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RETURN OF THE WOLF

Emotions rise over plans to reintroduce wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains. Are they bloodthirsty killers of game, or necessary to the balance of nature?

BY DANIEL S. LIGHT



The silver-tipped wolf pauses on a rocky outcropping. From the ledge she has a panoramic view of the valley and her new home range. Suddenly, she throws her muzzle skyward and lets out a heavy, mournful howl that echoes throughout the mountains. In that moment, what was a forest is reborn as a wilderness. And we all live happily ever after.

Or...

The marauding packs of savage beasts leave behind them bloody wakes of waste and desolation. The forest soon becomes barren of all wildlife except the devilish killer wolves. Not even people are safe!

Where is the truth? As usual with the gray wolf, it's somewhere in the middle.

The return of the wolf to the West is an issue without precedent. Although an estimated 50,000 wolves roam parts of Canada and Alaska, the federal Endangered Species Act requires that a species be listed as endangered if it is in danger of extinction in "all or a significant portion of its range." The act also requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to write a recovery plan that outlines goals and strategies for recovery of the species. The current controversy stems from the questions of where, when and how wolves should be recovered in the lower 48 states.

The epicenter of the debate is the Yellowstone ecosystem. From there, the shock waves have spread westward to Washington and southward to Arizona and New Mexico, which are potential reintroduction sites for the Mexican gray wolf (a subspecies of which the wild population consists of a few dozen plucky individuals in Mexico). Watching the events closely are Western sportsmen who are trying to decide who's "crying wolf" and who isn't.

In the Lower 48, only the 1550 to 1750 threatened wolves in Minnesota are secure. The gray wolf is listed as endangered in the other 47 states. Precarious populations are present in Wisconsin (40 animals), Michigan (less than 20), Montana (40 to 50), Idaho (less than 15), and Washington (unknown number, but small).

The current Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan calls for the establishment of three separate wolf populations in the Montana, Idaho and Wyoming region. When each population maintains 10 breeding pairs for three consecutive years, the delisting process can begin. The 30 breeding pairs extrapolates to about 300 wolves. A decision should be made later this year whether Washington will tag on to the Northern Rocky Mountain Recovery Plan or go its own direction.

Both the Montana and Idaho recovery areas presently have wolves, although it will be at least 10 years before these areas approach recovery goals. The Yellowstone recovery area will probably require reintroduction, by 1994 at the earliest.

All the controversy stems from the fact that wolves are predators. The ecological role is identical to pheasant chicks that feed

on grasshoppers and walleys that feed on minnows. However, the controversy, and the curse of being a wolf, is that wolves kill the same things humans want to kill.

