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Wolf War

Colorado's urban voters have forced livestock-growing counties into an unending and terrifying battle.

By Marjorie Haun

What Don Gittleson woke up to on a spring morning in 2022 was appalling. Something had been killed, brutally. A spinal column with a few ribs still attached, scattered flesh, small limbs, hunks of black hide and the head, severed from the body lying amidst the other remains, left no doubt it was a newborn calf. The calf's owner, Walden, Colo., rancher Gittleson, says of the scene: "It was a newborn calf [the wolves] killed at night. The only thing to show the calf was born alive was the bruising on the head. The cow was exhausted from fighting the wolves. We had a range rider that night who didn't even know it happened."

This was not the first time Gittleson had been confronted by wolves moving into his lands just south of the Wyoming frontier. "We've lost seven cows and three calves that we know of. How many calves have been taken in the night, we're not sure."

The push by radical environmentalists to bring northern gray wolves into Colorado bears a strange resemblance to the grisly scene on Don Gittleson's ranch. A state is being rent into pieces and with endless conflicts ensuing on the range and in the courts, the state may never be put back together.



COURTESY DON GITTLESON

Setting Up for a Battle

With a rich history of ranching, hunting and natural resource development, Colorado has slowly fallen prey to extremist policies flowing from Denver, which now seems to have little in common with the rural counties surrounding it. In 2018 Jared Polis, a Boulder millionaire and gay activist, was elected governor. He had formerly represented Colorado's 2nd Congressional District in the U.S. House

of Representatives. Polis is married to Marlon Reis, an outspoken animal rights activist and vegan, who appears to wield great influence over Polis. In 2021 Reis promoted a radical ballot measure, Proposition 16, which would have defined common animal husbandry practices such as artificial insemination and pregnancy checking as "sexual assault." Fortunately, Proposition 16 was squashed in the courts. But with ideologies like these dominating the Governor's Mansion, a face-off with livestock interests was inevitable. As Gittleson says, "The governor is in charge of what goes on in the state, and the First Gentleman is in charge of the governor."

In 2020, Polis endorsed Proposition 114, the Colorado Wolf Initiative, brought forth by the Rocky Mountain Wolf Project, whose chief donor was the Soros-funded Tides Center. The Center for Biological Diversity, Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council and Biophilia Foundation also pitched in to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars. Despite an upwelling of local opposition, primarily from rural communities, Proposition 114 passed by a slim margin, with urban populations voting in favor of introducing gray wolves into rural livestock-growing counties.



COURTESY COLORADO DNR



COURTESY DON GITTLESON

ABOVE: Gov. Jared Polis (center) poses with Colorado Parks & Wildlife director Jeff Davis (left) and Department of Natural Resources director Dan Gibbs. RIGHT: Don Gittleson with his grandson, Eisten, on his Walden, Colo., ranch. BELOW: Scott Rockholm, an Idaho biologist, hunter and expert on wolf predation, collects newspaper clippings detailing wolf attacks on humans and livestock from around the world going back 150 years. Too many people have died. OPPOSITE TOP: It is tough to escape from a wolf pack. OPPOSITE BOTTOM: The remains of a cow attacked by wolves lie strewn on Don Gittleson's ranch in northern Colorado.

Plenty of pro-wolf propaganda propped up the campaign. The Rocky Mountain Wolf Project quotes Joanna Lambert, Ph.D., from U.C. Boulder: “Humans have lived alongside wolves for our entire existence in the northern hemisphere. From all over the world, the science is clear that humans can live with large carnivores, even those that are potential predators of livestock.” She fails to mention that coexistence with wolves in settled landscapes has never succeeded in the past, and wolves have had to be culled en masse to protect humans, livestock and wildlife.

