

COEXISTENCE

PROTECTING CASCADE WILDNESS

Spring, 2023

Why Carnivores Mean a Healthy Ecosystem

By Dave Werntz, Senior Director, Science and Conservation

Carnivores play a unique and crucial role in overall ecosystem health. Situated at the top of the food web, carnivores like bears, wolves, lynx, and fisher, ensure that their prey don't become overpopulated, which in turn prevents starvation, disease spread, overgrazing and harmful impacts to riparian and other habitat. As large carnivores and other predators focus on prevalent species, they make room for others, resulting in greater biological diversity. Restoring a healthy population of carnivores to the landscape improves ecological resilience, as species-rich ecosystems tend to have increased capacity to withstand and recover from disturbances.

For more than 30 years, Conservation Northwest has focused on establishing a network of connected landscapes in the Pacific Northwest to maintain ecological functions and to provide a home for wide-ranging carnivores including many locally extinct due to hunting, trapping and habitat loss. We've had remarkable success protecting nearly all majestic old-growth forests and untouched wild country on federal lands in the Cascades, Olympics, and Kettle Range. To restore habitat connectivity between wildlands, we formed coalitions to build wildlife crossings - overpasses and underpasses - which allow safe passage across Interstate 90, Highway 97, and elsewhere. With a connected network taking shape, we turned our attention to returning native wildlife to their rightful place in the landscape.

Our top priority is restoring wildlife that needs large areas to thrive, with ample food and shelter to raise young free from harm. In providing that for carnivores, we inherently provide for all the other plants and animals that live within those large areas. Big carnivores were among the first wildlife species to be eliminated from Washington landscapes because of greed, erroneous fear, and misperceptions about their role in the ecosystem. Conservation Northwest believes we have a responsibility to bring back carnivores not only because of their benefit to ecosystems, but also because their removal was caused largely by people's mistakes. We have a responsibility, a duty, to right those wrongs and leave the land in better shape, especially given the uncertainty of a climate-altered future.

There is plenty of space for people and carnivores to co-exist. For the most part, carnivores don't want to be around people and avoid human developments. Where people and wildlife do



interact, there are known and tested methods and practices for avoiding or minimizing conflicts. Limiting conflicts is largely about managing food and other attractants. For the most part, carnivores are highly elusive and if you see a wolverine, lynx, or fisher, you're pretty lucky. For the fortunate few, it can be awe inspiring.

In the last decade or so, we've made huge progress in restoring fishers, wolves, and lynx to the Pacific Northwest's wild country. With our First Nation partners in British Columbia we're protecting at-risk grizzly bear populations. And with the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation we've starting returning lynx to their home territory in central Washington's Kettle Range.

Our next challenge is one of Conservation Northwest's most important and enduring objectives: returning grizzly bears to the North Cascades. The North Cascades have been vacant of grizzly bears for far too long. It is one of the best of six federally designated recovery areas, lush with a diverse array of food, massive in size (more than 10,000 square miles), and easily capable of supporting dozens of bears (the goal is 25 bears over ten years). Grizzly bears are culturally and spiritually important to Indigenous people in the region, and ecologically important for seed and plant dispersal, aerating soils as they forage, and other functions. Grizzlies won't return without our help.

I've been with Conservation Northwest for a while, and the bulk of my time has been protecting and restoring habitat, making sure that animals have a quality home in our state. The success of our wildlife recovery work rests on a solid foundation of effective habitat protection and connectivity. There is really nothing more rewarding than knowing when you release a carnivore into functional and connected habitat - its historic home - they're going to be okay and do well in the world.

GRIZZLY BEAR RECOVERY

Conservation Northwest's next great challenge is restoration of grizzly bears in the North Cascades.

