal guard dogs is only part of their strategy for safeguarding their flocks against predators. This is where things get more high-tech.

Johnston devised an affordable tracking system with a long battery life for the dog collars using SPOT GPS. Now, every ten minutes, the ranchers



Jami Murdoch's smart phone records the the movements of her 6-year-old Akbash-Anatolian Shepherd mix guard dogs, Winter and Storm. Murdoch and her husband Erik Kalsta track the dogs' movements to protect their sheep flock from predators at their ranch near Glen in Southwest Montana.

receive a location from Winter and Storm, and track their movements on a cell phone application.

The system has led to some important discoveries.

Following the maps of dog movements, they've discovered mountain lions moving through the property. They've found sheep stuck in drainages multiple times that they otherwise wouldn't have known about.

"I was in Minnesota in March," Murdoch said, "and I got an alert my phone, and I was like, you need to go check why the dogs are down the country. They were down with their sheep who'd gone off on a lark."

The nonprofit and ranchers together recently secured a pasture with electric fencing for their sheep in the event of a predator problem.

"That'll be a big thing,"

Kalsta emphasized.

Unfortunately, the clever ravens have been by far the biggest threat to the ranch, and are the one predator the dogs have little effect on. The ranchers are hopeful that hydraulic lids at the refuse site will do the trick, as well as eliminate potential attractants for grizzlies.

In the event grizzlies come through anyway, Kalsta and Murdoch have the dogs, the cameras, and the electrified safe zone ready.

"The dogs are very effective," Murdoch said. "They're the first alert."

Should grizzlies or any other predators show, Kalsta said his pups will sound the alarm.

"I think we're going to see a change in behavior," Kalsta said. "That'll be the first thing. Hopefully we see that change before we see actual predation. That's our hope."

Kim Johnston, field project manager for nonprofit People and Carnivores, demonstrates the use of hydraulic dumpster lids at a Beaverhead County dump located off I-15 between Glen and Melrose. The lids prevent wild animals to the site, including ravens and bears.



It's mid afternoon on a hot day at the end of August and Winter, a 6-year-old Akbash-Anatolian Shepherd mix, is ready for a nap. The roaming guard dog has been patrolling all night long to protect sheep on a Glen ranch from various predators.

**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

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

- 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



COURTESY PEOPLE AND CARNIVORES

One of several grizzly bears that have been roaming Avon this year is captured on a game camera by People and Carnivores, a Montana non-profit dedicated to reducing conflicts between people and large carnivores.

# DEALING WITH DEPREDACTIONS

## Family takes steps to protect property from growing number of grizzlies

**MICHAEL CAST**

Bill McIntosh gathered his family around the kitchen table at the ranch house and told the grizzly tale, unable to hold back tears.

“If you see how these bears kill those things — they were in agony,” he said. “The last steer we found, his neck was broke. His nose was crushed into splinters.”

Late this spring, Bill and his son, Gib McIntosh, trotted up a creek one evening and saw a grizzly. Momentarily, the bear circled around through the timber and back towards its kill — one of their yearling steers. The grizzly huffed as it moved downhill, closing in on the two men.

“Too close,” Gib said, right before he and his father got out of there.

The bear was suspected of killing two yearling steers in close succession in late May, and U.S. Wildlife Services verified a grizzly had killed three other yearlings on the ranch earlier in the spring.

Bill had only seen a couple grizzlies in a lifetime spent in Avon, and never had a problem before.

His ranch house in the southwest Montana community of Avon has served the McIntosh family for six generations, and they still ride the range horseback to check cattle. On their combination of leased private ground and Forest Service land, the family runs about 900 head of cattle over some 10,000 acres, so bear mitigation is no simple matter.

As bears expand to new territory, many ranchers find themselves working with government wildlife managers and nonprofit groups to devise non-lethal solutions to protect bears and livestock.

The stakes are high for bears and ranchers alike.

For bears, it may be necessary to travel through the ranching valley to connect populations. For the McIntosh family, protecting their livestock isn't just about business.

“There's a point where people think, oh, well, you're just looking at the dollars — you're going to kill them anyway,” said Jill McIntosh, Bill's wife. “No. We care for them. We are with them from the time they hit the ground.”

“And besides the livestock, these kills were within a mile of my home,” Gib added. “I have two little boys. (My brother



PAT HANSEN

The McIntosh family poses for a photo in 2010 with Lou, Heather and Gib in the top row, and Jill and Bill McIntosh in front.

has) three little girls. That's something we never worried about growing up as kids. We'd go running around and be gone all afternoon. And you'd be kind of nervous to let your kids do that now.”

