

To Save the Bears, We Need to Save the Forests

American Forests Endangered Western Forests Initiative

(NAPSA)—Josh Westerhold, 36, is a grizzly bear hunter. His weapon is a camera. And over the years, he's shot grizzlies by the dozens.

Despite growing up in Cody, Wyo., Josh did not catch grizzly fever until his college days during hikes and mountain trips with friends. It was then that he learned how and where to find the threatened bears by talking with hunting outfitters, U.S. Forest Service members and fish and game experts. The key piece of advice was to go where the bears go for food. In the Mountain West, this meant at or above the timberline, as grizzlies feed on seeds from whitebark pines growing there.

Whitebark pine seeds are essential for many birds and animals. For bears, they are a rich, preferred food source that provide a high calorie content — more calories per pound than chocolate — that is vital for hibernation. In bumper crop seasons for whitebark cones, they can dominate the food habits of bears for the entire next year. In bad years for whitebark pine, according to Josh, you can fairly accurately predict the increased number of incidents of grizzly and human interactions, as the bears travel down the mountains for food.

With this knowledge, Josh began finding grizzlies — lots of them — and took to photography to illustrate these amazing sights. “I kept telling people about all the stuff I was seeing, and I realized I needed to document it. I was witnessing things like 35 grizzlies in one place — males, females and cubs all together. Because of the abundant food source, they're pretty tolerant of each other. It is very unusual.”

But things are changing in the West, including in the iconic Greater Yellowstone Area, Josh says. “Over the course of the last decade, I've seen the progressive deterioration of the forest. Not just the whitebark pine, but the whole upper canopy, right at the timberline. In certain drainages, more trees are dead than alive.”

What Josh is seeing, according



A Josh Westerhold photo of a grizzly bear in snow

to Dr. Bob Keane, American Forests Science Advisory Board member and U.S. Forest Service research ecologist, is the combined impact of mountain pine beetles, white pine blister rust and excessive past fire suppression. “We are seeing an urgent situation in the process of turning catastrophic,” says Dr. Keane. “In the last decade of warmer summers and winters, the decline of this critical ecosystem has greatly accelerated in all parts of whitebark pine's range.” It is estimated that 41.7 million acres of pine forests in more than 10 states are dying due to abnormally large mountain pine beetle outbreaks. These affected forests contain the headwaters of some of America's most prominent rivers, which serve as major water resources for more than 33 million people in 16 states, including cities like Los Angeles.

The whitebark pine is a keystone species critical to the health of these at-risk, high-elevation ecosystems. The American Forests Endangered Western Forests initiative is a collaborative program designed to find solutions to and address these threats. Funded in part by a U.S. Forest Service grant, the initiative has created a partnership between American Forests, federal agencies, local communities and other nonprofits to protect and restore forest ecosystems in the West devastated by these threats. The initial phase



Dying whitebark pines

of the initiative is focused on the Greater Yellowstone Area by planting 100,000 naturally disease-resistant whitebark pines and protecting another 10,000 with pheromone patches. The program is supporting researchers and scientists testing the best techniques for rehabilitation; managers implementing these restoration actions on the ground; and the public learning about these forests, their threats and the level of damage. The organization has a track record of success in these areas and has planted 125,000 whitebark pines since 2010.

“We are at a critical point in ensuring the future of these beloved forests,” says Dr. Keane. “With new research and management techniques, we hope to restore whitebark pine across most of its range and, in turn, create resilient landscapes that can weather future climate change, but time is of the essence.”

And not just for the forests, but for the species that make their homes there. The Greater Yellowstone Area is home to approximately half of the threatened grizzlies found in the lower 48 states.

“I love grizzlies because they are what make the wilderness wild, but they're a threatened species,” says Josh. “The survival of the bears is an indicator of the health of the environment and how we've taken care of the forests.”

To learn more about the American Forests Endangered Western Forests initiative, visit the website www.americanforests.org/EWF or call 202-737-1944. Please support the work of this initiative and help save our western forests. Your contribution can make a critical difference.