

Overkill?

Wolf experts say predators rarely indulge in surplus killing, but Orofino man who logs extensive time in Idaho's backcountry is not convinced

By Eric Barker of the Tribune
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Contributed photo

Lewis Turcott, of Orofino, poses with a dead cow elk he believes was killed by wolves but not consumed by the predators.
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Lewis Turcott doesn't believe wolves are in balance with elk.

The Orofino man has logged hundreds of hours in the backcountry during the dead of winter. He's seen wolves walk past dead elk and barely take a sniff. That leads him to the conclusion wolves often kill more deer and elk than they need to survive.

But wolf experts say that practice, known as surplus or sport killing, is rare. It does happen but not often, according to scientists like Ed Bangs and Mike Jimenez of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Doug Smith of Yellowstone National Park and Curt Mack of the Nez Perce Tribe Wildlife Department. "We are on our 15th year of wolves in Yellowstone and we have only documented it one winter," said Smith, a wolf manager at Yellowstone.

Bangs, the wolf recovery coordinator for the Northern Rockies at Helena, Mont., said wolves will kill several domestic animals like sheep at one time. But it doesn't happen with wolves and deer very often.

"It does happen with domestic animals because people have bred every ounce of self-protection out of those things and predators can kill large numbers of them at one time simply because they just stand around and are vulnerable," he said. "In nature, that rarely happens. If wolves were going to kill all the elk, they would have done it 10,000 years ago."

Jimenez manages wolves in Wyoming, where thousands of elk winter at low elevations. Many of them hang around feeding areas where the state doles out hay. That many elk attracts the attention of wolf

packs.

But Jimenez said despite the opportunity to kill several elk at once, the wolves tend to pick them off one at a time.

"Once in a while we would see more than one elk would be killed in a day, but by far they kill at the same predation rate they would on normal (elk) winter range."

Mack, a biologist for the Nez Perce Tribe, said the perception of wolves killing large number of elk at one time persists for several reasons. Wolves tend to hunt in low-elevation areas with moderate terrain. He said that is the same type of ground to which people recreating in the winter flock. That means people are much more likely to run across elk killed by wolves than they are elk killed by mountain lions.

Since wolves hunt in packs a kill site is very visible, often with several sets of tracks and blood in the snow. On top of that, he said, people often happen along and bump wolves off of a recent kill. They make the assumption wolves killed the elk and simply left it. But the wolves often return as soon as the people leave.

"You can understand why the public perception is out there," he said.

Mack participated in a study of winter hunting habits of wolves outside of Salmon. He said the research showed wolves almost always ate the entire carcass or most of the carcass before moving on.

"We documented, on average, a carcass was consumed 75 to 100 percent."

But he said wolves tend to run a circuit during the winter between different elk winter ranges. When they leave a kill site, they will often return in a week or so and find uneaten portions of carcasses to feed on.

"As they come through, if they find a carcass, they just continue to eat on those all winter long."

Jimenez said some wolf packs are more wary of people than others. Shy packs will sometimes abandon kills if they have been disturbed by people.

"Some packs are easily disturbed and other packs may come right back," he said.

Smith once watched a pack take down an elk shortly before a car happened by. The people stopped to take pictures and the wolves left. But, he said, they came back that night and ate the carcass.

The one case of surplus killing documented in Yellowstone happened late in the harsh winter of 1997. A pack killed five elk in one day.

"When they killed those five elk they cycled back to all five in a two-week period and consumed all of the elk," Smith said.

Turcott is not convinced by those arguments. He often snowmobiles deep into the North Fork of the Clearwater River basin to observe elk and wolves interacting. He remembers seeing dead elk virtually ignored by the wolves.

"Sometimes you see three or four dead elk. You can see all of them at one time and maybe one or two will have a little bit chewed off of them and others have nothing," he said. "I have seen wolves come back by there and there is a lot of meat left on them and they walk right by them. I'm not saying it happens 100 percent of the time, but there is a lot of them they walk right by."

The biologists say when wolves do kill several elk or deer at one time it is usually because of unusual conditions like exceptionally deep snow that makes the prey animals more vulnerable. Wolves are programmed to take advantage of those situations, partly because elk are difficult to kill. Smith said wolves are successful only about 10 percent to 20 percent of the time.

"They are programmed to take advantage of every situation or they are going to starve to death."

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