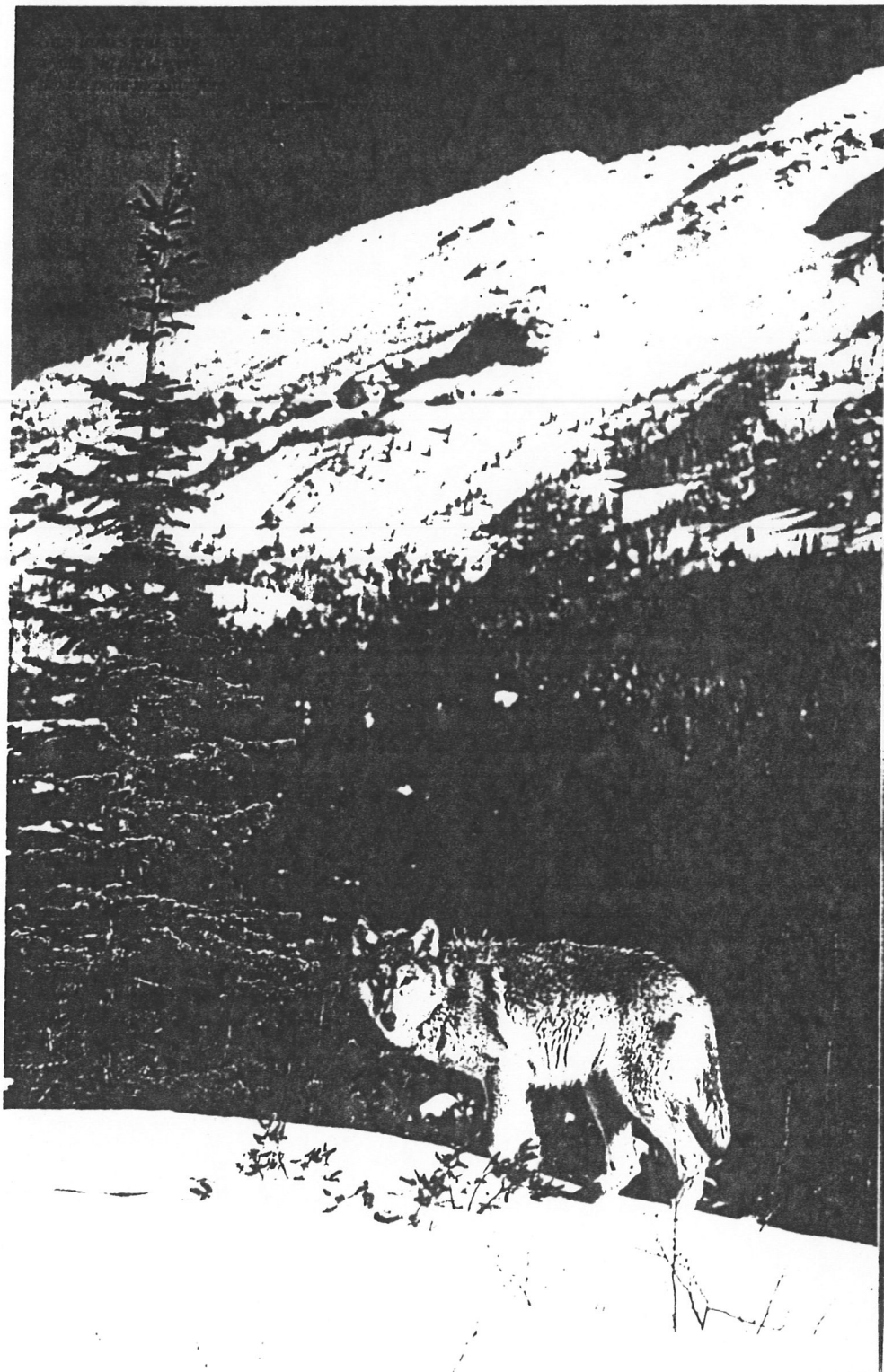
Scientists have determined that a wolf consumes an average of eight pounds of food per day. When elk are the denominator, that computes to seven elk per wolf per year (which includes a correction factor for the parts non-edible to a wolf, essentially the hair and the hooves). The crude arithmetic calculates out to 2100 elk per year in the northern Rocky Mountains (Yellowstone National Park itself contains approximately 30,000 elk during summer).


But, the actual number of elk and deer taken by wolves may be less since wolves supplement their diet with beaver, rabbits

and other small prey. And when opportunity presents itself, wolves are not too proud to become glorified scavengers. Mike Jimenez of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reports that gray wolves in Montana rely heavily on gut piles and injured ungulates.

Biologists have repeatedly proven that wolves usually kill the old, the young and the injured. Evolution has honed the predator-prey relationship so finely that only the inferior prey animals are readily caught by wolves. Fate may occasionally land a prime animal in a wolf's jaws; however, this is a much less common occurrence.

By removing less fit animals, gray wolves actually improve the quality of big game



A black and white photograph showing a wolf in a snowy, wooded environment. The wolf is positioned in the lower-left foreground, facing right, and appears to be feeding on a carcass. The ground is covered in snow, and the background is filled with bare, snow-laden branches of trees and shrubs. The lighting is bright, creating high contrast between the dark fur of the wolf and the white snow.

Elk are a principal prey of wolves, which usually take the young, sick and injured animals. This wolf is apparently feeding on a winter-kill carcass.

(Tom and Pat Leeson photo)

populations. For example, in Wyoming the quality of the bighorn sheep herd is declining due to a surplus of old ewes. Even if hunting ewes becomes socially acceptable, it's unlikely that hunters could select the old, non-reproducing ewes and leave the healthy young ones. Wolves wouldn't knowingly do this, but it would fortunately occur through natural selection processes.

Wolves and big game species co-existed in a well oiled equilibrium long before man came on the scene. Steve Fritts of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has spent a lifetime studying wolves. Concerning wolves and big game, Fritts says, "Every time we look at areas where wolves are alleged to have wiped out or severely reduced game animals, we find that other factors such as deteriorating habitat, a hard winter, over-hunting, disease or a combination of such factors is also at work." As further evidence, the Minnesota deer population has continued to rise in the face of an increasing wolf population.

Biologists estimate that wolves in Yellowstone National Park will reduce the ungulate populations by 10 to 15 percent. Many game herds in the Western states have exceeded the carrying capacity of the range by at least 10 percent.

