

Living **on** the Wolf Highway

A rancher's nightmare. Words and photos by Rochelle Danielson.

Northeast Oregon's Wallowa County is known as the wild corner of the state and thought by conservationists to be excellent habitat for the gray wolf. Because of its isolated landscape and wildlife, they're right. Since first swimming the Snake River into Oregon from Idaho, wolves have found the county a perfect fit for their voracious appetites and rampant ways.

But as in other Northwest states, the success of wolves has come with a cost. Sportsmen find less wildlife to hunt. Increasing calf depredation and harassment have Wallowa ranchers frustrated, stressed and angry—facing not only the loss of their freedoms, but also their way of life.

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On a gentle slope overlooking upper Wallowa Valley's patchwork of farms, ranches, and snowcapped mountains, Todd Nash's 300 cow-calf pairs begin to crowd the corner fence. Older cows anticipating a return to green grass stand patiently by the gate, while first-time mothers—with not much sense at all—pace, butt, and bawl, calling their calves.

Wintry spring winds blow across the hillside as cowhands hunker down to gather the herd for the three-day cattle drive. They'll trail 30 miles over a diverse landscape, from the Zumwalt Prairie northeast of Enterprise down 2,500 feet into the depths of Big Sheep Canyon just five miles from the Snake River.

“The drive, followed by a day of brand-

ing, is meant to be a time of relaxation from the rigors of winter feeding and calving,” says Nash. “And a celebration, thankful the baby calves are alive and well.”

Nash, who within a two-year period mysteriously lost 30 calves while grazing summer range, spent days searching the canyon's rugged basalt rims. Not daring to send his border collies too far out, he accidentally found one calf's remains after noticing an eagle perched on a carcass. This spring he's not celebrating turning his cows out. He's worried sick about wolves.

Longtime rancher Karl Patton—whose place lies near what he calls the wolf highway—says: “No relaxing here, I'm wolfin' all the time. When the pack travels north or



Todd Nash's 300 cow-calf pairs are about to be moved to the high country and are beginning to crowd the corner fence. Older cows anticipating a return to green grass stand patiently by the gate, while first-time mothers—with not much sense at all—pace, butt, and bawl, calling their calves.

moves south, and they're always on the move, they pass on my land. I'm in contact with ODFW [Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife] every four hours as to the pack's whereabouts."

Patton faced five charging wolves last spring and says: "The wolves are like a gang of thugs, traveling the countryside doing what they want. Until someone stops them, they'll continue their wanton ways."

From Tom and Lori Schaafsma's ranch home near the timber-covered foothills six miles east of Joseph, the couple watched a huge black wolf lope down the hill and cross through their fenced pasture behind the barn.

"They're unafraid," says Lori, "and now I fear for our kids when they take the four-wheeler, along with the dogs, to hunt squirrels."

Scott and Kelly Shear, who ranch on Tucker Down Road across from the Schaafsmas, lost a calf to wolves last spring, but found one little fella who'd luckily escaped



with just a huge wolf bite. Scott says, "If Oregon wants wolves so badly, they should compensate the rancher for depredation losses and veterinarian bills."

Both Shear and Schaafsma use nonlethal deterrents such as radio activated guard (RAG) boxes that pick up signals from the GPS-collared wolves, dead-animal disposal

and fladry. "An electrified flagged fence may haze the wolves, but they're smart," says Schaafsma. "Neighbors Don and Lois Hough have found wolves inside their fladry-encircled pasture more than once."

Rod Childers is chairman of the wolf committee for the Oregon Cattlemen's Association. "The wolf's presence in Wallowa

ABOVE: Eric Smith lost this three-month-old calf to wolves. It was killed on rented private land after summer turnout. BELOW: The majestic Wallowa Mountains and the small town of Joseph, located in northeast Oregon, provide a picturesque backdrop as cowhands gather 300 cow/calf pairs for a three-day, 30-mile cattle drive. Todd Nash and crew are moving his herd from the high country winter feed in the Wallowa Valley to summer grass—on private and public (wolf) land—in the rugged lower elevations of Hell's Canyon and Snake River country on the Oregon/Idaho border.



County has changed the way producers do business,” he says. “Besides dealing with increased management costs and death loss, indirect costs come from disposition, lower conception rates and weight loss. For more than 20 years, the natural-resource industries have lobbied to modify the Endangered Species Act and National Environmental Policy Act. Without action on these policies, users will never grow their operations, which causes fewer jobs, hurts the infrastructure of communities, and requires more imports from other countries. With more than 60,000 wolves on the North American continent, it is utterly ridiculous to allow special interest groups to pull out so-called subspecies and call them endangered. That was never the intent of the act. The federal government should immediately move to delist all wolves.”

John Williams, Oregon State University extension agent, says: “Ranching in Wallowa County has always been challenging. It’s a way of life. Challenges historically have come from Mother Nature. New challenges seem to be from the government.”

Childers agrees. “Most ranchers would rise to the wolf challenge if the playing field was level,” he says. “Otherwise, we only need to look to Montana, Idaho and Wyoming to see Oregon is next, and we don’t like it.”

Rochelle Danielson is a freelance writer for the Observer in La Grande, Ore. A Boise Cascade employee, she worked in sawmill production in Joseph for 18 years until the spotted owl issue forced plant closure. She then transferred to Boise’s Elgin plywood plant—a 90-mile commute from Enterprise—for 12 years before retirement.



ABOVE: Branding with the Dunhams, left to right, Connie, volunteer Dave Schreiber, son Jason (holding calf) and husband Jim. BELOW LEFT: Karl Patton’s wolf-killed calf. AT BOTTOM: Wallowa County Sheriff Fred Steen studies a carcass. He’s seen too many wolf kills on these rolling hills.

Living With Wolves in Oregon

The Oregon Cattlemen’s Association introduced several House bills to the Oregon Legislature including HB3560, which would establish a wolf depredation compensation plan if funded. (Defenders of Wildlife, the only group to compensate losses, plans to halt payments in September—something it said it would never do.) This bill passed both the House and the Senate in late June. Rod Childers, OCA wolf committee chairman and co-founder of the bill says, “I’m very pleased.”

HB3563 would allow the taking of a wolf without a permit if it is chasing, harassing, wounding or biting livestock, pets, working or sport dogs. Government regulations will move at a snail’s pace while the biological and natural cycles move at a much faster pace, negatively impacting rural communities. Wolves will lose, as we kill many just to live with them. Cattle will lose, as many are killed. Wildlife will lose, as many get preyed upon. People will lose, as they attempt to manage this train wreck.

Wallowa County is taking positive steps by establishing the Community Alliance Livestock Fund (a.k.a. CALF). The plan sets up a mechanism to receive federal and state money while being administered on a local level.

CALF’s educational committee consists of ranchers’ wives, Extension agents, and volunteers working together to educate and create educational opportunities through the use of various forms of media. This includes billboards, YouTube documentary, and a PowerPoint presentation to present to schools and community groups. They host students from Sunnyside Elementary, a public environmental school in Portland, Ore., for a week. In turn Sunnyside hosts kids from Wallowa County ranches.—RD