Grizzly bears are listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act, and because of biological, sociopolitical, and logistical factors will be one of the most difficult animals to recover once they're gone. For 10,000 years grizzly bears were found as far south as Mexico and as far east as the Mississippi, but their range has been reduced by 98%. They now only exist in four states. Because they were perceived as a threat to humans and livestock, grizzly bears have been persecuted, overhunted, mismanaged, and misunderstood.

The North Cascades is one of only six ecosystems in the U.S. that is a federally recognized grizzly bear recovery zone, which means we have the ideal habitat to recover a self-sustaining bear population.

“The grizzly bear is a critical part of the ecological and cultural fabric of the North Cascades. They belong here. Without them, our wild areas are diminished, less diverse and sanitized. The narrative about Cascades grizzly bear recovery will take decades to unfold. But with science, education and a little human tolerance, it can be one of the greatest conservation success stories.”

— Joe Scott, Associate Director, International Programs

Why is Grizzly Bear Recovery Important?

■ **Ecologically:** Grizzly bears play a unique ecological role as “habitat engineers”. An ecosystem that can support bears is a healthy ecosystem. They are prolific diggers for food, and that digging and defecating aerates and fertilizes soils, which enriches the area for all the other species that share that ecosystem. In the Pacific Northwest no other animal does that on a scale that a grizzly bear does.

■ **Culturally:** Our First Nation and Tribal partners have a fundamental cultural connection between their societies and the grizzly bear. Grizzly bears taught people what to eat, how to survive in the same ecosystem, and how to raise their young. Losing the bear, like losing language, impacts indigenous cultural disempowerment. And conversely, when you restore this animal, it's a step toward renewing those cultures and traditional practices.

■ **Morally:** Human activity has been the main cause of grizzly bear decline. We believe it's our responsibility as conservationists, our responsibility as government, and our responsibility as a society to restore them.



Photo by Lisa Hupp

Conservation Northwest's Role

In November 2022, the National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced they are restarting the process to return grizzly bears to the North Cascades Ecosystem- a large network of mostly protected public lands from northwest Washington State into British Columbia, including North Cascades National Park.

The environmental impact statement process includes opportunities for public input on a range of strategies designed to restore grizzlies. This revival of a multi-year effort is backed by overwhelming public approval. When a similar process began in 2015, it received more than 159,000 public comments supporting it. Our role in this process is to:

- Raise awareness about the ecological and cultural importance of grizzly bear recovery
- Conduct independent analyses of benefits of bears and their impact on an ecosystem
- Provide education on grizzly bear behavior and counter myths about the danger bears pose to humans
- Support government agencies (including North Cascades National Park) in the federal mission to recover bears in the Cascades
- Work with communities directly impacted by grizzly bear presence on co-existence, including food security and livestock protection

Minimizing Our Impact on Wildlife

“I’m happy to call myself an enthusiastic recreationist, and this report challenges us to have deeper reverence for our beautiful and wildlife-rich landscapes. They are some of our favorite places. The wildlife here supports natural cycles that clean our water and our air and provides other vital ecosystem services that keep us bipedal mammals alive and well. Damage we do to these places is ultimately damage to ourselves.”

— Kurt Hellmann, Senior Coordinator, Wildlife-Recreation Coexistence

Many Washingtonians hold a deep appreciation for our diverse landscapes and their plethora of wildlife. But, as participation in outdoor recreation throughout the Cascade Range continues to grow, Conservation Northwest has wondered how ecosystems are impacted by the rising number of people spending time in nature. And specifically, how our presence affects the wildlife that call these places home.

We partnered with Home Range Wildlife Research in the Methow Valley to compile a report about the impact of recreation on fifteen species in Washington. While the report contains nuanced findings for each species, the main takeaway is clear: Recreation can have negative impacts on wildlife. This ranges from temporarily displacing species to posing serious challenges to a population’s viability.

We know that coupled with a changing climate and continued habitat loss, these impacts from recreation, no matter how small, can prove detrimental to species. So what are we doing about it?

