

# Grizzlies Were Raiding Montana Farms. Then Came Some Formidable Dogs.

Bears have recently acquired a fondness for the good eating found around grain bins on Montana's plains. That's a big problem for humans and grizzlies alike.



A livestock guardian dog and a grizzly bear. Ryan Rauscher/Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

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By **Catrin Einhorn**

Catrin Einhorn made friends with large dogs in Teton, Pondera and Toole Counties in Montana while reporting this article.

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The grizzly bears feasted on piles of spilled wheat and barley. They broke into grain bins. They helped themselves to apples from family orchards. Sometimes they massacred chickens or picked off calves.

Once nearly eradicated from the lower 48 United States, grizzlies are growing in population and spreading onto Montana's plains, where they had not roamed in perhaps a century.

In their travels, they've acquired a fondness for the good eating to be found in farmyards.



Bears scavenged for food near grain bins and a trap, at right in the background, that was set for them on Steve and Julie Ahrens's farm near Shelby, Mont. Wesley Sarmiento/Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks



A bear that broke into a grain bin on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation near Valier, Mont. Wesley Sarmiento/Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Blackfeet Fish and Wildlife



Spilled grain and signs of a bear. Wesley Sarmiento/Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

This is a grave problem for both humans and bears. The safety of farmers and their families is at stake, and so is the survival of the bears, which could get themselves killed by threatening people's lives and livelihoods.

Enter the bear dogs. This one's name is Patton, and he's a Turkish Boz shepherd.



Farms are [not the only places where grizzlies are showing up](#), and all those bears, understandably, have humans very worried.

As conflicts have increased around the state, so have calls to remove the bears from protection under the Endangered Species Act, including through current legislation in Congress aimed at a population of bears to the south, around Yellowstone National Park.

Removing federal protection would let the state hold a hunting season for grizzlies, which many Montanans see as necessary.

“There are too many bears,” said Mike Leys, who owns Patton and runs a farm near Choteau, Mont. He said he wished farmers could shoot problem bears that come on their property.

But amid the controversy, dogs are an important strategy in a complicated quest for coexistence, according to a growing number of researchers and farmers. By keeping the bears away from farms, dogs can help prevent conflicts before they start.

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“The bear dogs are there to basically change the calculus in the bear’s head,” said Wesley Sarmento, a former bear manager for Montana’s wildlife agency. “To switch it from these farms being a place where they’re getting benefits, to being now a place of risk.”

Mr. Sarmento, whose job was to keep humans and bears safe by keeping them apart, found his way to the dogs out of desperation. The calls and texts from farmers wouldn’t stop, and nothing seemed to work to keep the bears away.

Among the frequent callers were Steve and Julie Ahrens, who’ve been farming wheat, barley and chickpeas outside Shelby for more than 40 years. Before that, Mr. Ahrens’s grandfather worked the same land. They had never seen a bear on the farm before 2019.

By June 2020, they had four grizzlies visit in a single week.

The Ahrensens would watch with a mix of wonder and horror as bears ambled around just yards from their home, often nosing around by the grain bins.







Video via Julie Ahrens

“They figured out if they just pushed on the door, they could get the grain to trickle out,” Mrs. Ahrens said of an older bin farther from the house. “So we called it the self-feeder.”

Mrs. Ahrens stopped taking her morning walks, and the couple grew fearful of letting their grandchildren play outside.

They texted Mr. Sarmiento a lot, and he tried his best to dissuade the bears. Here’s what didn’t work: Cleaning up grain spills (all but impossible on a working farm). Trapping and releasing near Glacier National Park (the bears came back). Alarms on the grain bins (the bears ignored them). Electric fencing around the bins (it kept the bears out but was a big nuisance for the farmworkers).

Then there was the question of a grove of apple trees, another lure for bears. As a child, Mr. Ahrens had helped his grandfather plant the trees. He just couldn’t chop them down.

And that was at just one of several bear-plagued farms in Mr. Sarmiento’s coverage area. At Stick Leg Ranch near Valier, a bear killed dozens of chickens, earning it the nickname Chick-fil-A Bear. And to the south, outside Choteau, Mr. Leys’s young grandson was playing outside when he told his dad he’d found a new “puppy.” It was a cub stuck in a fence. The child’s father, Aaron Leys, scooped up the boy and ran inside, all while the mother bear watched from a short distance.

#### Editors' Picks



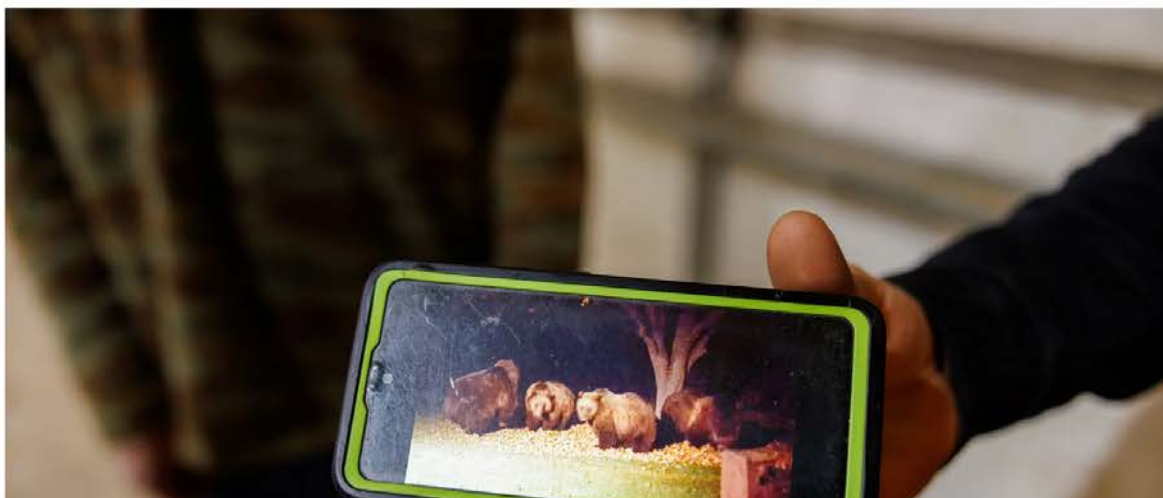
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A Maple Syrup Farmer Lands on the Upper East Side for His Next Chapter





Aaron Leys showed a photo of four grizzlies feeding on apples in his family's backyard. John Stember for The New York Times

"We really needed a solution that would be long-term," Mr. Sarmento said.

