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Room for bears

By Brent Israelsen
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GRAND TETON NATIONAL PARK -- Wyoming wildlife biologist Steve Kilpatrick slices open a whitebark pine cone with his knife and teases out a few nuts.

The tasty morsels, he explains, are a favorite food for the grizzly bear.

That, and an occasional side of beef.

Grizzlies in these parts, however, are going to have to get used to nuts and berries again.

A recent buyout of livestock grazing permits -- made possible with the financial help of a little-known organization in Utah -- virtually guarantees that cattle will roam no more on a huge chunk of land east of Grand Teton National Park.

The deal is the largest of its type in the 27-million-acre greater Yellowstone ecosystem and the latest in a growing trend of free-market buyouts of grazing permits in sensitive places around the West.

Despite the removal of domesticated red meat from grizzlies' diet, this latest buyout is good news for the animals. When bears eat cows, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department is bound by law to pay ranchers for the losses and to remove or kill the offending bears.

The days of death, deportation and compensation are over in this part of bear country.

"This is the greatest achievement of my career," says Kilpatrick. "The nation won't be hearing about grizzly bear conflicts here anymore."

Kilpatrick is sitting on the toolbox in the back of his pickup in Squaw Basin, in the easternmost part of an area known as the Blackrock/Spread Creek grazing allotment.

The allotment covers 87,500 acres of the Bridger-Teton National Forest, in an approximately 25-mile-long, 7-mile-wide swath that begins near the east entrance of Grand Teton. A third the size of the national park and three times bigger than the nearby National Elk Refuge, the allotment is a high-elevation landscape, with a mix of tall-grass meadows, sagebrush uplands, dense lodgepole and aspen stands, and small lakes, streams and springs.

"It's an incredibly rich habitat for bears," says Hank Fischer, project coordinator for the National Wildlife Federation.

It also has been rich grazing land for the Jackson-based Walton Ranch, owned by the late Paul Walton and his wife, Betty, whose cowboys ran 800 head each summer in the Blackrock/Spread Creek allotment.

In the mid-1990s, when the grizzly bear began repopulating Yellowstone and its surrounding environs, bears from Grand Teton moved into the Blackrock/Spread Creek area.

The bears began killing cows, sparking widespread fear and loathing in the ranching community of the northern Rocky Mountains. Ranchers a decade earlier had fought federal efforts to recover the grizzly bear, a "threatened" species under the Endangered Species Act.

During the next three years, the Walton Ranch lost at least 108 cattle to grizzly bears, although the actual number of losses could be double or triple that.

"It got to be pretty exasperating," says Dave Moody, large-carnivore biologist for Wyoming Game and Fish. "People didn't know how to handle it. All of a sudden, the Waltons, who have been ranching here since the 1960s, had bears in their livestock."

Wildlife managers killed eight to 10 bears a year in the allotment, attracting national news coverage.

"There is no place [in the lower 48 states] that has had more grizzly bear conflicts," says Fischer. "Wyoming Game and Fish were there all the time, trying to capture and move bears."

The agency paid about \$158,000 in compensation to the Waltons and spent another \$300,000 managing the situation, in which up to 20 bears were known to wander the allotment at one time.

After 1998, the Waltons voluntarily vacated the allotment to avoid the conflicts and look for a solution.

In the years after, matters in the allotment became more complicated. A wolf pack formed nearby, and increasing numbers of bison and elk from Grand Teton feasted on the Waltons' forage.

To end the conflicts, Fischer, who has worked on wolf and bear conservation for more than 20 years, called Betty Walton last summer.

After nearly a year of negotiations, they and the Walton Ranch struck a deal. The National Wildlife Federation agreed to pay the Walton Ranch \$250,000 for their grazing allotment. The Waltons have used the cash to buy grazing leases on private land in Idaho.

And the U.S. Forest Service agreed to end livestock grazing in the allotment, which is sandwiched between the park and the Teton Wilderness Area, another important range for grizzly bears.

The allotment will remain open to camping, fishing, hunting, motor vehicles and other recreational uses.

The retirement of the grazing permits by the Forest Service is not permanent. Subsequent forest managers could reinstate grazing, but most people associated with this buyout say that is unlikely.

The buyout is similar to a transaction that occurred in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in southern Utah last year. In that deal, the Grand Canyon Trust paid several ranchers \$600,000 for grazing permits. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management, which administers the monument, then agreed to end or drastically reduce grazing on 350,000 acres inside the federal reserve.

Bill Hedden, the Grand Canyon Trust representative who negotiated the Grand Staircase-Escalante buyout, consulted with Fischer on the Blackrock/Spread Creek deal.

"We are seeing in yet another landscape how private retirement of grazing permits can solve environmental problems," says Hedden.

Another environmental group, the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign, based in Ashland, Ore., is lobbying Congress to fund grazing-permit buyouts around the West.

Everyone associated with the Blackrock/Spread Creek deal expressed relief, if not joy, after it was inked in early August.

"This agreement will allow the Walton Ranch to lease private replacement forage for a number of years," says Hank Phibbs, an attorney for Betty Walton. "The Walton family thanks these folks and their organizations for making this solution possible."

One of the two-dozen groups that contributed to the buyout was Vital Ground, a land trust based in Park City that ponied up \$20,000.

Vital Ground was founded in 1990 by Doug and Lynne Seus, of Heber, who train bears and wolves for TV and film productions. Their most famous client, a Kodiak named Bart who starred in "The Bear," died in 2000.

To date, not counting this latest deal, Vital Ground has purchased land or conservation easements on 33,000 acres of bear habitat, mainly in Montana.

The Blackrock/Spread Creek deal is the first in which Vital Ground has helped to buy out grazing permits.

The group's executive director, Tina Quayle, says the deal provided great "bang for the buck" in meeting Vital Ground's goal of preserving habitat and linking fragmented habitats with migratory corridors.

Indeed, Moody says the Blackrock/Spread Creek is "an important jumping off point" for expansion of grizzly populations to the south, into the Gros Ventre and Wind River mountain ranges.

It may even facilitate the bear's return to Utah, where the last grizzly was shot and killed in 1923.

Chris Servheen, grizzly bear recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, expects a bruin will wander into the Beehive State within the next 10 years.

"Bears are continuing to increase and reoccupy habitat and they are doing it really well."