

WEIGHING WOLVES

IN ON

Montana works to strike a fair and biologically sound balance between having enough of the large carnivores and having too many. BY TOM DICKSON



▶ DRIVING THROUGH THE FROZEN landscape of Yellowstone National Park’s (YNP) Lamar Valley one recent morning, wolf watching guide Nathan Varley slows down and points to several ravens about a mile off. “There it is,” he says, pulling over to set up his spotting scope and train it on a recent elk kill, which a few minutes earlier a colleague had told him was in the vicinity. For an hour we watch two wolves feeding on the carcass, a large gray male known to local watchers as “Crooked Ear” and a smaller black female called “Spitfire.” The naming fosters anthropomorphizing, admits Varley, but it helps with identification, as do numbers given to about 20 percent of the park’s wolves that wear radio collars for research purposes. Several other wolf watchers gather along the road in the bitter cold to view the large carnivores, clearly visible through high-powered optics. Crowded tour buses and minivans operated by wildlife-viewing companies pass by every 15 minutes or so, returning to Gardiner from another elk kill farther up the valley.

Varley, who lives in Gardiner, studied the park’s carnivores for several years while earning a doctorate in ecology. But his primary concern with wolves these days is economic, not academic. “Every park wolf that steps over the border into Montana and Wyoming and gets shot is money out of our pocket,” says the wildlife guide, who is also vice president of a local group called Bear Creek Council that tries

SAME ANIMAL, DIFFERENT LENSES Many hunters see the wolf as competition for elk and deer. Ranchers consider the large carnivore a threat to livestock. Yet others, like wolf watchers who crowd Yellowstone National Park in winter, when viewing conditions are best (right), consider the large carnivore a natural wonder to be cherished and protected.

LEFT: ONDY GÖEDEL; RIGHT: ROBERT WESLMANN



to increase tolerance for wolves and bison leaving the park. Varley and his wife run Yellowstone Wolf Tracker wildlife tours, one of a dozen or so guiding operations sanctioned by park officials. These kinds of services are at the heart of a thriving wolf watching tourism that a University of Montana study found pumps millions of dollars into counties surrounding the park each year.

That economic argument is just one used by wolf advocates critical of growing hunter and trapper wolf harvests in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming. Some are like Varley, who has no gripe with wolf hunting elsewhere but wants a kill-free buffer around Yellowstone. Others, often from outside the Rocky Mountain West, want to halt all lethal action on an animal that was classified as federally endangered just a few years ago.

On the flip side are those who demand that Montana kill more wolves, which they say harm ranchers' bottom line and deplete elk and deer herds. "We'd like the state to take much more aggressive measures in certain areas to bring these predator numbers down to a more tolerable ratio with prey populations," says Rob Arnaud, president of the Montana Outfitters and Guides Association. "We've got hunting outfitters around Yellowstone going out of business because of wolves."

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is listening to all sides. The department's job is to ensure there are enough wolves to maintain a healthy

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

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population in Montana, as mandated by its mission and federal law. At the same time, it works to limit livestock depredation, maintain abundant deer and elk, and foster public tolerance for wolves.

It's a balancing act, and, with impassioned interests tugging every which way, not an easy one.

► Frustration fuels anger

The wolf has long represented conflicting views of untamed nature. Roman, Norse, and Celtic mythology celebrated wolves, yet the carnivores were feared and persecuted throughout Europe for centuries. Native American tribes revered wolves as guides to the spirit world. The United States nearly eradicated the carnivore with bounties and, later, wide-scale federal government extermination. In Montana alone, "wolfers" killed 100,000 wolves between the 1860s and 1920s, primarily with poison.

Public attitudes toward wolves began to change in the 1970s as part of the growing environmental movement. *Canis lupus*, nearly extinct in the Lower 48, became a symbol of the nation's vanishing wildness. In 1995-96, 66 wolves were live-trapped in Canada and set free in Yellowstone National Park and the wilderness of central Idaho. The goal: Restore wolves to a region where they had almost been eliminated. Western states objected but took some comfort knowing that management authority, which includes regulated hunting and trapping, would revert back to them once the wolf population reached federal recovery goals.