Gray wolves also benefit non-prey wildlife. Many researchers believe that grizzly bears benefit from wolves by scavenging on their kills. This food source is especially critical during the bear's springtime emergence.

The present coyote problem is another example of the complex biological niche that wolves occupy. Studies have suggested that wolves force coyotes into living in the nooks and crannies between wolf territories. Essentially, the presence of a few wolves (a wolf pack, i.e., family, has a 50-square-mile or greater territory) may mean many fewer coyotes. Ironically, many biologists attribute the coyote expansion to the extirpation of wolves.

The presence of wolves may improve Western big game herds via political means as well as biological. Good wolf management essentially consists of good big game management. The U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management will be required to place increased emphasis on ungulate management where wolves are involved. Roads and other projects that adversely affect big game populations will be prohibited when endangered wolves are present. Meanwhile, biologists agree that there will be no limitations placed on hunting or trapping due to wolves.

Will hunters and trappers ever again be able to harvest wolves in the Lower 48? The answer is probably yes. But first the species must be recovered. There is a precedent for this happening. The alligator was on the endangered species list for many years. It now provides sport and profit for many Southern sportsmen. At least one study in Canada has shown that the value of wolf pelts (tanned hides fetch several hundred dollars) can balance the losses caused by

wolf depredation of livestock.

When Western wolves reach their recovery goals, wolf management will be transferred to the states. Tom France of the National Wildlife Federation says, "Wolves need initial protection, but as soon as possible they should be placed under state management." Although the Minnesota wolf population is very secure, they have not been delisted because they serve as a seed source for the new populations in Wisconsin and Michigan.

The pressure to reintroduce wolves seems unlikely to go away until the recovery goals are met. The slow rate of recovery in many areas is attributed to human-caused mortality. It's ironic that people who illegally shoot wolves are actually delaying the delisting of the animal.

Generally, sportsmen and sportswomen have a positive perception of wolves. Support is especially high among hunters with higher education levels and those knowledgeable about wolf biology. Surveys in Montana, Wyoming, Michigan, Minnesota and other areas support this fact.

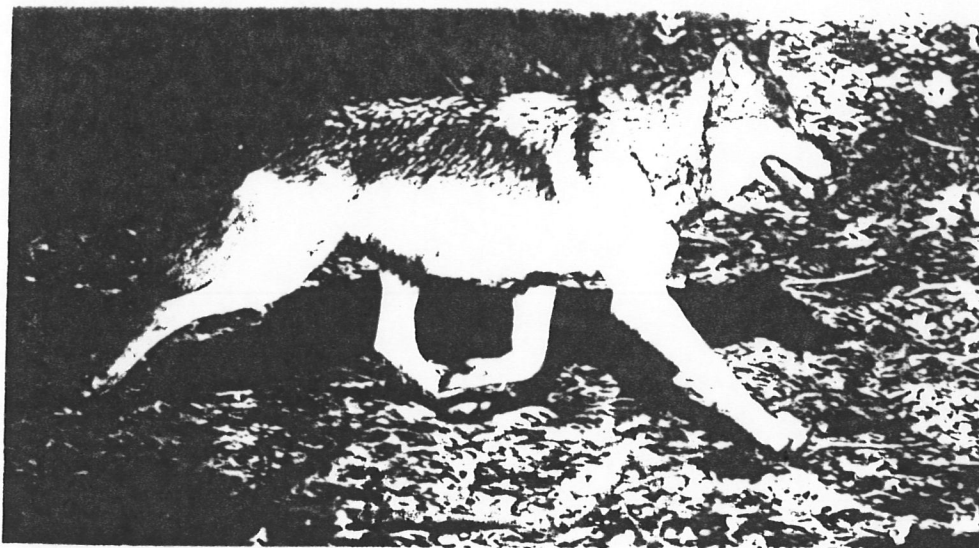
The only rational objection to wolf reintroduction is voiced by the livestock industry. Wolves do indeed kill livestock. However, the numbers are small in proportion to the controversy. In 1991, the verified cattle losses attributed to the 1500-plus Minnesota wolves were three cows and 32 calves. The number of cattle available to the wolves was 232,000. But to a landowner, the loss of one animal can be significant.

Biologists and mainstream governmental groups are well aware of the need for management. France says, "Wolves can, and should, be managed." Wolf experts support the practice of removing livestock-killing wolves under the belief that the livestock-depredating behavior can be culled from the wolf population (livestock killing is typically a learned trait).

