



Final Range Riding and Wildlife Report 2021



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“Striving to preserve traditional ranching as a way of life in the Centennial Valley, and to maintain quality open space, wildlife habitat, water quality, and wildlife migration corridors as they exist today for future generations.”

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Sarah, Erika, and Brooke with some of their faithful sidekicks.

Range riding

We had a productive 2021 range riding season in the Centennial Valley (CV) last summer. We were fortunate to have a great crew consisting of Range Riders Sarah Malarik and Brooke Blackburn, and Wildlife Coordinator Erika Nunlist. We were also fortunate to keep working with our same producers, partners, and community members who really help keep this program running.

During the 2021 season, we continued working towards our program goals of reducing unconfirmed cattle losses, mitigating conflict, and disseminating information to the community. Range Riders were out riding around 100 days throughout our season. On the days we weren't riding cattle, we were checking game cameras, doing vehicle and equipment maintenance, or keeping up on our data collection.

Similar to last year, we helped monitor 9 herds belonging to 6 different producers. On average, we logged an average of 38 Range Rider-days per producer. During our efforts, we covered around 300,000-acres of country. From our time out monitoring cattle, Range Riders recorded more than 100 observations on cattle health, infrastructure or other items that were reported to producers.

Overall, there were 125 losses reported by producers (a large proportion of these were from an unfortunate poisonous plant event early in the season). For a detailed breakdown of losses over the past 5 years, please see Table 1. Of all the losses, 26 were located and reported by the Range Riders, including 4 confirmed depredations.

Table 1. Reported cattle losses since 2017 broken down by loss type.

Year	Number of reported losses	<u>Loss type</u>		<u>Breakdown of confirmed losses</u>		
		Unknown	Known	Confirmed depredation	Suspected depredation	Other known or suspected causes
2017	73	34	39	3	3	35
2018	68	13	55	4	2	49
2019	75	6	69	5	2	62
2020	107	15	92	3	6	83
2021	125	19	106	8	8	90

Total losses were up this year, but like last year, this was largely because of one poisoning event. We hope that the poisonous plants are in less abundance this upcoming season! In response to these terrible events, we have increased our knowledge on poisonous plants and factors that affect poison conditions (i.e. drought, big precipitation events, etc.) to help producers keep an eye on the pasture conditions prior to and while cattle are present. Following the poisoning event, there were concerns that the high density of carcasses would attract concentrated grizzly bear activity presenting human safety concerns. We

were thankful that the producer, landowner, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), and Range Riders were able to work together and respond quickly to remove most of the carcasses. Although we hope this doesn't happen again soon, it was an opportunity to see what kind of resources and helping hands are available for quick reaction to this kind of situation.

Our producers reported a total of 8 confirmed depredations and an additional 8 suspected depredations this year. Most of these were grizzly bear related, although there was 1 confirmed wolf depredation. Locations of higher depredation activity was like previous years, primarily in the north-central and far eastern portions of the valley. Nearly all the depredations happened from August 1 – September 15, which is also consistent with previous years. With this in mind, you can be sure we will be busy riding, working with producers, and doing whatever we can reduce depredations during this time period (and throughout the whole season) next summer!

One tool that we've seen great success with in the last two years is a portable electric-mesh wire bear fence. We use it on carcasses that are suspected depredations to preserve the carcasses from further scavenging until Wildlife Services can perform an inspection. On one carcass last summer, we documented around 6 different bears deterred from scavenging in one night. We also loaned the bear fence to one of our producers for about a month, and they also saw success using it. We hope to attain several more of these fences, so they can be loaned out to folks who might need them throughout the season.

We thank all the participants for their involvement, constructive feedback, and interest in the program this past season. We also thank all our partners and community members for their support and interest in the program. This program wouldn't be what it is today without all of you! Thank you!



Erika inspecting a calf carcass that turned out to be a confirmed wolf kill.



Grizzly bear about to get shocked by electric fence while trying to access a carcass.

Wildlife

As in previous years, Range Riders monitored wildlife activity through range riding and tracking, game cameras and community reports. We had a total of 32 game cameras out on the landscape from mid-May through late-October. Twenty of these cameras were placed in semi-permanent locations and the remaining 12 were used at additional areas of interest such as carcasses. Our cameras logged 2,362 wildlife events throughout the season. We were also thankful to receive 21 wildlife reports from community members. Range Riders and the cameras cannot capture the entire Valley each day, so community reports and support is extremely valuable to understand how wildlife use the CV. The following sections review the wildlife activity observed during the 2021 season.

Grizzly bears— Across all methods, CVA documented 88 grizzly bear observations. This included 61 CVA game camera events, 13 Range Rider observations (4 sightings, 9 track/scat observations), and 14 community reports (8 sightings, 6 track/scat observations). From the CVA game cameras only, we estimated 26 unique grizzly bears throughout the CV (Table 2). When community reports and range riding efforts were taken into consideration, our estimates increased up to 29 unique grizzly bears. Our estimates include approximately 3 subadults, 21 lone individuals, and 2 sow with cub family groups. Although activity was dispersed throughout the CV, we observed the most consistent activity in the north-central and far eastern portions of the valley.