Bill didn't suspect grizzlies at first.

He found three calves chewed up in early spring, one after another. Which each dead calf, he grew more suspicious, but at first he didn't assume a predator was responsible. Coyotes were on the carcasses, but there was nothing unusual about that.

Two of the calves were found near the pit where the ranch traditionally heaped carcasses. Some dead animals are all but inevitable on a big ranch like the McIntosh family has.

In case bloating was the cause, the family tried changing the feed. Finally, Bill said a U.S. Wildlife Services employee measured the bite marks on the third kill, and determined it was a grizzly.

At the same time, it was discovered a bear was digging for carcasses in the pit. After several attempts, U.S. Wildlife Services and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks officials managed, with a hunk of road-kill deer as bait, to draw a grizzly into a culvert trap nearby.

By all accounts, that 429-pound male bear was

docile inside the trap. The bear was relocated to the Bob Marshall Wilderness, and stayed there in the heart of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem since.

Later, the McIntosh family decided the bear likely wasn't responsible for the first three depredations.

“I think we just caught an innocent bystander,” Jill said.

“He was just coming to have his breakfast in the pit,” Bill added. “I really don't think that bear was a problem at all.”

The McIntosh family removed the cow carcasses from the pit — four cows that had flipped over on their backs and died, and a few dead calves — as advised by wildlife managers.

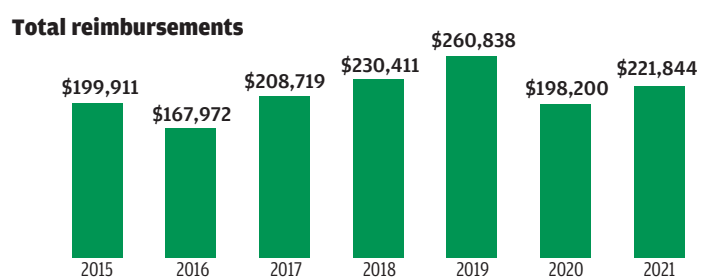
There wasn't much mystery with the second bear.

After Bill and Gib retreated, Gib and his brother Lou McIntosh went back for the carcass and the bear was still nearby. Wildlife managers and the McIntosh family then found the bear had killed another steer. Using that the steer for bait, the bear was trapped the next day, his prints made a direct line through the snow into the trap.

The 6-year-old, 411-pound male wasn't happy, to say the least. The bear was euthanized on May 24 and the McIntosh family hasn't had a bear problem since.

**Livestock loss totals in Montana 2015-21**

The Montana Livestock Loss Program provides financial reimbursements to livestock producers for losses caused by grizzly bears, wolves or mountain lions. Totals below show statewide reimbursement figures for all cattle, sheep, goats, horses and other livestock lost.



Note: 2021 figure current as of Nov. 5.

Lee Enterprises graphic

came from, its sex, and other information.

Bill has checked the post for Trimbo, and they've come up with a couple good hair samples.

“Avon's kind of a new territory for this many bear showing up, so it's good information,” Trimbo said.

Wildlife managers have counted a minimum of four grizzlies active in Avon this year, about the same number of yearling steers the McIntosh family lost to them. Based on reports from other ranchers, there could be more grizzlies around than that.

The Montana Livestock Loss Board paid Bill \$1,084 for each of the five McIntosh steers killed.

“That was great. I appreciate that,” Bill said. “But \$1,084 — most of that was gone in what we had into them by the time they were killed.”

The family raised the yearlings for an entire year, and would have sold them this fall. Subtracting feed and labor, he said the steers were worth substantially more than he was paid for them. Margins are tight in the cattle business.

This year looks a little better, Bill said, but beef prices — what ranchers get, not what folks pay at the store — have been down.

“The last two falls, if you broke even you did pretty well,” he said.

Still, the McIntosh family is making adjustments to protect themselves and their livestock.

“I bought bear spray for the first time in my life,” Gib said with a laugh.

Bill has changed where he pastures animals based on when and where the depredations occurred. As for livestock guardian dogs, Bill said he's not ready to make the leap. The expenses and time involved are considerable.

“It's not as convenient for us. It's not the way we'd like to do it. But if it saves a few yearlings and saves some problems, we'll do it,” he said.

After his experience this spring, he'd like to have the option to shoot a grizzly in a pinch, though he figures that's easier said than done.

“(It's) especially not easy to do if you're raising cattle and working with cattle all day and then trying to mitigate your bear problem at night,” he said. “Frankly, we're very vulnerable.”