On its website, the Denver Zoo states, “They [wolves] are part of a healthy ecosystem and reestablishing them will help restore a natural balance that has been missing.” And it goes on to deceive with its answer to the question, “Are wolves a threat to humans?” It asserts: “Wolves are very shy and elusive animals. Most people don’t even see wolves when they are in areas with robust populations. Wolf attacks can happen, but they are extremely rare. Between 1900 and 2000, in Alaska and Canada, where over 60,000 wolves live, there were only 16 documented bites by wolves—only six were considered serious and none were life threatening.” Such wolf mythology persists despite hundreds of historical accounts of wolves attacking and killing humans—including many Natives—throughout North America, Europe and Asia to the present day.

Perhaps the greatest irony of all is that



COURTESY SCOTT ROCKHOLM

WOLVES KILL LONE INDIAN
Slays Nine Animals in North Before He is Overcome.
 After emptying his rifle and fighting desperately with his knife, killing nine wolves, a lone Indian on the Lake of the Woods, thirty-five miles from Warroad, was torn to pieces by the rest of the beasts that had attacked him. His bones were found stripped of every vestige of flesh. The nine carcasses of the dead wolves that he had killed were lying near.
 This is the first fatality of the kind reported this winter. The wolves are starving because of the lack of snow, which makes it easy for them to overtake deer in the woods, and they are traveling on the lake in large packs of thirty or more animals.

prior to Proposition 114, gray wolves were introducing themselves into Colorado from the north, and the attacks on Don Gittleson’s cattle serve as undeniable proof. Gittleson says: “The wolves run a big range and a pack can cover about 350 square miles. They are elusive and travel with ease.” And he warns, “Once they have a litter and settle into a den, that’s going to be their home range.”

Mexican gray wolves are also pressing northward through New Mexico. And now the interested government agencies find themselves flummoxed by these natural migrations. In February, the *Denver Post* reported: “The Mexican gray wolf subspecies has made a significant recovery over the last 25 years, but government biologists now worry that the reintroduction of the larger northern gray wolf in Colorado could derail that progress, should the two populations mix.... Those worries prompted Colorado wildlife officials in September to sign first-of-their-kind agreements with New Mexico, Arizona and Utah. They will allow those states to relocate any roving northern gray wolves back to Colorado.”

Wolves Come First

Colorado Parks & Wildlife is charged with managing the complicated and politically charged wolf introduction effort. Finding itself pressed by pro-wolf ideologues on one side and hunters, ranchers and rural counties on the other, CPW has made enemies of



VIA INTERNET
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COURTESY DON GITTLESON



ABOVE AND CENTER: Another grim reminder of the dangers of putting these killers with humans, dogs, horses, livestock and wildlife. RIGHT: Stealthy wolves leave human-hand-sized tracks on Don Gittleston's ranch. BELOW: After being attacked by wolves, this cow had to be put down. According to Gittleston, "Wolves will eat a live animal from the inside out, beginning with the anus." According to documentary filmmaker Scott Rockholm, "The fantasy of living with wolves is a joke."

many of the people it once served.

Although legislators from rural districts passed bills to defend livestock owners—including one that would give the state a greater variety of wolf management options and another that would delay release of wolves—the bills received Polis' veto. During the 2024 session, legislators from two rural counties pushed CPW and Gov. Polis to provide a definition of "chronic depredation," which would give ranchers standing should they have to destroy incorrigible wolves. At this writing, neither CPW nor Polis has responded to the request. The governor did sign a bill into law creating the Wolf Depredation Compensation Fund to reimburse ranchers who lose animals to wolf predation. Compensation will not come, however, if CPW has doubts. According to Don Gittleston: "So far, we've had seven cows confirmed as wolf kills. But we've had some calves that we think the wolves got that they didn't confirm. For example, we had a cow that had a calf and when we checked her in the morning, the calf was gone." Gittleston continues, "We lost one cow that we were reimbursed \$5,000 for, but her value was well over that."

