



REDUCING CONFLICT WITH GRIZZLY BEARS, WOLVES AND ELK

A Western Landowners' Guide





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Western Landowners Alliance is deeply grateful for the landowners and ranchers, resource managers and others listed below whose collective knowledge and hands-on experience created the substance of this guide. This guide is a compilation of contributions from each of these individuals—a resource created by landowners, for landowners.

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This guide has been produced by and for landowners and practitioners constructively engaged in one of the greatest conservation challenges of our time—how to share and manage a wild, working landscape that sustains both people and wildlife.

Western Landowners Alliance is deeply grateful to the many individuals and organizations that have made this guide possible. The knowledge and insight offered here have not been lightly earned. Each of the contributors brings a wealth of real-world and often hard-won experience in ranching and wildlife management. Some ride daily among grizzlies. Others spend nights on the range among wolves. Out of necessity and interest, they are innovators and close observers of wildlife, livestock and people. They know first-hand the difference between what looks good on paper and what works on the ground.

The resources and best management practices in the guide have also been developed and informed by dedicated researchers, wildlife agencies and nonprofit organizations, a number of which are referenced in this guide. From the landowner perspective, these groups deserve great credit and credibility for seeking out solutions that work for both people and wildlife.

The Western Landowners Alliance is indebted to National Geographic Society for making this project possible, and to the wise guidance and unfailing support of Rick Danvir, a founding member, advisor and the principal author of this guide. Rick spent 30 years as a wildlife biologist and manager for the Desert Ranches, where he pioneered many strategies to integrate wildlife conservation and profitable ranching.

This guide will be successful if the knowledge and perspectives it contains help reduce conflict and prevent losses of both livestock and wildlife. We hope also that it will open new ways of thinking and of relating to land, wildlife and one another.

Lesli Allison

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Introduction

Historically, the relationship between ranchers and large carnivores — native predators capable of killing and eating livestock — in the western United States has been predominantly adversarial. Ranchers and, more recently, government-sponsored programs employed poisoning, trapping, culling, shooting and eventually aerial gunning to reduce predator numbers and conflict.

As a result of these efforts, the gray wolf was extirpated in the lower forty-eight states and the grizzly bear (brown bear) was reduced to a small population in the Northern Rockies. Black bear and mountain lion (cougar) fared better, maintaining populations in most western states. Coyotes fared best, seeming to thrive in the face of persecution, nearly doubling their range to inhabit the eastern as well as western United States.

Curtailed use of poisons, better management by state wildlife agencies and recovery efforts through the Endangered Species Act (ESA) have expanded the ranges and increased the abundance of all five of these large carnivore species. The ESA has been effective for several of these species; as a consequence of federal listing and recovery efforts, wolf and grizzly bear management is being returned to state wildlife agencies, along with that of black bears and mountain lions. Without ESA



Photo: Jonita Sommers

protections and despite the fact that coyote hunting is largely unregulated, coyotes are thriving both in the wild and in urban settings across the country.

The recovery of large ungulates (native hoofed grazers and browsers), including Rocky Mountain elk (hereafter, elk), is also a conservation success story. Elk were once hunted until only a small population remained within Yellowstone National Park, but thanks to efforts by nonprofit organizations (NGOs) and state wildlife agencies, they have repopulated the western states and several eastern states as well. Other large ungulates that were similarly over-hunted by the turn of the century, including bison, bighorn sheep, mule deer and pronghorn, have also recovered to varying degrees.

As populations of elk, wolves and grizzly bears have increased in the West, conflicts with rural farmers, ranchers and other landowners have also increased. Agricultural challenges from elk and other ungulates include crop depredation, forage competition and disease concerns. Wolf conflict primarily involves livestock depredation. Bears (both grizzly and black) are omnivorous and attracted to a wide range of food sources. When grizzly bears' wide-ranging foraging habits bring them in contact with humans, safety becomes a concern. Grizzly bears may aggressively defend cubs and food sources from perceived threats.

