

The Curious Case of

Wolf 57



In December 2021, FWP wildlife biologist Wendy Cole received a tattered radio collar covered in moss and shrouded in mystery. Solving the puzzle ended up shedding further light on the impressive movements of wildlife.

BY DILLON TABISH. PHOTOS BY HUNTER D'ANTUONO

On a quiet Friday afternoon shortly before Christmas 2021, Wendy Cole received an unexpected gift.

The Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks wolf specialist was finishing work before the holiday break when a man came into her Kalispell office and handed her a tattered, cloth-covered collar. He said he had been walking through the forest west of town, near Little Bitterroot Lake, when he stumbled upon it in the brush, partially blanketed in snow and green moss. He looked around for other clues but found nothing.

Cole recognized it as a wildlife-tracking collar. But it was an old VHF (very high frequency) model that biologists hadn't used for years. The only clues to what the radio collar was doing in the woods were a serial number, a telephone number, and the words "Parks Canada Banff, AB" printed on the side.

Cole wondered if the man had found the collar of a wolf that had wandered south from Canada. "I told him that we occasionally get wolves repopulating here from north of the border," Cole recalls. "That's how we initially

got wolves restarting down here in northwestern Montana in the 1970s and '80s.

The wolf specialist spent the next few weeks trying to figure out if her hunch was correct. She talked to staff with Parks Canada and found a wildlife biologist who was equally intrigued by the mysterious collar. He started doing some digging.

It turned out that in 2001, Canadian biologists had fitted the VHF collar on "Wolf 57," a young female with the Fairholme Pack in Banff National Park. The researchers were looking to track the pack locally, but many of the collars also helped them better understand how long-distance travel by individual wolves can improve the genetic health of populations. When wolves mate with others in distant packs, they make populations more genetically diverse and better able to withstand disease or other afflictions.

For decades, biologists in Montana and Canada have used VHF and, in recent years, GPS collars to learn where wolves travel, what habitats they use, the size of their home ranges, and other important information

needed for management and conservation.

But none of that information is transmitted if a collar disappears.

In July 2003, Canadian biologists had tracked Wolf 57 into the Lake Minnewanka area of the Bow Valley west of Calgary, Alberta. But then it dropped off the radar.

GENETICALLY ROBUST

The landscape between Banff National Park and Kalispell, 300 miles south, is big, wild country. The jagged, ice-capped peaks of the Canadian Rockies reach up to 12,000 feet. Between the mountains are human-built hazards of highways, cattle ranches, and housing developments. It would be a long, difficult journey for any animal.

Somehow Wolf 57 found a way.

"This collar is a good indicator of movement corridors within vast areas of habitat that large carnivores can use to travel great distances," Cole says. "It shows that wolves can make use of disjointed habitat patches even hundreds of miles from each other, which can make populations more genetically robust."

The journey isn't the longest documented for a Canadian or Montana wolf.

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FWP wolf specialist Wendy Cole with the VHF wolf tracking collar found 300 miles south of where it originated.

In 2014, FWP wolf specialists tracked one wolf from Montana's Ninemile Valley roughly 900 miles north to Fort St. John, about 500 miles northwest of Banff, before it was killed on the TransCanada Highway.

After taking one last look at the 20-year-old collar discovered near Kalispell, Cole mailed it back north, a late Christmas gift for her Canadian colleagues.

Today, she notes that while some of the Wolf 57 mystery has been solved, there are still many unanswered questions: "How did it die? What route did it take to get here? Did it join or start a pack with other wolves once it was in Montana and contribute to the population before it died? There's still a lot we don't know."

What she and other wildlife experts do know is that protecting and conserving land to provide connectivity for wide-ranging species like wolves is essential for long-term survival.



WILDLIFE CORRIDOR? This map shows the route of another Canadian wolf, WM2001, carrying a GPS collar that transmitted its location from Banff National Park in western Alberta south through British Columbia to northwestern Montana. Biologists tracked the two-year-old male from February 2021 until it was legally shot and killed by a hunter in March 2021. This may have been similar to the route taken by the mysterious Wolf 57.

"Wolves instinctually need to disperse, and the protected public lands and well-managed private holdings in northwestern Montana and southern Alberta allow that to happen," Cole says. The route of another Canadian wolf in early 2021 (see map at left) shows the possible route that Wolf 57 may have taken to reach Montana.

When Cole gives talks to people interested in wolves and other wildlife, she now includes the story of Wolf 57 and its impressive travels. There's always something new to learn.

"Sometimes when we think there is a dead end of information, we can still discover more information many years later," she says. "Parks Canada was wondering for years what happened to that wolf, and we were able to solve at least part of that mystery—that somehow it ended up right here, 300 miles away, near Kalispell, Montana." 🐺