Polis even pooh-poohed a legal device called the J-10 rule that would help ranchers. According to John Martin, a county commissioner and livestock owner from impacted Garfield County: "Under the federal provision called the J-10 rule, if there is a stockperson who has animals being preyed on, they can protect their livestock by destroying the predator. But Gov. Polis doesn't want that to happen so the CPW is discouraging it as well. This will eventually end up in court when

people are arrested for protecting their stock because to the state the wolves come first."

Aside from hunters and trappers, wolves have no natural enemies and Colorado outlawed trapping in 1996. Montana, Idaho and Wyoming allow for the culling of wolves, but Colorado will afford wolves the full measure of Endangered Species Act protections. And although mild hazing is allowed, wolves quickly become inured to non-lethal deterrents such as light and noise devices and red flags.

Lies and a Surprise

A key order of business for CPW was to curate adult gray wolves to import. In May 2023, its director Jeff Davis sought wolves from Montana, Idaho, Washington and Oregon. Montana first declined, then Idaho. As Phys.org, reports, Jim Fredericks, the director of Idaho Fish & Game, cited federal restrictions on managing Idaho's wolves, unacceptable impacts of wolves on elk and deer populations, and mistrust between conservation groups and ranchers as reasons for denying Colorado's request.

Following a snub from the state of Washington, Oregon accommodated—with animals that have an apparent taste for livestock. Notwithstanding his Sept. 12, 2023, testimony before the Colorado House Ag Committee, in which Davis assured his agency would not put "problem" wolves into the mix, two of the



COURTESY DON GITTLESON

first five wolves released in the heart of Colorado came from Oregon's infamous Five Points Pack. Rachel Gabel's scathing December 20 report in *The Fencepost* details: "Two wolves released on Dec. 19, 2023...come from the Five Points Pack. According to Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife Livestock Depredation Investigations, Five Points Pack wolves injured

one calf and killed another in separate depredations in July of 2023; killed a cow on Dec. 5, 2022; and injured a 900-pound yearling heifer on July 17, 2022."

What has been described as the "covert" release of wolves was a gut punch to Routt County rancher Skylar Fischer, whose op-ed appeared in the *Denver Post* on December 31. He wrote: "As I opened the email, I expected another fact sheet of advice on how to deal with an encounter; I was floored by what I read. Five wolves had been released in Radium, a small town that I was once assured was a doable daylong horse ride from my home...I hear my neighbors and friends demanding that someone, really anyone, hear their side of the story and try to understand how this action has devastated their futures as livestock producers."

At this writing 12 wolves have been released, and according to radio collar tracking data are ranging an area of 5,000 square miles that reaches from south of Vail to near the Wyoming state line. Commissioner John Mar-

tin says: “So far, we’ve got 23 cows and calves that have been killed or maimed by the wolves and that is only going to get worse. That doesn’t take into consideration wildlife.”

Counteroffensive

Days before the Dec. 19, 2023, wolf release, Colorado Conservation Alliance brought into play the favored litigation weapon of the left—NEPA, the National Environmental Policy Act—and hit CPW with a lawsuit naming Jeff Davis and the executive director of the Colorado Department of Natural Resources, Dan Gibbs, as defendants. The lawsuit claims Colorado failed to follow NEPA in its implementation of the wolf plan, and that its environmental impact statement is “deficient.” Because CPW failed to inform livestock owners prior to the release of wolves and included animals with histories of livestock predation, on Dec. 22, CCA was able to file a court injunction to halt further wolf releases. In response to its injunction, on January 24, CPW announced that it would not introduce any more wolves until December 2024.

From an environmental standpoint, this lawsuit appears to have teeth. That wolves carry diseases including hydatid disease or canine tapeworm (*Echinococcus granulosus*) that can spread to big game, dogs, livestock and humans is well-documented.

