

WAR ON WOLVES

On the path to recovery from near-extinction, wolves are once again under fire

by RUTHANNE JOHNSON

By the time they received federal protection under the Endangered Species Act in 1974, gray wolves in the lower 48 states had been backed into a corner—a remote swath of northern Minnesota that hosted the last known viable breeding packs. Their only other known location was in Michigan, where a small number lived in Isle Royale National Park. Centuries of persecution and government-sponsored bounties had driven toward extinction a once vibrant population estimated at 500,000 to 2 million animals.

The listing of wolves under the ESA ushered in a period of slow recovery; Minnesota wolves spread into Wisconsin, Canada wolves migrated into Montana, and a federal program relocated wolves from

Canada to Wyoming and Idaho. Though they still faced illegal trapping and shooting and state-sanctioned killing of “nuisance” animals, the populations expanded to present-day estimates of 4,000 in the Great Lakes region and 1,650 in the Northern Rockies.

Those gains are modest at best; today, the gray wolf is present across only 5 percent of its historic range in the continental U.S. But any number of wolves is apparently too many for the ranching and trophy hunting interests that have vied for 35 years to remove this magnificent animal from the endangered species list. Bowing to the pressure from these groups, federal officials have repeatedly tried to reduce or remove ESA protections for wolves and abdicate wolf management to state agencies.

Seven times in the past five years, The HSUS and other organizations have thwarted these attempts, most recently this summer when a successful HSUS-led lawsuit restored ESA protections to Great Lakes wolves. But this fall, in spite of a pending suit to restore protections for the Northern Rockies population, the states of Montana and Idaho decided to proceed with wolf hunts. Never has an endangered species been delisted at such low numbers and then immediately hunted.

To make delisting possible in these regions, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has attempted to arbitrarily carve out specific clusters of the species one area at a time. A federal court last year suggested that the move is contrary to the language and purpose of the ESA, under which gray wolves were originally protected throughout their range in the lower 48 states.

Fish and Wildlife Service officials themselves have previously determined that the ESA does not allow for a state-by-state approach to delisting wolves. But in a reversal of that position, the agency later delisted them in Montana and Idaho while leaving their endangered status intact in neighboring Wyoming.

“To strip these wolf populations of federal protection just as they have begun to bounce back could destroy decades of expensive and wide-ranging recovery efforts,” says Jonathan Lovvorn, The HSUS’s vice president and chief counsel for Animal Protection Litigation and Research. “The HSUS will continue the legal fight to restore federal protection for wolves until we are certain they won’t face mass slaughter at the hands of hostile state wildlife authorities.”



Alaska

Wolves in Alaska are heavily exploited during a six-month trapping season and a hunting season that lasts up to 10 months in some areas. According to one state wildlife official, as many as 3,000 wolves are killed in the state each year.

► **ESTIMATED POPULATION:** 7,700 to 11,200, unknown number of packs

► **STATUS:** Alaska wolves have never been listed as endangered or threatened because their numbers aren't considered low enough. State officials conduct culling and aerial shooting and sanction sport hunting and trapping. The kill allowance is typically 5 to 10 wolves per licensed hunter each season, but in some areas, the "bag" limit is 10 wolves per day. Licensed trappers can often kill an unlimited number.

Montana

In 1985, gray wolves from Canada migrated to northwest Montana. The next year, the first wolf den in the western U.S. in more than 50 years was documented in the state.

► **ESTIMATED POPULATION:** 497 wolves, 84 packs

► **STATUS:** Removed from the federal endangered species list in April. A wolf hunt opened on Sept. 15, with a kill quota of 75 for the season. The state is allowed to reduce the population to 150.

Minnesota

Four years after wolves received endangered species status in 1974, the classification of those in Minnesota was downgraded.

► **ESTIMATED POPULATION:** 2,921 wolves, 503 packs

► **STATUS:** Federally protected as threatened. The government's prior delisting effort would have allowed the state to reduce the population to 1,251.

Michigan

By 1973, wolves had been reduced to six individuals in the Upper Peninsula and an isolated population in Isle Royale National Park. With immigration from Wisconsin, Minnesota, or Ontario, numbers slowly increased on the mainland, and the first breeding pair was documented in 1991.

► **ESTIMATED POPULATION:** 543 wolves, 119 packs

► **STATUS:** Still federally protected as endangered. The government's prior delisting effort would have allowed the state to reduce the population to 200.

Wisconsin

Before wolves were listed under the ESA, the last known wolf in the state was killed in 1957. Minnesota's growing population has since expanded into Wisconsin.

► **ESTIMATED POPULATION:** 626 wolves, 162 packs

► **STATUS:** Still federally protected as endangered. The government's prior delisting effort would have allowed the state to reduce the population to 250.

