Restoration of Gray Wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains

By Ed Bangs
Former Wolf Recovery Coordinator
US Fish and Wildlife Service

President Theodore Roosevelt was ahead of his time in many respects, but his view of wolves as the "beast of waste and desolation" reflected that of most Americans in 1900. As a result of this widespread hatred, wolves were already well on their way to being deliberately exterminated from the lower 48 states. This attitude arrived with the first European settlers, and wolf bounties in the Plymouth colonies started in the 1620s. At that time there might have been nearly 400,000 wolves in what is now Mexico and the western United States. Ironically, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) got its start as the Biological Survey in the early 1900s, and its very first mission and funding from Congress was to eradicate wolves from the western U.S. By 1930 it had succeeded. In 1974 when wolves in the lower 48 states became listed under the Endangered Species Act (Act), only a few hundred in extreme northeastern Minnesota remained. As societal values changed, the USFWS's mandate from Congress switched from being the nation's primary wolf exterminator to being its lead wolf restorer.

2008 WOLF UPDATE

USFWS VIEWPOINT

Wolf hunting should be just as successful at promoting the conservation of wolf populations as other forms of hunting have been at helping to conserve elk, deer, mountain lion, and black bear populations.

Wolves have always evoked strong emotions in people. The two land mammals with the greatest natural distribution on earth were people and wolves, leading to a lengthy and close interaction—and a great deal of mythology. Generally, hunter-gatherer societies had very positive views of wolves—Brothers in the hunt, so to speak. They saw the wolf's family loyalty, hunting ability, beauty, endurance, and cunning as admirable traits which humans could benefit by mimicking. That changed when people began raising livestock. Domestication removes an animal's natural ability to defend itself and wild predators were a serious threat to anyone whose livelihood depended on livestock. The more people love domestic animals (or treat wild ungulates like livestock), the more they hate wolves. In addition, during the Middle Ages, people began to use wolves as the symbols for the darker side of human nature. Lessons about human moral values were passed from generation to generation through stories that used wolves as surrogates for dangerous or inappropriate human behavior. *Little Red Riding Hood* and *The Three Little Pigs* are among the most famous examples. We soon forgot about the analogy and moral lesson and just learned to dislike wolves even more.

Of course, it wasn't only wolves that were singled out for persecution or that suffered from neglect. By 1900 nearly every wildlife species in North America had been impacted by unregulated human use and several had become extinct. The restoration of ungulate populations and other game animals by sportsmen and state wildlife agencies (The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation) was one of the most remarkable achievements of wildlife management; without it, wolf restoration would be impossible. Native ungulate populations (deer, elk, etc.) that had been largely extirpated in the early 1900s, were restored throughout most of their historic range by the 1970s. However we should also not forget those earliest successes were often at the expense of large predators like bears, mountain lions, coyotes, and especially wolves. In 1970, several western states still had bounties on mountain lions and wolves. But the building body of knowledge from ungulate research and management also began to provide factual insights about predators. This new science-based information revealed a more positive image of wolves than the sinister one portrayed in folklore. The ultimate result of this fresh outlook by wildlife professionals, a more informed public, increasing urbanization, and the growing national concern for a host of environmental issues was that public attitudes about wolves changed dramatically. The restoration of wolves to the northern Rocky Mountains was just the latest step in the long progression of wildlife restoration and the ongoing national debate about what nature and wildness contributes to the quality of our American way of life.

There are three basic reasons to have wolves: 1) Their high symbolism to people. While wolves don't always make people's lives better, they always make life more interesting. 2) Personal enjoyment by experiencing wolves as part of an outdoor experience; and 3) Ecological restoration; everything in the Northern Hemisphere evolved with wolves as part of the equation. As the poet Robinson Jeffers recognized "What but the wolf's tooth whittled so fleet the limbs of the antelope.". For a scavenger, like a wolverine, eagle, raven, or bear, a wolf's howl is the dinner bell.

