



WESTERN GREAT LAKES GRAY WOLF

Introduction

The gray wolves of the Western Great Lakes (WGL) region are being considered for delisting in 2011 as a distinct population segment (DPS) of gray wolf in the United States under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).^{1,2} These wolves are currently found throughout the northern regions of Minnesota and Wisconsin, and Michigan's Upper Peninsula, as shown in the map below.³ Historically, their range extended into the southern portions of these states, but in the 1800s and early 1900s, unregulated hunting, intentional extermination, and diminished prey availability nearly eliminated the wolves in the Great Lakes region.

Starting in the 1800s, federal and state governments paid bounties for dead wolves. By the late 1800s, gray wolves had disappeared from the southern portions of these states.^{4,5,6} With wolves nearly extirpated from Michigan and Wisconsin, and reduced to very low numbers in Minnesota, state protections began in Wisconsin in 1957 and in Michigan in 1965.⁷ Minnesota maintained an open season on wolves until 1974. In May 1974, the gray wolf gained federal protection under the ESA. The wolf population rebounded, and as of 2011 there were at least 687 wolves⁸ in Michigan and 782 in Wisconsin.⁹ A 2007-2008 survey estimated the Minnesota population at 2,921 wolves.⁷ The WGL DPS also includes portions of North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio.^{10,11} Dispersing wolves have been detected through much of this region.¹²



Credit: USFWS

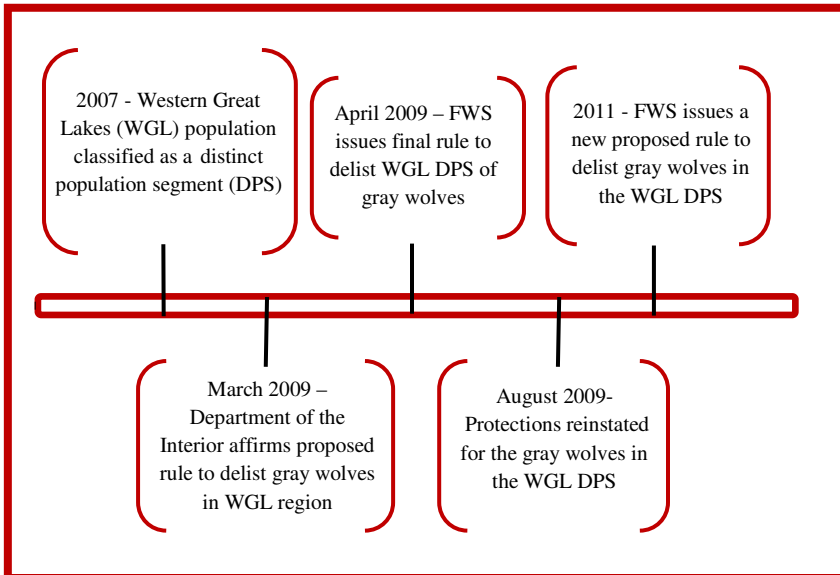
Gray wolf



Ecology

Gray wolves in the Great Lakes range from 25 to 50 kg (55-110 lbs) in weight, with adult males averaging about 36 kg (80 lbs) and adult females averaging about 32 kg (70 lbs). Fur coloration is generally a grizzled gray, tan, or black mix, with a small percentage being all black or all white. Their body length from nose to tail ranges from 1.3 to 2 m (4.5 to 6.5 ft), and they can be as tall as 90 cm (32 inches) at the shoulder.¹³ Gray wolves are highly territorial and commonly maintain ranges of at least 50 square miles. Although they are habitat generalists, wolves in the Great Lakes region are mainly restricted to areas of extensive forest cover and low road densities.¹⁴ Wolves are known select specific habitat elements such as den and rendezvous sites in secluded areas away from disturbances and roads.¹⁵

"We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view."
 – Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949)



The Great Lakes wolves feed primarily on white-tailed deer that make short-distant migrations from summer to winter range. Beaver are also important throughout the region. Toward northern Minnesota, moose become an important prey item, and some packs prey on small elk herds reintroduced in portions of Minnesota and Wisconsin.¹⁶

Conflicts

Human-wolf conflicts in the Great Lakes region usually arise over livestock, pet, and working animal predation.¹⁷ Negative public attitudes stemming from threatening wolf behavior towards humans and pets exacerbate such conflicts. All three states

have created programs to compensate landowners for verified livestock losses due to wolf attacks. U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services and wildlife agencies work together to investigate wolf attacks, gather information on wolf movement, and remove depredating wolves, when authorized.¹⁸

Conservation and Recovery

The WGL gray wolves have rebounded from severe decline and are again under consideration for delisting.¹⁹ The most important factors that led to the gray wolf's recovery in this region included a combination of strong state management, federal protections of the ESA, and increasing prey populations.⁷ Wolves in this region began to re-colonize major portions of their historic range without reintroduction efforts, and have since maintained healthy population levels and expanded their range.²⁰ There are now over 4,500 individuals in the WGL DPS. If federal delisting occurs, the three states and Indian tribes within this region would take over wolf management under conservation plans approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). The FWS is required to monitor wolf populations following delisting for five years to ensure recovery.



Gray wolves

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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