

SPECIAL REPORT

ARE WOLVES REALLY THE PROBLEM?



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HISTORY HAS SHOWN THAT WOLVES AND CIVILIZED DEVELOPMENT DO NOT COEXIST WELL — OR SUSTAINABLY. WOLVES ARE PRIMAL AND THAT'S A GOOD THING. IT'S WHEN THEIR POPULATIONS ARE ALLOWED TO INCREASE BEYOND THAT WHICH WILD AREAS CAN SUPPORT THAT IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES DEVELOP.

BY CHANCE GOWAN

Bill McIrvin was sound asleep when the phone began ringing. As with most people, he assumed a late-night call was important. He staggered from his bed and answered. The call wasn't urgent and it wasn't from family or a neighbor; it was another pugnacious call from a wolf advocate.

These intrusions make him angry. Bill's a tough guy, but he's become weary of the persecution. He and his family have loved and nurtured the same land for six generations. They're a good, hardworking, close-knit family trying to do the right thing. Yet, they've received many insulting calls in the past few years: some threatening, some accusatory, and some pleading. Many are depraved or vulgar and some have threatened their children or promised to burn their homes to the ground.

But this call was different. The voice on the other end was trembling and it sounded as though she was crying. "You have to stop killing wolves," she quavered. "Don't you understand what wolves do? If a child gets lost in the mountains the wolves will find them, take care of them and protect the child until they can lead them back to safety."

Such is the level of incongruity surrounding the wolf controversy in North America. "We've received quite a few calls like that," McIrvin says, shaking his head with a grimace. "You'd be surprised how many people believe 'The Jungle Book' is a true story."

Most people would say this controversy began in 1996 when wolves were first released into the River of No Return Wilderness in central Idaho. In reality, the emotional fervor surrounding wolves started years earlier.

Wolves were officially listed as an endangered species in 1974. At that point, in the lower 48 states they were kind of endangered. I say "kind of" because there have always been lots of wolves in North America; they just weren't present on all their historic ranges. Today, there are at least 75,000 wolves in Alaska and Canada, with thousands more in the lower 48. And the true number could easily be much higher; it's not easy to count wolves.

An endangered species is defined as "a species at serious risk of extinction." As a biologist, I struggle to believe that a contiguous population of at least 75,000 apex-level predators is "seriously at risk." Since the listing of wolves 45 years ago, they have been on and off the endangered list many times. Soon after the first listing, wildlife agencies in several western states petitioned to have wolves reclassified as "threatened," which would recognize that wolves needed some level of pro-



ABOVE LEFT: The location of telltale bite marks, depth of the punctures, and manner of attack led biologists to confirm that wolves killed this calf—killed but they didn't bother to eat it. Unlike bears and mountain lions, wolves frequently eat their prey while they are still alive. RIGHT: This young calf was completely consumed in a single feeding frenzy.



PHOTOS COURTESY, JEFF FLOOD

tection but also sanction management of their populations.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS), the federal agency in charge of administering the Endangered Species Act, reviewed the petitions and agreed that wolves were not truly endangered, their populations were increasing, and so were conflicts between wolves and livestock and people. A mod-

icum of balance would provide much-needed management latitude. Wolves in the lower 48 states were officially reclassified as threatened in 1976.

Unfortunately, environmental nonprofits, always hungry for a quick buck and a fuzzy poster child, rallied their legions of lawyers and slapped huge, complicated lawsuits on the FWS, demanding that wolves be reclassified. Knowing that fighting the suits would involve years of expensive litigation, the agency knuckled under and relisted wolves as endangered.

With that move, wolf populations were once again fully shielded from the slightest management. Popula-

tions quickly began to expand and they dispersed at an astonishing rate. Problems emerged, conflicts between wolves and people began to escalate, and once again it became clear that management was needed.

The FWS was again petitioned to downgrade wolf status. A team of federal biologists studied wolf population trends and agreed. Wolves were reclassified as threatened. Plans were made that would ensure healthy populations while sanctioning management that would protect people, private property, and wildlife herds from excessive depredation.

That process of listing and delisting has repeated itself multiple times since 1974 at huge cost to taxpayers while providing immense earnings for environmental groups. Today the status, classification, and management of wolf populations are so complicated and convoluted that few understand it.