There are also four basic reasons to not have wolves: 1) Livestock depredation. 2) Competition with human hunters for surplus big game animals. 3) The negative symbolism of having wolves restored when your forefathers deliberately got rid of them is often mentioned by people. 4) While wolf attacks on people are amazingly rare, surveys indicate up to 20 percent of people are still afraid of wolves.

The history of wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming was similar to most areas in the world. Wolves and their wild prey like bison, elk, deer, sheep, and pronghorn were once plentiful. As settlers moved West, wildlife disappeared under the relentless abuse of subsistence and market hunting. Wildlife and wild habitat were replaced by livestock and crops, and all forms of wildlife, especially large predators, were persecuted. Wolves disappeared quickly because of the settler's almost pathological hatred of them and because wolves' large home ranges, natural low density, and susceptibility to poison made them the most vulnerable. By 1930 the wolf population in the northern Rockies had been exterminated.

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Every decade a few lone wolves from Canada would disperse into the northern Rockies but they still had no legal protection and were quickly killed. After Canada launched its wolf restoration efforts in the late 1960s, wolves began to reoccupy southern British Columbia and Alberta. In 1986, wolves that had dispersed from Canada denned in Glacier National Park and another pack denned on the adjacent Blackfeet Indian Reservation. In 1987 the first livestock depredation by wolves in recent times occurred. That controversy prompted the Reagan administration and USFWS Director Frank Dunkle (the former Director of Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks) to begin a wolf management program in Montana to monitor wolves, control problem wolves, initiate research on wolves and their impact to livestock and big game populations, and conduct public outreach. I came down from Alaska in 1988 to coordinate that program. As a result of natural range expansion and the combination of routine law enforcement and a comprehensive management program, by December 2007, there were about 230 wolves in northwestern Montana and northern Idaho (roughly that area west of I-15 and north of I-90).

One of the most common questions I get asked is "Why have wolves?" That question was being asked even as the last wolves in the western United States were being eliminated. A few people at that

time, including Aldo Leopold, the Father of modern wildlife management, was questioning whether wolves should be eliminated from some of the vast wild areas of the west including Yellowstone National Park where conflicts with livestock would be rare. His famous quote about watching the "fierce green fire dying" in the eyes of a wolf he had shot inferred his awakening toward the ecological benefit of predators: "I now suspect that just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does the mountain live in mortal fear of its deer. And perhaps with a better cause, for while a buck pulled down by wolves can be replaced in two or three years, a range pulled down by too many deer may fail of replacement in as many decades." Alas, there were too few voices and too much momentum, and wolves disappeared. However the concept never really went away especially for areas like Yellowstone National Park. In the 1960s, almost 10 years before wolves were listed under the Act, the National Park Service mentioned restoring wolves to Yellowstone. Local western politics, being what they were at that time, promptly put an end to any further agency discussion of such foolishness.

However, the concept of wolves in the world's first, and perhaps most famous national park, the Yellowstone wolf plan wasn't extinguished. The first northern Rocky Mountain wolf recovery plan, led by the state of Montana, was signed in 1980. It recommended that the best places for wolves in the northern Rockies were in Yellowstone and the large network of public land wilderness areas in central Idaho and western Montana. Once wolves began to naturally establish themselves in Glacier National Park, public awareness of possibly having wolves in Yellowstone National Park began to build even further. The 1987 revised northern Rocky Mountain wolf recovery plan recommended that wolves be reintroduced to Yellowstone. About the same time, Congressman Wayne Owens from Utah introduced a bill to reintroduce wolves to Yellowstone. The subsequent media attention fueled public debate, which became increasingly polarized.