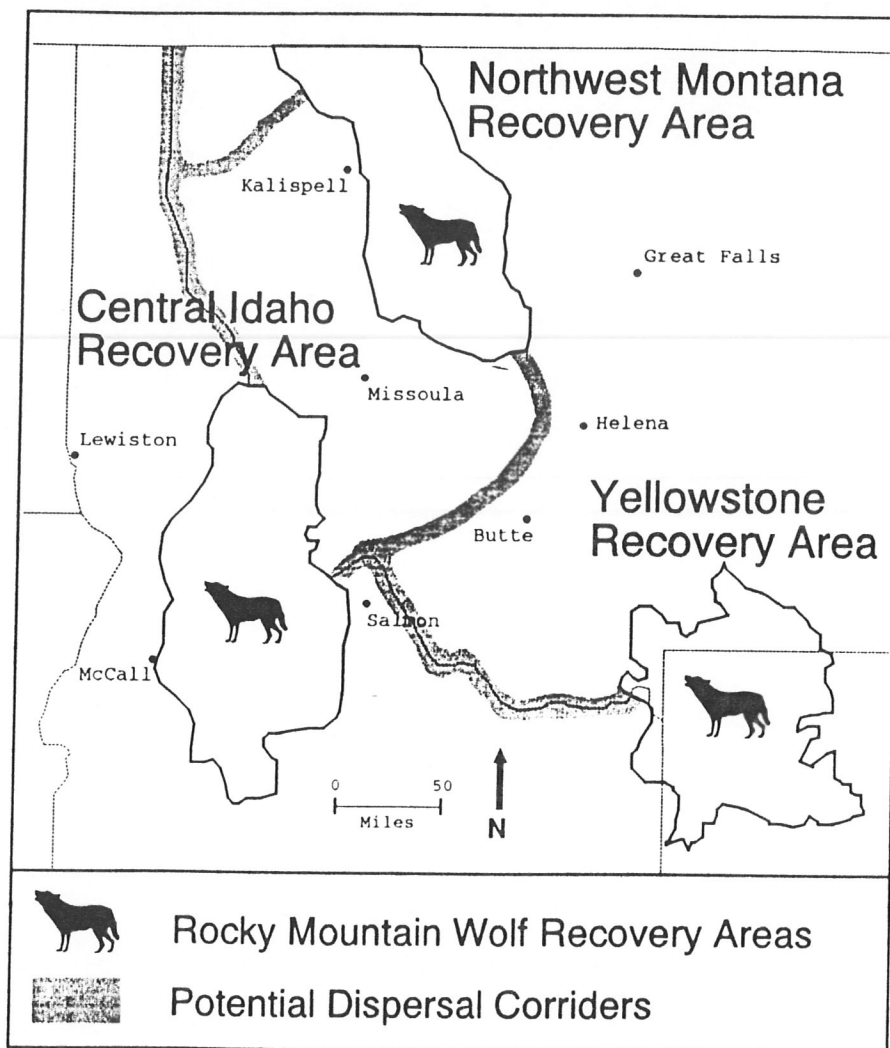
In spite of folklore, there are no verified reports of wolves killing people in North America in modern times. Yet old beliefs, even erroneous ones, don't die easily. In one study the hostile perception towards wolves was exceeded only by negative attitudes toward skunks. The relative difference seems appropriate, since skunks are a much greater danger to man.

Meanwhile, the exaggerated claims are tossed back and forth in the media and the courtrooms. In spite of what the extremists and radicals say, the wolf is not the beast of waste and desolation. They will not annihilate game herds, nor will they take women and children. On the other hand, wolves are not cuddly furballs that humans can walk up to and hug. They do not *always* kill the old, the weak, the young or the ugly.

Wolves are much less of a threat to hunting than the internal polarization they are causing among the various sportsmen's groups. How hunters respond to the wolf issue may affect their sport well into the next century. Much of the public perceives gray wolves as an integral part of America's



The gray wolf is noted as a tireless hunter that covers many miles in a day searching for prey. They stalk, then attack in a burst of speed, and pursuits usually last less than a half mile. (Photo by S. David Powers)



wildlife heritage and a part of its culture. Many sportsmen see themselves in the same light. As one hunter said, "Sportsmen and sportswomen should wake up and smell the campfire coffee."

Meanwhile, in the middle of this fracas (and attorney's paradise) is the gray wolf. So far, biologists have found no evidence of the animal being possessed by demonic intentions nor blessed with noble inspira-

tions. The animal simply exists. When it does encounter a human it may stop to stare, with a slightly quizzical expression, at the two-legged creature before vanishing into the forest darkness. There may be a reason for the perplexed look.

Author Daniel S. Licht, a wildlife biologist, assisted in a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wolf recovery program in North Dakota.