■ Our **Wildlife Recreation Coexistence Program** works with recreation communities and land managers to expand the knowledge, capacity, and will to more actively manage and support sustainable recreation in Washington, including more research to identify and measure where recreation and wildlife habitats overlap; preserve critical wildlife spaces by identifying and protecting habitat that is vital for species’ survival and corridors for wildlife to move across landscapes; and supporting

Throughout the Cascades, recreation can impact elk, mountain goat, mule deer, black bear, mountain lion, wolverine, bald and golden eagles. The North Cascades are also home to Canada lynx, gray wolves, and in the future (hopefully!) grizzly bears.

lands management that is quick to respond to known recreation impacts on wildlife.

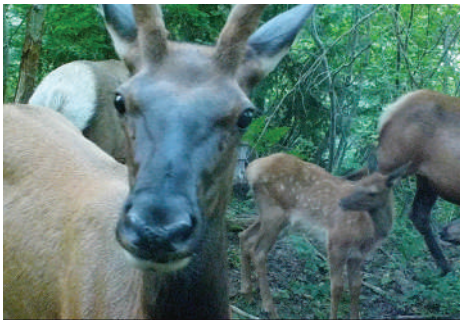
■ Launch a pilot of **Wildlife Ambassadors** to do in-person outreach to hikers, campers, and mountain bikers in the Middle Fork area of the Snoqualmie River. This will educate people about wildlife in the area, tips for wildlife encounters, and information about limiting impacts to wildlife and habitat.

■ Partner with the U.S. Forest Service to **reduce human-wildlife conflict by adding bear-proof dumpsters** and signage about proper food and garbage storage from hiking and camping.

■ Continue to share **wildlife-recreation tips** that give practical advice to recreationists on safety and low-impact, but also remind us that Washington’s landscapes are much more than places for us to ‘play’. They are radically alive ecosystems teeming with diverse critters and flora that are part of our natural heritage.

KEEPING AN EYE ON CARNIVORES

By Tanner Humphries, Senior Coordinator, Wildlife Monitoring



For nearly two decades, the Community Wildlife Monitoring Program has engaged community science volunteers in the monitoring of Washington's rare and sensitive wildlife species. Using remote cameras and snow tracking surveys, our volunteers attempt to document presence of six target carnivore species - Canada lynx, Cascade red fox, fisher, gray wolf, grizzly bear, and wolverine - with an emphasis on areas that are critical for habitat connectivity. Community scientists contribute valuable information on the presence and movements of wildlife that aid in our state's wildlife recovery and conservation efforts.

While the Cascades may serve as a "refuge" to some Washington urbanites (guilty), it is essential for the wildlife that call it home. The variety of habitats in the North Cascades alone

supports nearly 340 species of wildlife. Monitoring the biological diversity of an area is akin to monitoring the health of the environment. Long-term monitoring efforts allow us to detect changes, determine what caused the change, and explore how it can be remedied.

Conservation Northwest's Community Wildlife Monitoring Program increases our collective understanding of wildlife. Photo documentation of rare and sensitive species influences research and policy decisions and sharing these images with the public creates a narrative about our state's wildlife that can engage people of diverse ages and backgrounds. Our program will continue to emphasize the importance of human-driven conservation efforts to ensure a sustainable future for Washington's wildlife.

Central Cascades Watershed Restoration Program - how do we change the tide of recreation abuse?

By Laurel Baum, Senior Coordinator, Central Cascades Watershed and Jen Syrowitz, Senior Manager, Conservation Projects



Photos by Laurel Baum

Over the past few years, we've worked alongside the U.S. Forest Service to restore and connect wildlife habitat in watersheds adjacent to the I-90 corridor. We rip out roads to decrease fragmentation, build fences to protect high elevation meadows, unpack soils and restore native plants, blast culverts to open fish habitat, and pull weeds and spread native seeds in terrestrial uplands. Our National Forest partners are tasked with managing the lands for wood products, wildlife habitat, healthy salmon spawning grounds, AND recreational access. Often the goals and objectives of each use conflict with each other. Our Central Cascades Watershed Restoration Program was created to improve degraded watersheds adjacent to I-90 back into more resilient and better functioning versions of themselves. This involves a lot of partnership work, large-scale thinking and landscape-scale planning, combined with on the ground implementation actions to keep things moving forward in the right direction.