Wolf proponents are fond of saying, "There has never been a documented wolf attack on a human in North America." This is not true. There have been at least 145 documented wolf attacks in North America, with 50 fatalities, 27 of those occurring in the last 20 years. Worldwide there have been tens of thousands of documented wolf attacks on humans.

Since 2000, there have been 363 significant wolf attacks on humans worldwide. In



With hair shaved off, you can clearly see the diagnostic fang marks from wolves. Mountain lions and bears attack in a different manner and coyotes are too small. The wolves left this calf to rot.

North America in 2011 a schoolteacher was jogging down a road when she was chased down by two wolves, killed, and partially eaten; in 2005 a geologist was attacked and eaten; and in 2007 a man was savagely attacked while riding a snowmobile. Even Lewis and Clark documented wolf attacks among well-armed men.

In all these recent wolf attacks, more than 90 percent were officially classified as “unprovoked” or “predatory.” Fewer than five percent involved cases where the wolves were sick, injured, or being threatened.

During World War I, huge packs of wolves converged upon German and Russian soldiers on the Eastern Front. Initially, one or two wolves would attack sleeping soldiers at night, drag them out of the trenches and eat them alive while their brethren listened in horror. As the wolves



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machine guns and bombing them with grenades, all to no avail. Ultimately, in an unprecedented action, a truce was called and opposing forces joined together to confront this terrifying foe. These former enemies killed hundreds of wolves, but in a queer example of human behavior, after the wolf attacks were quelled, the once-allied soldiers returned to their trenches and resumed shooting at each other.

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became bolder, whole packs began to plunge into the trenches, slaughtering men en masse. Soldiers tried shooting them with rifles and

Throughout recorded history there have been thousands of instances of wolves killing humans. In France there were close to 7,600 fatal wolf attacks up until 1920, when wolves were essentially extirpated. In India in 1996 wolves killed more than 50 children, attacking many more. Today super packs of up to 400 wolves are terrorizing people in remote Russian villages, and in Italy’s Tuscany region wolf attacks are cur-



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ABOVE: Wildlife specialist/wolf expert Jeff Flood sets a motion-sensing game camera. AT TOP: A pack of 25 wolves embarks on a hunt. The writer says, “I struggle to believe that a contiguous population of at least 75,000 apex-level predators is ‘seriously at risk.’” CENTER RIGHT: A game camera captured this young collared male and black female, which have broken from different packs to start their own. BOTTOM RIGHT: A young pup absconds with the remnant of yet another kill.



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Nobody knows for sure how many wolves are in Washington and throughout the West. Here, an alpha wolf (center) pushes away a subordinate wolf until it has eaten its fill. Wolf packs are not made up of happy little families. They hunt together because it's a more efficient way to kill.

rently near “crisis levels.”

What causes these attacks? Dr. Valerius Geist, a widely acknowledged expert in wolf behavior and a full professor at the University of Calgary, has written a paper delineating the “seven stages leading to an attack on people by wolves.” He has dedicated much of his career to studying wolves. Here is what he’s learned:

Stage 1: Traditional prey animals become scarce due to increasing numbers of wolves. The scarcity is partially due to increased predation, but also because prey animals begin evacuating home ranges en masse, seeking sanctuary near people.

Stage 2: Wolves in search of food begin to approach human habitations at night.

Stage 3: Wolves appear in daylight and observe people at some distance. Dr. Geist states: “It’s important to recognize that wolves learn in a manner different from dogs. They excel at learning by close observation; they are insight learners; they solve problems, such as unlatching gates, almost at once!”

Stage 4: Small-bodied livestock and pets are attacked close to buildings, even during

the day. The wolves act distinctly bolder.

Stage 5: Wolves explore large livestock, often biting off their tails. Wounded cattle tend to have severe injuries and many are ultimately put down. The wolves become brazen and livestock are killed, sometimes close to houses and barns.