In the first decade after the Yellowstone introduction, the highly prolific carnivores grew rapidly in number and range. By 2001 the regionwide population count surpassed the federal goal of 300 in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming combined (at least 100 in each of the three states). By 2007 it reached at least 1,500—five times the initial target. Yet as wolf advocates cheered the growth, stockgrowers were reporting more and more livestock losses. Hunters in some areas began seeing fewer deer and elk and attributed the disappearance to growing wolf numbers. With the large carnivores still under federal protection, wolf critics felt powerless to stem the rapid population growth. They grew increasingly vocal, holding rallies, proposing legislation to defy federal rule, and even threatening illegal actions. "Shoot, Shovel, and Shut Up," read one popular bumper sticker.

Anti-wolf furor lessened after 2011, when the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) removed ("delisted") the Northern Rockies population from the federally threatened and endangered species list. Wolves could now be hunted under carefully regulated conditions. Still, many wolf opponents complained that too many wolves remained in areas where hunters were unable to reduce numbers. Demands grew for the state to kill pups in dens or, as Alaska and Idaho do, employ aerial gunning from helicopters.

FED UP Frustrated that wolf numbers continued to grow far beyond initial federal recovery goals, anti-wolf protesters turned up the volume during the early 2000s. Wolves were finally delisted in 2011.



THE FACTS regarding concerns over Montana's wolf management



► PRO-WOLF BELIEF:

"Regulated hunting and trapping is decimating Montana's wolf population."

6X **FACT:** Montana's wolf population is still six times greater than the initial federal recovery goal of 100—a threshold reached in 2001.

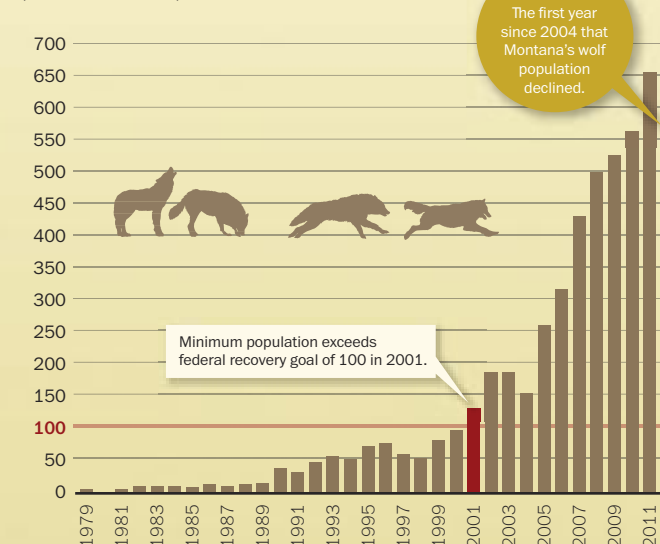


► ANTI-WOLF BELIEF:

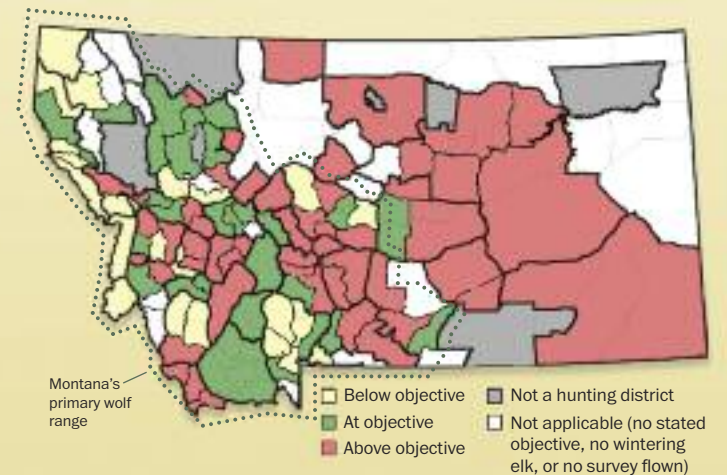
"Wolves are decimating Montana's elk population."