We see the same challenges again and again – people driving their vehicles through sensitive habitats, unsafe recreational shooting that pollutes salmon waters, and immense amounts of human trash and waste. Yes, some people have never learned how to go to

the bathroom in the woods, leaving unsanitary conditions behind for the next user group and for USFS Recreation Staff who are trying to protect our shared natural resources. We won't go into detail here, just trust us, it's BAD! While we don't have all the answers, we know it will take a concerted effort from not just land managers, but also education, outreach, and accountability for the bad actors trashing the land and leaving it worse than they found it.

This is why we are supporting the vision to shift three recreation corridors along the Greenwater River to 'Designated Dispersed', which will create more guidelines and education for campers

that will help people avoid human wildlife conflicts through proper food and trash storage, and ensure their understanding of Leave No Trace ethics.

We know it's vital for people to connect with nature, but we must find sustainable ways to manage the mounting recreational pressures and misuse and abuse of these habitat and ecosystems. This is why our CCWR program works to ensure good outcomes for wildlife, secure funding for restorative implementation actions that connect and restore big landscapes, and dig in on shovel-ready projects that will increase the pace and scale of forest health and resilience on our public lands.

The upper part of the Green River watershed anchors the southern end of the Central Cascades region, with its mix of private and public timberland remote (at this point) from development. We want to make sure that it remains at least as wild, productive, and supportive of salmon spawning, wildlife moving, and carbon storage as it is now.

Our goal is a Green/Duwamish Watershed that is connected and restored from Puget Sound to the Cascade Crest, providing an enduring source of clean drinking water, salmon habitat, and interconnected wildlife habitat. CNW is facilitating a holistic, public-private partnership approach that includes climate refugia, habitat connectivity, and Indigenous knowledge systems.

BRIDGING BARRIERS

A critical element of wildlife conservation and connectivity within the busy Cascade corridor is the ability of animals to navigate safely around people. With major highways fragmenting habitat both north-south and east-west, wildlife crossings have become an increasingly important piece of our work. We've proven the success of over- and underpasses with the structures built on I-90 and HWY 97, which have decreased wildlife-vehicle collisions up to 90%. Two projects highlight the ongoing need.

Snoqualmie Wildlife Undercrossing:

The stretch of I-90 between Issaquah and Snoqualmie Pass is under immense pressure from hikers and other recreationists. A few existing bridges where I-90 goes over the South Fork Snoqualmie River are actively used as wildlife undercrossing structures for elk, black-tailed and mule deer, coyotes, black bears, fishers, and other critters. But the existing crossing near Mile post 27 between Preston and North Bend was built nearly 50 years ago and no longer serves the wildlife that needs to use it. It's too small to be used by elk, even though this underpass falls near one of the highest elk-vehicle collision areas in the state.

Conservation Northwest is renovating the existing bridge undercrossing; moving, replacing and widening the existing fence to make it more attractive to large wildlife. Volunteers have removed blackberry, small trees, and brush that were restricting the viewshed under the interstate for elk and other species, who prefer a large 'openness' to feel comfortable using the crossing. We're also adding more camera monitoring of both pre- and post-restoration for comparison (cameras are provided by WSDOT). This data will be beneficial for future bridge and undercrossing size recommendations.



Wildlife bridge on I-90. Photo by Washington State Department of Transportation.

Safe Passage I-5

The Olympic Peninsula contains the second-largest mountain range in Washington and supports vast temperate rainforests and world-class biodiversity. This region is home to diverse species, including Roosevelt and Rocky Mountain elk, cougar, black-tailed deer, black bear, fisher, and vulnerable salmon. As a peninsula, options for wildlife movements are limited by geography. Maintaining connections between these wildlife populations and groups in the Cascades is vital for long term viability of species.