Agricultural interests and rural residents tended to be against wolf restoration but they were a minority. Favorable attitudes were strongest among environmental and conservation organization members and urban residents. Public surveys repeatedly

showed that most Americans, including a majority of residents of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming were in favor of wolf restoration. These attitudes are easy to understand—people who were likely to live amongst wolves and experience livestock or pet depredation, tended to oppose wolf recovery. Those who didn't have to live with wolves everyday, but could visit a National Park or National Forest with wolves and believed that wolves helped to balance the ecosystem tended to support wolf recovery. Sportsmen were evenly split over supporting wolf recovery. Most sportsmen didn't mind sharing some big game, but they didn't want all surplus elk and deer to go to wolves. So depending on how wolves might be managed and how that might affect hunting determined their views on wolf recovery. That practical, but divided perspective continues today. Recent public opinion research in Idaho indicates that most hunters look upon wolves unfavorably if the recovered population remains listed under the Act. However, if wolves are managed as trophy game by the state wildlife agencies and hunting is used to help blend wolves into the whole balance of healthy predator and prey populations in Idaho, then a strong majority of hunters view wolves favorably.

As a political compromise and to postpone any reintroduction, Congress directed the first of two "Wolves for Yellowstone?" studies in 1988. Those reports examined what might happen if wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park. In 1990, under the George H.W. Bush administration, Congress unsuccessfully tried to reduce the simmering controversy by creating a Wolf Management Committee composed of various Federal (USFWS, National Park Service, Forest Service), and state wildlife agencies in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, and four private interests (two conservation groups, the Wyoming Woolgrowers livestock group and sportsmen—the latter of whom were represented by a lobbyist for the Idaho Cattlemen). Congress rejected the Wolf Management Committee's recommendation to modify the Endangered Species Act and reintroduce wolves to both Yellowstone and central Idaho.

Instead, in 1992 Congress directed the USFWS to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement on reintroducing wolves to Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho. At that time, John Turner from Wyoming was the USFWS director under the George H.W. Bush administration. His directions to me were simple: pull together a professional federal, state, and tribal team to prepare the EIS to the highest scientific standards and let the politics sort themselves out. During the following two years, this effort produced over 750,000 documents, 130 meetings, and 180,000 public comments that were analyzed. Most of that effort was in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming where wolves might live. In 1994, with Mollie Beattie as USFWS director under the Clinton administration, the Service recommended that wolves be reintroduced to both areas under a special "experimental population" provision of the Act, which allows very liberal management if listed species are reintroduced into vacant but historic habitat.

Reintroduction is a routine tool for wildlife restoration, and populations of many types of mammals, birds, and fish have been restored this way. The concept is amazingly simple: Put animals in places where they will do best and where people want them to be. Of course, additional management is needed as the population expands and the potential for conflicts with people increases. The Act has many tools to help restore species listed under its purview, but public hunting isn't typically one of them. However, hunting is a common tool used by state wildlife agencies to manipulate the numbers and distribution of wildlife to minimize conflicts, fund management, harvest meat, antlers, and pelts, and to provide opportunities for public participation.

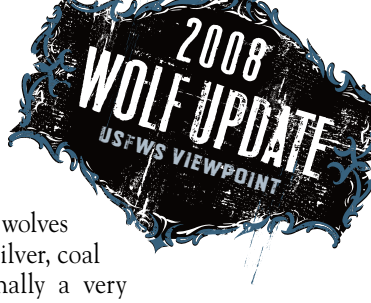
In 1995 and 1996, the USFWS and a host of U.S. and Canadian cooperators bought wolves from Canadian fur trappers to radio-collar and release. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game loaned us two of its top wolf capture experts who led efforts to dart wolves from helicopter east of Banff National Park, Alberta, in 1995 and north of Fort St. John, British Columbia, in 1996. Once the wolves were given their medical examinations and customs clearances they were flown into the U.S. We immediately released young adult wolves into central Idaho, hoping to mimic the way that wolf packs naturally form in the wild. In Yellowstone Park, we held family groups in one-acre pens for 10 weeks before releasing them. Both methods worked better than planned, and we ended up releasing 35 "lone" wolves in Idaho and 31 wolves in seven family groups in Yellowstone.