81% **FACT:** Elk numbers are still at or over population objectives in 81% of hunting districts statewide. Numbers remain strong across most of the state's primary wolf range.

Montana Wolf Population (Minimum counts)



2013 Elk Population Objective Status by Hunting District



GRAPHICS: MONTANA OUTDOORS; SOURCE: FWP



Such radical proposals alarmed wolf advocates. With the species no longer under federal protection but instead subject to state control, they responded by ramping up their rhetoric and protests, just as wolf critics had a few years before. Public comments to FWP skyrocketed, from 500 on the first proposed wolf hunting season to more than 25,000 on the most recent. Most were coordinated e-mail “blasts” coming from outside Montana that denounced all wolf hunting.

► **Outrage over killings**

Much of the outcry from wolf advocates concerns the Yellowstone park wolves. Extensive coverage by the BBC, *National Geographic*, *The New York Times*, and other global media have detailed the carnivores’ complex social interactions since reintroduction. Fans throughout the world track the Junction Butte, Blacktail, and other packs on blog posts and Facebook pages maintained by watchers who cruise the park’s roads year round. Devotees can see where Tall Gray was spotted last week or learn how 686F is faring in Mollie’s Pack, as though the wolves were characters in a reality TV show. Little wonder the Internet lit up this past August after a collared YNP wolf (820F) that had become habituated to humans was killed in Gardiner. “People become attached to these wolves that then leave the park and are shot. They get outraged,” says Varley.

Yellowstone’s wolf population has declined in recent years, not due to outside-the-park hunting, as some suggest, but mainly from a shrinking elk population. (All hunting is banned within the borders of national parks.) In the late 1980s and early ‘90s, the northern Yellowstone elk herd was one of the nation’s largest. Reintroduced to this prey-rich environment, wolves grew from 41 in 1997 to a peak of 174 in 2003. As park biologists predicted, once elk numbers dropped (due to predation, weather, and

liberal elk hunting seasons outside the park) so did the wolf population, which now numbers 86. Hunters have legally killed wolves that wander out of Yellowstone, but far more of the animals have died from wolf-on-wolf attacks, starvation, and disease. Mange alone has killed dozens.

Though the park’s wolf decline understandably concerns watchers and guides, “the Yellowstone introduction was not designed to create wolf viewing opportunities or businesses,” says Ken McDonald, head of the FWP Wildlife Division. “It was meant as the

base for expansion far beyond the park’s perimeter. Park visitors focus on individual animals, but here in Montana our responsibility is to manage wolves at a population level.”

Wolf numbers in Montana and elsewhere in the Northern Rockies are robust, making the park’s packs less significant to the regional population than their popularity would indicate, says McDonald. Today just over 5 percent of the 1,600-plus wolves in the Northern Rockies reside in Yellowstone. The species is thriving across the West and Midwest, despite recent claims by the Sierra Club that hunting “has driven the gray wolf nearly to extinction.” According to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the Lower 48’s wolf population has grown by 50 percent over the past decade to 5,360.

Outlandish claims show up on both sides of the issue. Some wolf critics still insist the carnivores are “wiping out” most of western Montana’s elk populations. True, numbers are considerably down in some areas that have especially high wolf densities, notably the upper Gallatin, Blackfoot Valley, and Gardiner areas. But elk numbers remain at or above “population objectives” (what the habitat base and landowners will tolerate) in 81 percent of the state’s hunting districts.

► **Addressing reasonable concerns**

Exaggerations aside, most apprehension over wolves is well within reason: A Dillon rancher needs to protect his sheep; a Missoula hunter wants to see elk next November; a Bozeman naturalist desires to live in a state with a healthy wolf population; a Florida tourist hopes her favorite Yellowstone wolf stays free from harm. “We take all reasonable concerns about wolves seriously,” says Jeff Hagener, FWP director.

The department notes that livestock losses declined last year thanks to higher hunting and trapping harvest. Also credited are ranchers working with the department’s six wolf specialists to protect sheep and cattle using fence flagging (fladry), carcass

removal, and other measures.