But, the two existing connectivity pathways are threatened by growing development pressures, particularly along the I-5 corridor. This is a multi-lane barrier disrupting free wildlife movement between the Cascades and Olympics mountain ranges. It harms ecological connectivity, and the window to address this critical issue is rapidly closing. From the Chehalis Basin to the Columbia River, the I-5 corridor is experiencing a development boom. Warehouses, factories, and other structures are being built quickly, and there is even talk of a SeaTac-sized airport in the area.

Now is the time to design and build safe crossings before this area is overdeveloped in the few remaining connectivity locations.

Wildlife crossings are massive infrastructure undertakings, requiring the support of numerous stakeholders and government funding. This urgent effort has a strong coalition of stakeholders, including the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Washington State Department of Transportation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of Natural Resources, Tribal scientists, community members, NGOs, Conservation Districts and many more. Supporting this effort now paves the way for this project to be shovel-ready and eligible for state and federal funds in two years and have crossings in place by 2030.

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Volunteer with Conservation Northwest

We can't achieve our mission to protect, connect and restore wildlands and wildlife without the generous people who donate their time to Conservation Northwest. As we shed our winter coats and try to find our sunglasses, we're planning many opportunities for you to join us in our work. We need volunteers to help us clear invasive plants, support our wildlife monitoring program, assist in clean-up restoration projects, help with our annual auction, join us in pygmy rabbit research, and more. Visit our volunteer page to see the opportunities this spring and summer:

conservationnw.org/take-action/volunteer/. We can't wait to see you in the field!



THANK YOU TO THE LEA FOUNDATION!

By Mitch Friedman, Executive Director

Jim Lea passed away in December of 2016, but his legacy lives on in the great work his estate has funded. I didn't know Jim, but I sure owe him deep gratitude. Jim grew up in Tacoma and became a Boeing engineer, then an inventor and co-founder of Cascade Designs. If you've slept on a Therm-a-Rest, Jim made your life better. When he passed, he left a large amount to the James M. Lea Foundation for grants to protect the Northwest wildlands and wildlife that he loved. We have received nearly half a million dollars for projects including restoring wetlands in the Upper Greenwater Watershed, recovering lynx, and establishing wildlife crossings on HWY 97. This is the final year for the foundation, meaning that we'll receive our last grant in Jim's name. But the work we do with those funds will carry his legacy indefinitely in the wild Northwest.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Join Conservation Northwest at our **20th Annual Hope for a Wild Future Auction and Dinner**. Tickets are available until April 17. Celebrate our Northwest wildlife and wildlands and learn about CNW's plans for this year. The silent auction is online and open to everyone through April 20. Visit conservationnw.org/auction2023 for tickets and access to the auction.

Making Your Impact

By Meghan Madden, Director of Philanthropy

Growing up in the Pacific Northwest, I took it for granted. I vaguely recall debates raging about old growth and spotted owl when I was a kid, but we were surrounded by seemingly immutable nature, and I didn't understand how fragile it was. It was only when I returned after a decade on the East Coast that I realized how unique and special our little corner of the country is. To live in one of a handful of places where grizzly bears and lynx can still, maybe, be seen in the wild is staggering to me.

It's a privilege to work at Conservation Northwest. Every day I get to see how vital our work is in preserving and protecting the remaining wildlands in Washington. Our program staff build awareness, education, collaboration, and literal bridges to ensure that our wildlife have an advocate for their future. We know what happens if we do nothing. We also know that EVERYTHING we do is only possible because of our community of supporters. Every win and every new challenge accepted is because of the thousands of individuals that have kept Conservation Northwest going for more than 30 years. We hope you'll carry on with us as we continue to keep the Northwest wild.



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