Pine: Trees important food source for bears

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try to protect it.

"I read that they were going to have this tour, and since I didn't know anything about whitebark pine I signed up," says Julie Saylor as she picks her way among the thick, green clumps of bear grass covering the ground. "It's a great opportunity to go on a guided hike. I knew whitebark pine was in danger and wanted to know why."

As Milburn and the group move among the forest, she notes that whitebark pine plays an important ecological role. The pines regulate runoff by slowing snowmelt, reduce soil erosion by growing shortly after fires and other disturbances, and provide cones that are an important high-energy food source for birds and mammals, ranging from grizzly bears to Clark's nuthatch.

"It's the last tree that grows before you get to the rocks at treeline," Milburn says. "But it has four threats."

In no particular order, she lists climate change, mountain pine beetle infestations, historic fire suppression and blister rust as dangers posed to the slow-growing whitebark pines. Limber pines and Douglas fir trees are crowding them, and once they tower over the whitebark pines they no longer have the sunshine needed to thrive.

Their nature also works against them. Unlike lodgepole pines, which can start producing cones when they're 7 years old, whitebark pines' cones don't come out until they're 50 or older. The cones take two years to mature.

Whitebark pine is experiencing an overall long-term pattern of decline, even in areas originally thought to be mostly

Elka Wiley *Independent Record*

A small but healthy whitebark pine sapling was specifically planted on the shady side of a burned tree trunk on the Helena National Forest near Stemple Pass by the U.S. Forest Service. The keystone species, found at high elevations, is proposed for listing as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

dictions indicate a continuing downward trend within the majority of its range.

"While individual trees may persist, given current trends the Service anticipates whitebark pine forests will likely become extirpated and their ecosystem functions will be lost in the foreseeable future," the federal agency notes. "On a landscape scale, the species appears to be in danger of extinction, potentially within as few as two to three generations."

Milburn walks along an old four-wheel-drive road, and stops next to an area that was relatively clear cut in 1997, with loggers leaving only the whitebark pines.

"It's not so pretty to look at, but we wanted to liberate the whitebark that were in here," she says. "The next phase, if this remains successful, is to come in with chain saws and thin them out. It doesn't perfectly emulate a fire, because so many whitebark seedlings would have been killed also, but I would call it a success. I don't think clear cutting an opening road for a short distance before heading deep into the forest. Milburn points out the differences in the various tree species — lodgepoles are straight and narrow, subalpine firs have a few spindles sticking out from the trunk, and the whitebark have thick, heavy branches that shoot skyward almost from the ground up. Whitebarks also grow with five-needle clumps.

"The limber pines are mixed with the whitebarks, and they look almost identical except for the cones," Milburn said.

Stepping into the area burned by the Davis fire, she notes that it became a "stand replacing" fire, and as far as the eye can see almost all the trees here are burned to various shades of gray. Where some may see only destruction, Milburn said it's created an opportunity for regrowth.

"The fire knocked back the shade trees, and now it's been prepped to plant the small whitebark pines," Milburn said. "We plant them 12 to 15 feet apart in microsites — next to trees or logs to shade the

Milburn adds that she'll be happy if 40 to 50 percent of them survive. The Forest Service is new at planting whitebark pines; they're better with standard timber seedlings, where they have an 80 percent survival rate.

"Here's one of your trees," calls out Jeff Richards, who's discovered a 2-inch-tall seedling next to a downed log. Like Saylor, he was curious about whitebark pines after hearing how important they are to grizzly bear diets. "I know it's been dying off all over the West."

The group breaks out of the forest and walks past the Granite Butte fire lookout tower, then individuals head back to their vehicles. Along the way, Milburn stops at another "plus tree" that also has wire baskets surrounding the tips of its branches, and unabashedly acknowledges that this is her favorite whitebark pine tree.

"I think it's about 180 years old," Milburn says, gazing at its thick branches. "It's amazing."

Reporter Eve Byron: 447-4076 or eve.byron@

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