



NORTHERN ROCKY MOUNTAIN GRAY WOLF

Introduction

The gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) once roamed throughout the northern hemisphere, but today occupies only a fraction of its historic range. Gray wolves were extirpated from the northern Rocky Mountains (NRM) of the United States by the 1930s, largely due to extermination efforts by private citizens and government entities seeking to remove the threat these predators posed to livestock and game species. Throughout most of Canada and Alaska, however, wolves persisted.¹ In 1974, gray wolves were listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). As a result of the protections afforded and management required under the ESA, the gray wolf once again inhabits NRM states, namely Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, eastern Washington, and eastern Oregon. By the end of 2010, the NRM region had at least 1,650 wolves in 244 packs, with 110 successful breeding pairs (comprised of one adult male and female and two surviving pups).²



Gray wolf

RECENT POLICY ACTIVITY:

- **1974** - Gray wolf listed as endangered
- **2008** - FWS issues rule to delist
- **2008** - Injunction filed – re-listed
- **2009** - Proposed rule to delist
- **May, 2009** - Final rule issued to delist NRM DPS of gray wolves
- **August, 2010** - Gray wolf placed back on list of endangered wildlife
- **May, 2011** - Wolves delisted in all or part of Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington, and Utah - management plans in Wyoming in flux.

Classification and Ecology

The NRM gray wolves are considered a distinct population segment (DPS)³ under the ESA. Adult gray wolves in the NRM average approximately 0.75 m (2.5 ft) tall, 1.5-1.8 m (5-6 ft) long, 35-60 kg (80-130 lbs) in weight, and vary in color from white to black. Wolves are apex predators in their natural environment and feed mainly on ungulates such as elk, deer, and bison, and small mammals.

Wolves are social animals that generally live and hunt in packs. Studies indicate that the presence of this keystone species affects a variety of other species, both directly and indirectly. For example, a study in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem reported a higher survival rate of pronghorn fawns when wolves were present due to reduced coyote predation. Wolves have larger body masses than coyotes and expend more energy during a hunt; therefore they rarely prey on small animals like pronghorn fawns.⁴