Stage 6: Wolves turn their attention to people and approach them closely, initially observing them for several minutes. This is a switch from the establishment of territory to targeting people as prey. The wolves may make hesitant attacks, darting in and out on humans, testing the potential prey. This exact behavior occurred in summer 2018 in Washington state when a Forest Service worker was confronted by a pack of wolves. She was forced to climb a tree to save herself and later was life-flighted out by helicopter. When Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife biologists were questioned, their response was, “Oh, we think they were just playing or possibly defending a territory.”

Stage 7: Wolves attack people.

We’re clearly at Stage 6, especially in Washington state. With the explosive rise in

numbers, commensurate declines in prey species, rapidly increasing incidences of wolves moving ever closer to people and towns, and unprecedented numbers of livestock being attacked, it seems clear that wolf attacks on people are imminent. In the northeast corner of the state there are 17 packs, including five on the Colville Reservation, where the tribe manages its wolves, Indian style. When problems occur, the offending packs are destroyed before they habituate. Outside of the reservation, where state officials are trying hard to downplay issues surrounding the rapidly expanding populations and explosive increases in wolf/human conflicts, there are three “new packs” in Ferry and Stevens counties that are not yet “officially” acknowledged.

In late 2018 and early 2019, I spent several days in the field talking with local residents and touring with wolf expert and lead wildlife specialist Jeff Flood. His position is funded by concerned county commissioners and administered by the brave county sheriffs in Stevens and Ferry counties, who are more concerned with the safety of the public than



possible repercussions resulting from a lack of political correctness.

Jeff keeps close tabs on packs and tracks their movements with motion-sensitive wildlife cameras and by tracking wolves with radio collars. He documents depredations on livestock and notifies the public when packs are approaching residential areas and livestock. People are very worried. There are lots of wolves and they are approaching housing developments with a frightening increase in frequency.

We traveled the backcountry while Jeff checked numerous wildlife cameras. In all the photos captured by the motion-sensing equipment, there was only one image of an elk. There were no deer or hares, which are primary food sources for wolves. There were countless photos of wolves. We walked down dozens of roads and through meadows, seeing only one elk track and two snowshoe hare tracks. Wolf tracks were everywhere. It had snowed a few days prior, so all the tracks were fresh.

Our drive brought us back and forth through mountains and valleys with numerous ranches and houses on small acreages. We'd not observed a single deer or elk in all our time in the mountains, but deer and elk were openly visible in the populated portions of the counties. It is common for wildlife to

ABOVE: This is the territory of the Dirty Shirt pack. It contains 844 family homes and the U.S. Census Bureau includes it within the Spokane Metro Area—one of the 100 largest metropolitan areas in the United States. BELOW: Bill McIrvine makes another arduous trip, in chest-deep snow, in an attempt to save cattle that are surrounded by wolves and afraid to come home. He doesn't do this to save money. "Every cow and calf is important," he says, "and deserve better than to be eaten alive."



PHOTO COURTESY JEFF FLOOD

move into the valleys during extreme weather. But it wasn't winter. There had only been a skiff of snow, and hunting season was open. Deer and elk do not typically venture into open agricultural fields until winter comes and hunting seasons are over. They have learned that standing around in a field near well-traveled roads during hunting season may get them shot, but staying in the mountains where they're surrounded by wolves will almost certainly be worse.

Just three years ago in northeast Washington, depredations on livestock by wolves were primarily limited to remote areas. Now, as the number of packs increase and wolves become bolder around humans, that has changed. In 2018, for the first time, cattle and sheep were killed and eaten very close to homes. How long will it be before a child or a hiker is maimed or killed in Washington? Wolf populations and incidences of wolf/human conflicts are also rising rapidly in Oregon and parts of California, where they're also fully protected.

This doesn't have to happen. When Washington state created its wolf-management plan, provisions were made to deal with problem packs. Research has shown that when packs first kill livestock they quickly habituate, learning that livestock are easy prey with few



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Jeff examines yet another confirmed wolf kill. This valuable animal was only partially eaten.

defenses. If the offending packs are quickly culled, habituation doesn't occur and other packs can learn that killing livestock leads to a bad outcome. This wisdom was incorporated into the Wolf Management Plan developed by the Wolf Advisory Group, an interdisciplinary team of bureaucrats, biologists, conservationists and animal rights activists.