Then, in 2020, he heard from a farmer whose bear problems suddenly improved after his son brought home a stray dog.

It was a breed of livestock guardian dog. They're put out to live with sheep, poultry and other farm animals to protect them from coyotes and other predators. But this dog was doing something a little different: Living with people and chasing bears off the property, even mothers with cubs, which are notoriously dangerous.

Mr. Sarmento had long wondered whether dogs played a role in keeping predators away from Native American communities, and he knew large bear-chasing dogs were bred in Europe and Asia centuries ago.

"With the loss of carnivores over the last 200 years, we've completely forgot about these techniques and these breeds," Mr. Sarmento said. "And now with the recovery of a lot of these predators, we're having to relearn these ancient practices that have been long forgotten."





He partnered with Julie Young, an ecology professor at Utah State University, to investigate whether dogs could really keep bears out of farmyards. They decided on three Turkish breeds, all shepherds: the Kangal, the Boz and the Anatolian. The dogs cost about \$700 each, paid for by the study.

As lethal as grizzly bears can be, they generally prefer to avoid prey that's not easy to kill, experts say, which is why dogs can drive them away. "They're just like, 'OK, never mind, you're barking at me, I'll leave,'" Dr. Young said.

Mr. Sarmiento needed to recruit farmers to participate in the study, but at first many were skeptical. Would the dogs hurt children? How would they get along with their other pets? Then, there was the responsibility of caring for another animal. Ultimately, Mr. Sarmiento found four farmers willing to take dogs.

The Ahrensens were the first family to get one: Billy, a Kangal. The largest of the three breeds, he came in a horse trailer.



Mrs. Ahrens greeted Billy on the day he arrived. Photo via Julie Ahrens

The first few weeks were rocky. Billy ranged far and wide, crossing highways and annoying a neighbor, who accused him of stealing chickens and threatened to shoot him. But an electric collar kept him close to home, solving that problem. When Billy sensed a bear, he would stand with tail raised, barking loud and low.

From the get-go, Billy was sweet with the grandkids, Mrs. Ahrens said, letting them lie and climb on him. And while Billy's job keeps him sleeping outside on nightly bear patrol, he loves to hang out in

him sleeping outside on highly bear patrol, he loves to hang out in the house.

“He wants to be a lap dog,” Mrs. Ahrens said, but he weighs 180 pounds. “It’s just funny. He’s very lovey.”

For years after Billy arrived, the Ahrensens didn’t see a single bear inside the farmyard. But he’s getting older now, with a hip problem. This spring, a mother with cubs showed up on the outer edge of the yard. Still, the Ahrensens credit Billy with keeping the bears from coming closer.

“They can’t turn around every bear, but he’d lay down his life before the bear got to the house,” Mr. Ahrens said.



Mr. and Mrs. Ahrens with Billy and their goldendoodle, Bella. John Stember for The New York Times



The Ahrensens' granddaughter, Charlotte, with Billy. Photo via Julie Ahrens

During the study by Dr. Young and Mr. Sarmento, the four farms



that received dogs saw [an almost 90 percent drop](#) in GPS detections of collared bears within roughly 1,000 feet of the farmstead. And there was a 58-fold reduction in camera-trap detections of bears compared with neighboring farms that did not get dogs. It was a tiny study, so more research is needed. But the farmers say they're convinced.

At Mr. Leys's farm and ranch, where bears have been showing up since the 1980s and where the cub was stuck in the fence, Patton stands on hay bales to survey the property. Bears still frequent the area, but he mostly keeps them out of the farmyard. And he raises the alarm when they come close. Since Patton's arrival in 2022, Mr. Leys said he'd lost only one calf to a bear, down from a few each year before that.

"The bears pretty much ruled before he showed up," Mr. Leys said.

Now Patton, who is also good with kids and readily rolls over for belly rubs from visitors, makes Mr. Leys feel safe in the farmyard. Without the dog, he said, the family wouldn't be able to leave home at night.



Mike Leys and Patton on the farm in May. "When a bear is around, he goes nuts," Mr. Leys said. John Stember for The New York Times







"We love bears, but we also love that we now feel safer and that we're not constantly worrying," said Jennie Becker, seen here with Astra. John Stemmer for The New York Times

And at Stick Leg Ranch, two Anatolian shepherds, Zia and Astra, have become the indispensable "bear girls." Joining a vibrant young family led by Seth and Jennie Becker, the dogs lounge in their own beds on the porch when they're not roaming the land.

"We get to be ourselves again," Mr. Becker said. "They eliminated all that stress, that dark cloud."

Feeding them is expensive, Mrs. Becker chimed in, but they get meat scraps from the butcher and scavenge what's left behind by hunters in the area.

"We're trying to save the bears and save ourselves," she said, and the dogs make that possible.



Zia and Astra put the run on a nighttime intruder at Stick Leg Ranch. Video via Jennie Becker