What is the role private lands and ranchers play in maintaining habitat for populations of large carnivores and ungulates? Why should these animals have to co-exist with farmers, ranchers or other rural landowners? Because much of the land that once provided continuous wildlife habitat in

the valleys and foothills of the Rockies has been developed into cities, towns and residences, the remaining lower elevation, intermixed private and publicly owned working lands provide important seasonal habitat and key migration corridors. Despite the conflicts with rural agriculture, large carnivores and ungulates are generally better suited to rural working lands than to urban or residential areas. The private and publicly owned working landscapes of the American West are the last best place—indeed perhaps the last chance—for these large species to exist in the lower 48 states.

Wyoming rancher and state legislator Albert Sommers explains it this way:

It is so important for people to understand the critical role private ranches play in connecting landscapes together. We need to support programs like the Farm Bill to help private ranchers with conflict mitigation practices, fence modifications and conservation easements. For their part, ranchers need to learn what wildlife need on the landscape they are stewarding.

Big game migrations wouldn't exist without ranching as an industry that maintains open space. If you have land churn (a high rate of ownership turnover) in the marketplace, it's less likely that the landscape will remain intact. Keeping ranching



Photo: Jonita Sommers

“Keeping ranching economically viable is the best way to keep wildlife habitats connected and available for wildlife. Working ranches are generally a better place for big wildlife species than in housing developments.”

—Wyoming rancher and state legislator Albert Sommers

economically viable is the best way to keep wildlife habitats connected and available for wildlife. Working ranches are generally a better place for big wildlife species than in housing developments.

Winter in the Northern Rockies is tough for both domestic and native ungulates. Stockpiling forage, whether in bales or in pasture, is essential for maintaining livestock until grass grows again the following year. However, stockpiling forage for fall, winter and spring use isn't possible if elk consume it all. Too many elk can greatly reduce a producer's flexibility and profitability. When elk are trailed to their winter grounds by wolves or when they are carriers of brucellosis, the risks to producers are compounded. Similarly, getting cattle off irrigated meadows and out on range away from the home ranch isn't economically feasible if the young calves are eaten by grizzly bears and wolves. Livestock depredation by carnivores impacts producers' profitability, together with their ability to maintain and manage their associated private lands.

Federal and state regulation has played a key role in the conservation of large carnivores and ungulates in the western United States. At the same time, ongoing collaborative efforts between producers; landowners; local, state and federal governments and agencies; and NGOs are also needed to sustain their populations by mitigating conflict and integrating wildlife and agriculture on western working landscapes. Locally based, collaborative working groups comprising diverse interests are effective in developing and communicating sound solutions, drafting policies and securing funding assistance for conflict mitigation. Producers and landowners are proactively testing and implementing new technological solutions as well as dusting off old tricks. They are learning from and sharing knowledge with their Old World counterparts, some of whom have continuously farmed and herded livestock among wolves and bears for centuries. While not universally effective, in many cases practices such as carcass removal, electrified crop fields and calving pastures, livestock guardian

dogs, range riding, livestock herding and predator removal have significantly reduced conflict.

This guide is a compilation of landowner contributions acquired through one-on-one interviews, landowner meetings and group discussions hosted by the Western Landowners Alliance (WLA) in 2017-2018. Contributors describe the use and assess the effectiveness of wildlife conflict mitigation strategies and practices. Additional web and print resources are referenced to provide more in-depth information where necessary.

The ranchers' and farmers' practices and lessons learned presented here include the value of collaborative discussions, real listening and developing shared goals with other groups and individuals interested in the conservation of large carnivores and ungulates. They are intended to help owners and managers of private working landscapes mitigate conflict and coexist with large wildlife by 1) summarizing scientific understanding of key aspects of ungulate and carnivore ecology and behavior; 2) summarizing conflict mitigation strategies, tactics and programs available to landowners; and 3) assessing their effectiveness through interviews and case studies. Contributing landowners and others share their thoughts on the effectiveness of strategies and programs and discuss additional knowledge, policy and funding needs. The guide also describes and references some of the programs available through state wildlife agencies and NGOs to provide assistance, incentivize coexistence and mitigate conflict.

WLA offers this guide to help ranchers, farmers and other private land managers better understand the approaches and practices currently used by fellow landowners to mitigate carnivore and ungulate conflict. We hope that it will help inform discussions to improve policies and funding for conflict mitigation. As landowners, we believe that the successful conservation of large carnivores, ungulates and working landscapes are closely linked—wildlife and rural livelihoods equally depend on healthy working landscapes.



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