Table 2. Estimated number of unique grizzly bears documented by Range Riders, 2017-2021

Year	Grizzly bears
2017	12
2018	15
2019	20
2020	20
2021	26

Black bears— Throughout the season, we documented 14 black bear observations, including 7 community and Range Rider observations and 7 game camera events. Observations included one large boar and a handful of lone individuals. Black bear sightings were scattered around the valley with no particular use pattern to report.

Wolves— We documented 31 wolf observations, including 3 community reports, 21 game camera events, and 7 Range Rider observations. From these reports, we estimate that there were around 16 unique individuals documented spread across 2-3 different packs. The most consistent wolf activity was scattered across the eastern half of the valley.



Large black bear at a carcass.



Grizzly bear and wolf share a carcass.

Mountain Lions— There were no mountain lion observations documented this season. Due to their reclusive nature, we usually have very few mountain lion observations and this year we didn't get any. Better luck next year!

*Moose**—Moose are a common sight throughout the CV, especially if your eyes are trained to pick out their dark figures in willow-bottom areas. In total, we had 39 moose observations in 2021 (31 game camera events, 3 community reports, and 5 Range Rider observations). Moose were seen throughout the Valley, but most commonly observed along Elk Lake Road and between Upper and Lower Red Rock Lakes. Observation events included 11 cows, 2 calves, 11 bull moose, and 15 unknown adults.

*Elk**— We documented many elk throughout the CV in 2021. We had 241 elk events on our game cameras throughout the summer. Early in the summer, most of our observations were near the valley floor or low foothills coinciding with elk calving season (mid-May to June). The highest calving activity (based on number of cow/calf pairs we observed) was in the big basin sagebrush areas in the northeastern part of the valley. It is important to be extra diligent and bear-aware in elk calving areas because the newborns are an attractive food source for grizzly bears. As the season progressed, elk migrated to higher elevation foothills and mixed conifer forests.

*Deer**— We have both mule deer and white-tailed deer in the CV. We had 1,053 deer events on our game cameras throughout the summer. The mule deer that we observed were most often in the sagebrush foothills or mixed-conifer forests surrounding the Valley throughout the season. White-tailed deer also reside in the CV, and most of our observations were in willow-bottom areas.

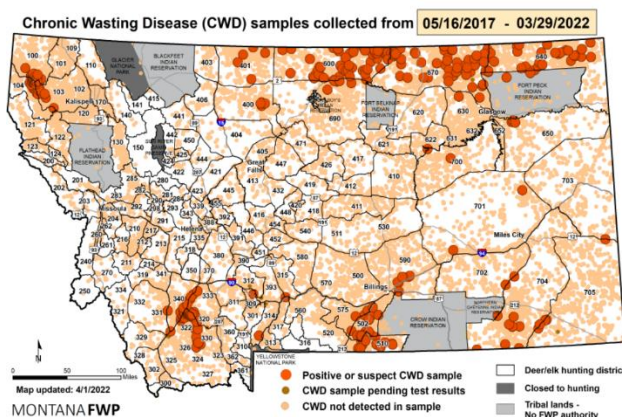


CVA game camera

Pronghorn— Pronghorn were a common sight throughout the valley floor throughout the summer months. We had 288 pronghorn events on our game cameras throughout the summer. This included some great photos of larger pronghorn groups moving and migrating throughout the valley.

Other species— We collected a lot of great pictures and observations of many other species. Some of the highlights included badgers, eagles, sandhill cranes, coyotes, fox, rabbits, owls, marmots, porcupines, songbirds, numerous avian species including eagles, turkey vultures, sandhill cranes, owls, and skunks. It is always fun to see what our cameras capture throughout the summer. We

hope you enjoy seeing it as much as we did.



*Species vulnerable to Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD). CWD is a contagious and fatal neurological disease that affects deer, elk, and moose. CWD has not been detected in the Centennial Valley yet; however, it has been detected just north in the Ruby Valley. The map to the right shows sampling efforts and positive CWD samples. For more information on CWD, visit fwp.mt.gov/cwd.

Concluding thoughts

We had a great 2021 season and are thankful for the continued community support of our Range Riding and Wildlife Program. We hope you find the reports and information that we share informative and valuable to our community here in the CV and surrounding areas. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please contact us. Also, community wildlife reports are very valuable in helping us all understand wildlife use in the valley. Please consider reporting your wildlife sightings (big or small!) to Erika this coming season. Thank you!

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Funding and Support

THANK YOU to the following entities for their support this season:

Equipment and horse donations:

- Lee Martinell Company loaned trail cameras, a horse and horse trailer, and donated hay.
- Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge loaned trail cameras, radios, a horse trailer, horse pasture, and a UTV. They also donated wilderness first aid training to CVA staff.
- The Nature Conservancy donated pasture grass for horse feed, electric fencing and shop materials, and winter equipment storage.
- Ruby Dell Ranch donated hay.

Monetary donations and grants:

- Cross Charitable Foundation
- Defenders of Wildlife
- Greater Yellowstone Coalition
- Livestock Loss Board
- Ruby Dell Ranch
- Raffety Cattle Company
- Grayling Centennial LLC
- Allan & Robin Mackenzie
- Double C Family Foundation
- J Bar L Ranch
- USFWS Grazing Fees
- Allen & Yvonne Martinell
- Western Sustainability Exchange
- Heart of the Rockies Initiative



A fine day to move cattle.