Another ecological factor is the impact of wolves on wildlife, most notably big game species including deer, elk, moose and bison. Sixty-six wolves were released in central Idaho and Yellowstone National Park over a period from 1995 to 1996. Data gathered by Idaho Fish & Wildlife reveals a startling decline in big game animals harvested since that time. Although Idaho’s elk herds were declining somewhat prior to 1995, the presence of wolves has coincided with sharp drops of 300 to 1,000 percent in some areas. In 1989 the elk harvest in Idaho’s Lolo zone, for example, was 1,975. By 2018 the harvest was 146, comprising a decline of some 930 percent. Impacts in Yellowstone have been similar. In 1995 there were approximately 20,000 elk and 1,000 moose in the national park. Data now holds the current wolf population at around 120,

while elk numbers have plummeted to 5,000 and moose now number less than 200. With easier prey disappearing, wolves are now going after the larger, more dangerous bison.

The court will determine whether or not CPW’s “deficient EIS” took any of these factors into consideration.

Forever War

From the beginning, wolf advocates have used sympathetic portrayals of wolves to exploit the naivete of urban voters. Shortly after the wolf release, Gov. Polis touted a new travel and tourism poster welcoming visitors to Colorado with the enticing line, “now with wolves” and portraying these apex predators

have to watch that wolf do its business on my cattle or my horses until they’re dead. I cannot shoot that wolf.” He continues: “What’s really frustrating is my wife loves to take our young sons hiking in the mountains, but the presence of wolves is a new danger. Wolves are not like bobcats or coyotes. They coordinate, they make a plan, then execute that plan according to the pack.”

As insane as it seems, stealthy, efficient, adaptable, predatory wolves have been intentionally released into the heart of Colorado’s livestock country, and neither citizens nor state agencies have been given the means to effectively control them. Despite legal efforts to stem the tide of carnage that will assuredly



COURTESY JADEN COTTLE

Livestock owner Jaden Cottle knows it’s a matter of time before wolves establish packs in the region of his ranch near Mancos in southwestern Colorado. Left to right: Jaden, baby Jett, Alyssa and young horseman, Colter.

ensue, everyone with an interest in healthy livestock and robust herds of ungulates will see their numbers diminished and a way of life eaten away.

Scott Rockholm is a documentary filmmaker (“Yellowstone is Dead,” “Ghosts of the Rockies”) and expert on wolf predation. He collects documentary evidence of wolf predation on animals and man spanning three centuries from throughout the world. He says: “Wolves are not shy. They are crafty and smart. They will kill you. I was attacked and almost killed by wolves. The fan-

as a cute cartoon character.

The sugarcoating doesn’t stop there. CPW followed up the wolf release with a “Living with Wolves” guide offering outdoor enthusiasts such sage advice as carrying a stick when walking in wolf country, clapping and blowing an emergency whistle should one encounter a wolf, and best of all: “If attacked, fight back and try to remain standing. A wolf’s underbelly and face are sensitive areas that can be good to strike.”

Jaden Cottle, a young livestock owner and family man living near Mancos in southwestern Colorado, worries. “Right now the only predators we face are mountain lions and black bears. On occasion coyotes will get a calf, but for the most part they aren’t a threat. The problem we’re going to run into is that wolves are federally protected. If a wolf comes on my property and starts attacking my livestock, I legally cannot do anything about it. I

tasy of living with wolves is a joke.”

Coloradans need not guess about what is in their future. The impact of wolves on livestock and wildlife in other western states paints a grim picture. Trust between the state and Colorado’s ranchers has been broken, and livestock owners will bear heavy burdens from wolf predation. Populations of large ungulates will falter and for years, decades and perhaps generations, rural people will be conscripted against their will to fight in Colorado’s wolf war. ■

Marjorie Haun is a freelance journalist specializing in ranching, agriculture and natural resource development. She lives in Utah’s high desert near the Colorado state line and is currently lobbying legislators to pass a law giving individuals full legal protections should they need to destroy an invading Colorado wolf in order to protect their lives and/or property.