

St. Marie: A Praire Town Survival Story

MONTANA

MAGAZINE

November | December 2008

a work in progress

Big Sky

It's a resort, but is
it a community?

A Spiritual Journey to the Sweet Grass Hills

Robin Selvig: Montana Hoops Legend

Bob Hayes is in it for the long haul

Grizzly Woman

Most people try to avoid grizzly bears. USGS biologist Kate Kendall has spent most of her career looking for them. She recently invited me to tag along with her and her team as they looked for bear sign along the North Fork of the Flathead River.

"Hey bear!" she shouts periodically, as we make our way along a remote trail.

She's wearing a heavy pack, but moves with the easy gait of someone who has spent her life in the woods. She picks huckleberries without breaking stride, calls out the names of plants for my benefit, and steps nimbly over the blown-down logs that frequently block our path. Suddenly she stops.

"This is what we're looking for," Kendall says, pointing to a medium-sized lodgepole pine. "A rub tree. We

believe the bears use these trees as a sort of chemical signpost, a way of communicating their presence to other bears."



To inexperienced eyes, the tree looks the same as any other, but she points out the bare dirt at its base, the broken branches, the claw marks. She plucks off a hair and shows it to me.

"See that?" she asks. "Brown with a silver tip. Almost certainly a grizzly."

Kendall recently published the results of her enormously ambitious population study of grizzly bears in the Northern Rockies, an area that included Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall Wilderness. The study found that there are 765 grizzlies in northwest Montana, the highest documented number in three decades.

That project used hair samples—34,000 of them—for DNA analysis. Today, however, the crew is looking for a good rub tree where they can set up a remote video camera. They have already captured remarkable footage from other cameras set up in northern Montana, showing grizzlies and black bears, as well as wolves, moose, wolverines and a variety of other wildlife.

"Basically," says Kendall, "the video footage helps fill in the gaps in our knowledge about bear behavior. It shows us what bears do in the woods when we're not around."

To demonstrate, she leans against the tree, rubs her back against it, and reaches over her head as if to claw the bark. "I guess you are looking at someone who has had bears on her mind for a long time," she says, with a laugh.

Kendall didn't always want to be a biologist, and wasn't always interested in bears. Growing up in Falls Church, Virginia, she was more interested in cheerleading and sports. Now, her name comes up whenever grizzlies are mentioned. Her DNA project was by far the most

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Kate Kendall



extensive study of its kind ever undertaken. It even drew the attention of presidential candidate Sen. John McCain, who has used it as an example of wasteful government spending. Kendall refuses to take the bait when asked about McCain, but finally says, in a measured tone: "It might be difficult for people to realize what we accomplished. This is one of only two viable populations of grizzlies in the lower 48. Until our study, we had no baseline data for the entire ecosystem. Our study area was 8 million acres—the size of Maryland and Delaware combined. The terrain is extremely rugged and remote. We completed our project at a cost of 25 cents an acre."

Back at her office later that day, Kendall talks about her career, about the feeling of satisfaction at what she and her team accomplished. "I could have enjoyed doing research on just about any animal," she says. "But grizzly bears—my God, what amazing animals they are! They're so intelligent, and have such individualistic behaviors. We spent so much time and effort and money bringing them back from the verge of oblivion here in the lower 48, but we've still been in the dark about so many aspects of how they live."

Until her study, that is.

"It turns out that there are many more grizzlies here than anyone suspected," she says. "And we now know so much more about them. And we're so much better positioned to manage them in the future. And that is important. Because grizzlies are the embodiment of something, I believe, that is crucial to who we are, and to our survival."

Early in her career, working in Yellowstone, Kendall and her field partner were charged by a sow grizzly. The bear came to within an inch of her partner, then wheeled and charged Kendall, stopping a few feet away. Finally the bear turned and went back to her cub. I ask if the experience made her rethink her career choice.

"Are you kidding?" she says. "If something like that doesn't make you feel alive and connected to the world, then I don't know what will." **M**

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