Following reports of wolf predation on the southern Bitterroot Valley’s elk herd, the department launched a large-scale investigation in 2011. Researchers recently found that mountain lions are more responsible for elk population declines there than wolves are. What’s more, the southern Bitterroot elk herd is rebounding, likely thanks to favorable weather and habitat conditions.

As for criticism that Montana hasn’t done enough to control wolf numbers, “FWP fought for years to restore state management authority that includes public hunting and trapping,” says Hagener. Because wolves are wary and difficult to hunt or trap, FWP has supported liberalized regulations that now include a six-month season, electronic calls, and a wolf limit of five (a number that very few hunters or trappers actually take).

Montana is working to pare down the population of 600-plus wolves living here. But the state will not drive numbers low enough to trigger federal re-listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). “We can keep the ESA at bay only if we continue to show we have adequate regulatory mechanisms in place and are not advocating wholesale wolf slaughter,” says McDonald.

In support of wolves, Montana’s wolf conservation plan—the document that

“As hard as it might be for some people to believe, allowing Montanans to hunt wolves actually builds tolerance for wolves”

guides its wolf management—recognizes that many people value wolves, the large carnivores play an important ecological role, and the population must remain genetically connected to those in other states and Canada if it is to survive over time. FWP opposes poison, aerial gunning, and proposed legislation classifying wolves as predators that can be shot on sight. The department has created special hunting zones around YNP and Glacier National Park that reduce the chances that a park research wolf will be killed, and it urges hunters not to shoot radio-collared wolves.

FWP has also committed to keeping the population well above what the USFWS originally deemed sufficient for recovery.

Despite protests from wolf advocates, Montana will continue to allow hunters and trappers to kill wolves. That was part of the recovery agreement. Paradoxically, it’s also

in the wolf’s best long-term interests.

“As hard as it might be for some people to believe, allowing Montanans to hunt wolves actually builds tolerance for wolves,” says Hagener. He points out that overall anti-wolf anger in Montana, though still strong in some circles, has eased considerably since hunting and trapping seasons began in 2011. “As long as we can manage wolf numbers at what most Montanans consider an acceptable level, people here will accept having a certain amount of wolves on the landscape along with some loss of livestock and prey animals.”

But without regulated harvest, Hagener says, “there’d be much more pressure to treat wolves like varmints that could be shot anytime, year round.” Such relentless mortality would drive down Montana’s overall wolf population. And it would prevent Yellowstone wolves from moving freely across the region to breed with counterparts in Idaho and northern Montana, threatening that population’s genetic health and future survival.

Most people, including Montanans, want wolves to exist in the Northern Rockies. But how many, and where? It should come as no surprise that what is considered “enough” differs widely between those trying to live their lives on a landscape where wolves live, too, and those watching the drama play out from hundreds of miles away. 🐾

5% Today just over five percent of the 1,600 or more wolves in the Northern Rockies reside in Yellowstone.

6 Montana’s wolf hunting season now lasts six months. Hunters and trappers may (though rarely do) take up to five wolves each.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JAMIE & LISA JOHNSON; BLEUEDELPHIN.COM; WIKIPEDIA; ARIZONA HISTORICAL SOCIETY; PUBLIC DOMAIN; PUBLIC DOMAIN

EATING OR STEALING? There’s no argument that wolves kill prey animals and livestock to survive. Where tempers flare is over how much, if any, of that predation is reasonable.



HISTORICAL PERCEPTIONS OF WOLVES



In Roman mythology, the twins Romulus and Remus, raised by a she-wolf, found the city of Rome.



For centuries Europeans feared wolves. “Wolves Chasing Sleigh” was a popular subject for painters.



President T.R. Roosevelt declared the wolf a “beast of waste and destruction” as the U.S. embarked on systematic eradication.



In fables and cartoons, the Big, Bad Wolf uses cunning and deceit to trick Little Red Riding Hood, the Three Little Pigs, and other innocents.



Modern fans embrace the wolf as intelligent, sensitive beings restored to their rightful place.