Wyoming

When wolves were briefly delisted in Wyoming and placed under state management last year, almost a dozen were killed for sport before a lawsuit by The HSUS and other organizations restored federal protection to these animals.

► **ESTIMATED POPULATION:** 302 wolves, 42 packs (124 of these wolves live in Yellowstone)

► **STATUS:** Federally protected as a "nonessential experimental" population under the ESA, a designation that allows more liberal rules for managing "nuisance" wolves. The government's prior delisting effort would have allowed the state to reduce the population to 150.

Idaho

During a prior effort to delist wolves in 2007, Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter boasted, "I'm prepared to bid for that first ticket to shoot a wolf myself." Current state plans call for killing up to 30 percent of Idaho's wolf population.

► **ESTIMATED POPULATION:** 846 wolves, 88 packs

► **STATUS:** Removed from the federal endangered species list in April. A wolf hunt opened on Sept. 1, with a kill quota of 255 for the season. The state is allowed to reduce the population to 150.

* Population estimates are derived from interviews and recently published government reports.

LIVING ON THE EDGE



State hunts threaten Yellowstone wolves' fragile existence

The Lamar Valley is a nature lover's paradise, teeming with bison, antelope, grizzlies, elk, moose, bald eagles—and the largest concentration of gray wolves in Yellowstone National Park.

The famous Druid Peak pack owns the landscape, a wide open vale flanked by the Absaroka Mountains. A road cutting through a high point in the valley creates a perch where visitors can see the wolves hunt, play, and nurture their young. More than 150,000 wolf watchers visit Yellowstone each year, bringing spotting scopes, cameras, and \$35 million in annual revenue to the region.

Once hunted to near extinction across the lower 48 states, wolves have slowly recolonized the park following reintroduction by the federal government in 1995. They now live in Yellowstone as nature intended—wild and free.

But beyond this sanctuary lies forbidden territory. Gray wolves in neighboring Idaho and Montana were recently removed from the federal endangered species list and can now be legally hunted in these states, meaning that even one trip outside the park could end in death. Between mid-September and the first week in October, nine wolves were killed in Montana, just north of Yellowstone's border. At least four of them were members of Yellowstone's Cottonwood pack, including the group's founder, a radio-collared alpha female born in the Druid pack seven years ago.

"Wolves don't know park boundaries," says longtime wolf watcher and advocate Dave Hornoff. "Because of their social structure, something like this can devastate the wolf pack."

When hunters enter an area, they don't understand pack dynamics, adds Jeremy

Heft, a wildlife biologist at the Wolf Education & Research Center in Winchester, Idaho. "They won't even know if they are shooting a male or female," he says.

In one case shortly after wolves had been reintroduced to the park, a breeding male was illegally killed in the region just two days before his mate gave birth to eight pups. Left without a partner to help care for them—and with no pack to pitch in—the pups would have died had the mother not been captured and taken to an enclosure where she could safely raise them.

In addition to disrupting wolf families, hunts can weaken entire populations. Many scientists believe that about 500 breeding pairs are necessary to achieve a genetically viable population of between 2,000 and 5,000 wolves—a threshold that will be unattainable under current state management plans. At a time when disease, natural disaster, and the effects of global warming make many wild species even more vulnerable, population isolation poses yet another danger in the form of potential genetic disorders; one recent study of a remote pack in Isle Royale National Park revealed severe bone deformities due to inbreeding.

The new war on wolves is being waged just when scientists are gaining a greater understanding of their role in the ecosystem. Bears, foxes, and other scavengers benefit from the presence of wolves, feasting on their prey. And the native plants that feed and shelter Yellowstone's wild inhabitants are staging a comeback

because of wolves' abilities to keep ungulates such as deer and elk in check. "We are just starting to see signs that the aspen communities are starting to recover," says wildlife biologist and wolf expert Nathan Varley, who grew up in the park. "Even more so, the willow and the cottonwood trees in some areas are showing some positive response that we haven't seen in decades in Yellowstone."

Such evidence of wolves' ecological benefits hasn't slowed the efforts of people fixated on destroying the species—like the hunters who resent the competition for large game animals. Or the ranchers who blame wolves for livestock losses, even though deaths from wolf predation are relatively small when compared with other causes and ranchers are often compensated for the losses they report.

The current climate for wolves is hauntingly reminiscent of the brutal killing campaigns of a century ago. In 1922, Yellowstone park ranger Henry Anderson found an active wolf den, killed the mother, and put her 10 pups on display at park headquarters. They, too, were later destroyed, and by the end of the decade, the park was virtually wolf-free.

Now, ironically, Yellowstone and other national parks may soon be the only places the Northern Rockies wolves are safe from human intolerance. Outside these limited borders—unless strict federal protections are upheld—they can expect no mercy. ■