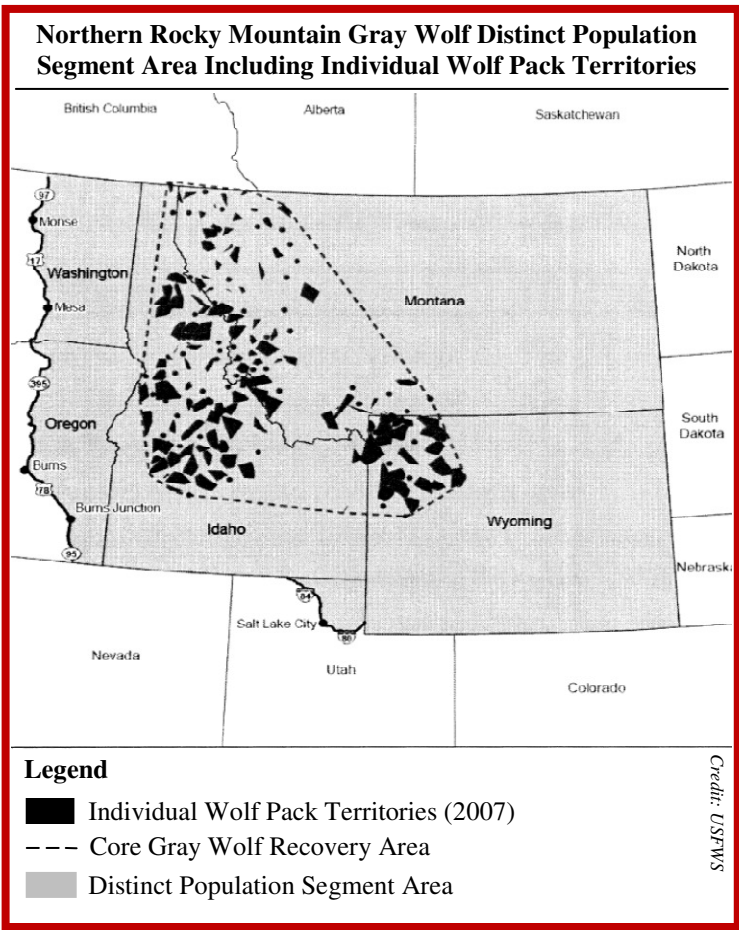
Reintroduction

Gray wolves began returning naturally to the NRM from Canada starting in the late 1970s, with formal reintroductions beginning in 1995 when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) released 31 wolves from Canada into Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho.⁵ In 1996 the FWS released an additional 35 wolves into both of these areas. Wolves that returned naturally to northwestern Montana were designated as endangered, but the FWS classified reintroduced wolves as “non-essential, experimental” populations. Under this designation, the federal government affords the FWS greater management flexibility to “reduce local concerns about excessive government regulation on private lands, uncontrolled livestock depredations, excessive big game predation, and the lack of state government involvement.”⁶

Human-Wolf Conflicts

As both human and wolf populations expand, the potential for conflict increases. The greatest of these conflicts involves wolves and the livestock industry. A report in 2010 recognized 450 depredations (mostly cattle and sheep) caused by wolves. This constituted a relatively small proportion of all livestock losses throughout the NRM, although areas with resident wolf packs may have been disproportionately affected.² Compensation programs exist to cover a portion of wolf damages, mainly livestock deaths, and management includes lethal control of problem wolves. Between 1982 and 2004, over 80% of all documented wolf deaths in the NRM were caused by humans (e.g., legal control, illegal killings, and vehicle accidents).⁷ Potential conflicts may also include hunting hound depredation and competition with hunters for surplus wild ungulates.

"In the wake of successful wolf reintroduction, managers who once fervently defended wolves are now faced with killing them. Are we ready for modern predator management?"
 – Jim Robbins, *Conservation Magazine* (2005)



Conservation

The NRM Wolf Recovery Plan, revised in 1987, set a goal of sustaining at least 10 breeding pairs in each of three recovery areas (northwest Montana, central Idaho, and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem) for three consecutive years.⁸ In 1994, that goal was determined to be inadequate and was therefore replaced by a goal of developing a wolf metapopulation that never falls below 300 wolves with 30 breeding pairs for three successive years in the three-part NRM region.⁷ Although this goal has been satisfied since 2002, some continue to argue it is too low.⁹

Quantifying a population level appropriate for sufficient genetic dispersal is challenging, and is especially difficult to determine for populations with shared colonization histories.¹⁰ Recent scientific research on wolf genetics and dispersal of radio-collared wolves reveals high genetic diversity in NRM wolf populations, and that natural dispersal alone would maintain it, even at minimum recovery levels.¹¹ Some have suggested that expansion of wolf populations in the NRM region be encouraged to more closely match historic conditions, providing protection for wolves and the positive impacts they have on local wild ecosystems.¹² However, this perspective ignores the fact that the vast majority of wolves live near people and their livestock and pets, and in areas where local residents work, live, and recreate.⁶

Since 2003, the FWS has repeatedly proposed listing reintroduced wolves in the NRM as a DPS and simultaneously delisting the DPS under the ESA, with each attempt struck down in court over legal technicalities.¹³ Most recently, in response to a directive in a budget rider to provide federal government funding through the end of Fiscal Year 2011, the FWS re-published its 2009 science-based rule that delisted NRM wolves, except in Wyoming.¹³ Discussions between the FWS and the state of Wyoming regarding plans to return the wolves to state management are in flux.



Gray wolf

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For a complete bibliography of references for this fact sheet and others related to wolf biology and management in the United States and Canada, please visit *The Wildlife Society's* Human-Wildlife Conflict page at www.wildlife.org