The plan sets threshold limits for wolf packs that habituate on livestock. If a pack kills four cattle in 10 months or three in a 30-day period, the pack will be eliminated before its behavior spreads or new packs are formed that are predisposed to kill livestock. The animal rights activists and bureaucrats never expected the packs to increase and disperse as rapidly as they have. Now that problems are rampant and wolves are moving into neigh-

borhoods, the activists are reneging on their agreement and the bureaucrats lack the fortitude to stand up to them.

It seems harsh to wipe out a whole pack, but if you only remove one or two the rest will continue to kill livestock and new pups will learn that cattle and sheep are the primary food source. Regrettably, the leadership at the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife (WDFW) is timorous and unwilling to make tough decisions. When a pack exceeds the thresholds and is habitually killing livestock, instead of removing the pack, as the plan stipulates, it may eventually take out one or two animals, then come up with an excuse to quit.

The irony of this behavior is that it results in more wolves being killed. If a couple of wolves are taken out of a pack and the rest are left to continue their behavior, then, ostensibly, the state could go on taking out a couple of wolves here and there from the same packs indefinitely. Depredations would never be suppressed and other packs would likely learn to kill livestock by observation. Conversely, if a pack that is accustomed to killing livestock is removed entirely, adjacent packs learn by scrutiny and avoid the behavior!

Sadly, the WDFW decided not to follow its own plan. Instead, it is removing problem wolves only when the political waters are not too hot. On top of this, the politicians (e.g., governor's office and state and federal legislators) who have administrative authority over WDFW have chosen to hide in the shadows,

ducking the controversy altogether.

How will they "spin" their cowardice when a person is maimed, a child is eaten, or rural businesses fall into bankruptcy and whole communities suffer? How will they redirect the blame, knowing that a little gumption on their part may have precluded such tragedies? They've been notified that these things are going on and cautioned about precipitous transgressions, but they just don't have the courage to act—and they won't, until it's too late.

Washington's plan calls for the state to be

When packs first kill livestock they quickly habituate, learning that livestock are easy prey with few defenses.

divided into sectors and before the wolves can be delisted (and thus managed) there have to be multiple packs of breeding wolves in each sector. This makes no sense because large parts of those sectors contain dense urban areas and other portions are heavily occupied with subdivisions and small family farms. Wolves can never reach target numbers in these areas without certain and devastating human conflicts. So, in effect, this plan has been crafted to actually guarantee that wolves will always be fully protected.

There's a component of the plan that



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Yearling steer on left shows typical body condition at end of summer. On the right, cattle from the same ranch, within the territory of the Profanity Wolf Pack, are emaciated from constant harassment by wolves. Many will not survive.



A fat wolf leisurely snacks on bone marrow from a dead cow.

PHOTO COURTESY JEFF FLOOD



Yet another healthy calf with mortal wounds, likely caused by young wolves learning to hunt cattle.

does provide compensation to ranchers who lose livestock to wolves—if the depredation is verified by two state biologists. That’s extremely difficult. The rancher has to find the dead animal immediately after it is killed and before it’s been eaten and guard the carcass, continuously, for up to 48 hours or it will be so thoroughly consumed by scavengers that “absolute verification of cause of death” cannot occur. Besides that, ranchers see compensation as sort of a bribe: “We’ll pay you for your loss, but you have to keep quiet, because now you have nothing to complain about.”

Landowners know the situation is getting worse. Very few losses can be documented in time to qualify for payment and they know the “hush money” won’t last forever. As wolf populations increase, there will be more losses and less restitution. By then most of the packs will enjoy the easy killing of livestock and few will have any fear of man. That is a recipe for disaster.

Throughout the world, history has shown us that wolves and humans cannot live in close proximity, in harmony. That’s not to say there is no place for wolves. They are here, there are a lot of them, and they will undoubtedly remain in sustainable numbers.



We’ve not seen this level of wolf/human conflicts since the 1800s. The number of conflicts and the ferocity of the wolf attacks is increasing almost daily. But if people in management positions refuse to make the hard decisions they’re paid to make, it’s only a matter of time until there are frequent and ferocious attacks on humans.