As a result of natural dispersal and reintroduction, by the end of 2007 there were over 1,500 wolves in 110,000 square miles of suitable habitat in western Montana, Idaho, and northwestern Wyoming. From 1974 through 2007, $27 million—all of it from federal income taxes or private donations—was spent on wolf restoration. In early 2008, the USFWS delisted the wolf population, which is now being managed by individual state and tribal wildlife management agencies. The first hunting seasons were set for fall 2008, with state wildlife managers planning to use hunting seasons with quotas to help manage the numbers and distribution of wolves.

However, all that was put on hold July 18, 2008, in U.S. Federal District Court in Missoula, Montana, when Judge Donald Molloy issued a preliminary injunction that immediately reinstated the

Wolf and Coyote Identification

Species	Wolf	Coyote
Weight	70-120 lbs	20-35 lbs
Height at Shoulder	26-34 inches	16-20 inches
Color	black, white, all shades of gray & tan, grizzled never spotted	all shades of gray & tan, white or black very rare, never spotted
Appearance	massive, long legged	delicate with fox-like face
Ears	relatively short, rounded	relatively long, pointed
Muzzle	large & blocky	long & pointed
Track (with claws)	4.5 -5 inches	2-3 inches



Endangered Species Act protections for wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains. That area includes all of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming and the eastern one-third of Washington and Oregon and parts of north-central Utah. Control of wolves that attack livestock is ongoing but wolf hunt seasons in 2008 have been cancelled. The Court was concerned with the USFWS's recovery goal in relation to genetics and the adequacy of Wyoming's state wolf plan. This injunction will remain in place until final resolution of this case occurs. The Endangered Species Act provisions reinstated by the court are the same ones in effect before wolves were delisted on March 28, 2008. In the meantime, the USFWS and its partners are evaluating legal options regarding the Court's order and the ongoing litigation over delisting of the northern Rocky Mountain wolf population. The USFWS believes gray wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains have recovered and no longer need the protections of the Endangered Species Act.

The USFWS strongly believes and repeatedly stated during the reintroduction process that hunting can be a valuable wildlife management tool and it should be a component of any state wolf management program. There is no reason that hunting should not be used to help manage a recovered wolf population in the northern Rocky Mountain region. Wolf hunting should be just as successful at promoting the conservation of wolf populations as other forms of hunting have been at helping to conserve elk, deer, mountain lion, and black bear populations. You can see all the statistics about the wolf recovery program and a host of other information at www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/mammals/wolf/.

While wolves can be called or tracked, most harvests will likely be incidental to hunting for elk, deer, and other species. No one really knows how vulnerable wolves will be to hunting in the western U.S., but the states intend to be cautious and to give themselves a chance to learn how wolf conservation programs in the West need to be professionally managed.

The good news for hunters who want to pursue wolves and take a possible trophy: wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains are among the largest in North America. Their genetics in combination with very abundant prey populations produce adult male wolves averaging over 100 pounds. Females are about 20 percent lighter. Males reach their peak size in 4- to 5-years. The heaviest wolf we've handled in the past 20 years was a 141 pound male that had a belly full of meat. Pelt colors are prime in late fall, and in the Northern Rocky Mountains wolves may be light gray/silver, coal black, or occasionally a very old wolf may be pure white. Mature northern Rocky Mountain male wolves also have large skulls.

The transition from extirpated to a healthy recovered wolf population with a harvestable surplus within only 20 years is a remarkable wildlife conservation success story. Currently we have more wolves in more places and fewer problems with livestock than we predicted. While a few ungulate herds in the northern Rocky Mountains have been reduced—at least in part, by wolf predation—most are at or above population objectives and habitat carrying capacity. The same situation exists in the Midwest where those 4,000 wolves were delisted in February 2007. While the Endangered Species Act clearly did its job, the future for wolf conservation in the lower 48 states still depends on sportsmen and successful state-led management. Hunters should be proud of their role in making all types of wildlife a valued part of our North American heritage. ■