

Montana's wolf management challenges

Less than a decade after wolves from Canada were placed in Yellowstone National Park, 153 of the wild canids were making a living in Montana, where the overall population had already grown beyond federal recovery goals.

That year, 2004, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service approved the state's first Gray Wolf Conservation and Management Plan, developed by a state advisory council. The USFWS made no bones about the plan's quality. "It's a class act," federal officials wrote.

But not everyone was pleased with the council's work. A critic countered, "The Montana plan is festooned with enough ribbons and bows to make it appear reasonable, but when you tear off the fancy wrapping and look inside, it opens up a Pandora's box of troubles for wolves."

And back and forth it still goes.

Meanwhile, in 2011, the gray wolf in the Northern Rockies was removed from the federal endangered species list. Montana's wildlife managers were then able to fully use the state's science-based plan to conserve and manage wolves as a native species that's here to stay.

The job's never been simple. Consider recent headlines like this one from Bloomberg.com: "Murder of Yellowstone Wolves Threatens Area Renaissance."

Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks (YNP and GNP) are positioned on Montana's southwestern and northwestern borders. They were essentially incubators for wolf recovery in the Northern Rockies, and remain a kind of protected refuge for wolves in the West.

Wolves were placed in YNP and neighboring Idaho to repopulate the West and eventually be managed by the states they would come to inhabit. Wolves introduced to YNP in 1995 and 1996, for instance, colonized Montana by migrating north—and wolves that began to naturally migrate from Canada to GNP in the 1980s wandered farther south into Montana. Wolves from central Idaho also populated western Montana.

In short, most Montana wolves—more than 600 today—are the progeny of wolves that migrated out of our national parks and Idaho wilderness areas.

Similar to other migratory wildlife—such as elk, deer, and bison—wolves that currently inhabit YNP pay no mind to boundaries. They can depart Yellowstone for any number of reasons, one of which is to join packs or form new packs in Montana.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks exists to conserve and manage Montana's wildlife. Wildlife management often means hunting and exercising some means of wildlife population control to maintain a

balance among an array of ecological factors—and with an eye toward social tolerance.

It's a challenge to strike that balance, but FWP wolf specialists and wildlife biologists are out there working to do that day after day.

They collar and track wolves. They use hand-held radios, trail cams, and reports submitted on the Internet by a vigilant public. They monitor den sites and traps. Before a trapped research animal is released, our wolf specialists take tissue samples, check for disease, and determine the size and sex of the animal. They work with landowners, approaching every depredation as a problem to resolve so it won't happen again.

About 50 wolves in Montana are now equipped with radio collars so that wildlife biologists can track movements, obtain counts, study reproduction rates and predator-prey relationships, and learn more about how, where, and why mortalities occur.

Some of Montana's collared wolves—and some that migrate here from YNP—are harvested by hunters or trappers. Others die from disease, accidents, fights with rival wolves, or trying to take down elk.

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Montana has been solely managing the state's wolves since they were delisted in 2011, including successfully administering three hunting seasons. Contrary to what some critics of state management say, Montana's wolf population continues to thrive well above state and federal recovery thresholds. More important, wolves are now an accepted part of Montana's rich wildlife heritage.

Through it all, Montana has also recognized the importance of national park wolves by creating specific harvest quotas in special buffer zones near the parks. As for Yellowstone wolves, they'll continue to contribute ecologically to the system that has been responding to their presence for nearly 20 years.

—M. Jeff Hagener, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Director