The problem with wolves is not the wolves themselves. It’s their job to kill animals and eat them. They are not like bears; major components of their diets are not made up of plants, berries, grubs and insects. Wolves eat meat! If wolves are to persist in these states they have to be managed in a way that recognizes that fact. In order to sustain our human population we need agriculture and livestock. Productive agriculture is not compatible with unregulated populations of wolves.

The problem with wolves isn’t their presence; they’re a valuable component of our ecosystem and add to the quality of life on our planet.

The problem with wolves is that too many decisions are being made by bureaucrats who are afraid to take actions that may negatively affect their political fortunes.

The problem with wolves is that too many people are too far removed from nature and reality. Wolves are not carefree, furry little

people, as depicted in the fairy tale “The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig.” Wolf packs do not find lost children in the mountains. They do not protect humans. What they do is hunt in ferocious packs and kill and eat anything that moves. A pack of wolves needs a lot of meat, day after day. They kill for a living, that’s their job. They have already seriously depleted populations of their traditional game animals and are refocusing their efforts toward killing livestock and pets. How long do you think it will be before they add humans to their diet?

The problem with wolves is lack of management. It’s not okay to say that wolves take complete precedence and it’s not okay that livelihoods are destroyed and families are forced off land that has been part of their heritage for generations.

The problem with wolves is that they need wide-open spaces away from man. History has shown that wolves and civilized development do not coexist well—or sustainably. Wolves are primal and that’s a good thing. It’s when their populations are allowed to increase beyond that which wild areas can support that irreconcilable differences develop.

In our current situation, as wolves deplete natural food sources they won’t die off to sustainable numbers, they’ll just shift from deer and elk to cattle, pets and chickens, and, ultimately, people. History does not lie.

It was a fool’s errand to believe that wolves



Wildlife cameras captured both these wolves very close to family homes, where children were preparing to catch a bus to school. The danger is real and growing daily.

can be reintroduced throughout their “historic ranges” without creating enormous impacts on civilization. People have homes, dogs, children, horses and livestock and America depends on many of these same people to feed the rest of our country.

People in cities like to dictate what we should do in our rural areas. It makes them feel benevolent and close to nature, like watching a Walt Disney movie. But it’s the ultimate hypocrisy. Those in cities have already sterilized their surroundings. Wild things are no longer allowed to live where environmental nonprofits and do-gooders dwell. There is no place for the natural environment or wildlife in cities, so they don’t have to deal with the wild things they profess to love and protect.

It’s these same urbanites who wish to take away guns from the rest of America. Why? Because they’re terrified of the wolves who live in their communities—the gangs and criminals who have infested their lives like predatory beasts. Regardless of the type of “wolves” you face, if you take away our ability to protect ourselves and maintain balance in our lives, these wolves won’t run and hide, they’ll multiply until they’ve taken away all that is precious to us.

I would feel that my life was less fulfilled if I were never again to hear the howl of a wolf echoing across a canyon. Just as I would feel less fulfilled if I were never again to wake up on a crisp morning high in the mountains alone, far from civilization, with just the earth and my God. I believe most people in this country feel the same, even if they never leave

**Apex predators
kill for a living and
right now they’re
killing lots of
livestock and pets.
It won’t be long
before they
come for you.**

their condos in the city. I believe people still want to know those things are there and that primal life still exists because it’s good for our spirits—it all holds the earth together.

The problem with wolves is us! We invited them back into our midst. They were fine living on the fringes of civilization, making an honest living; their populations were stable and genetically healthy. Whether you thought that reintroduction or total protection was a good idea is irrelevant. Wolves are here and they will remain; we owe it to them to find a balance in this mess. But let’s never forget that we also owe the people of rural America the opportunity to protect themselves, their families, their livestock and their livelihoods. It would be a greater travesty if the most self-reliant and perseverant in our country are left to pay that price alone, helplessly watching the carnage and perhaps forfeiting a family heritage that’s been passed down for generations—or worse, forfeiting the life of a child to a hungry pack of wolves.

The choice isn’t that difficult. ■

Chance Gowan is a biologist with more than 35 years of experience in research and management of wildlife, aquatic systems, and riparian ecology. He has presented more than 20 papers at regional, national, and international conferences and published dozens of articles in RANGE magazine. He lives in northern Idaho with his wife, Karli.

