

Who is Crying Wolf?

By Frank Minitzer, Executive Field Editor

Ryan Counts, a hunting guide from Pray, Mont., sighted a mature wolf on Oct. 3, 2009, and grabbed his rifle. He was hunting elk on Buffalo Plateau north of Yellowstone, an area where the Northern Yellowstone elk herd plummeted 67 percent between 1994-2008, a tumble in which wolves played a chief role. He had a wolf tag. This was his chance to do something about the wolf population.

He killed the wolf.

He found out later the wolf he shot was known as "No. 527." It was a female born in 2002 into what had been Yellowstone's Druid Peak Pack, a pack made famous by the PBS documentary "In the Valley of the

Wolves." He didn't know "wolf watchers" had named this wolf "Bolt" because it had a Z-shaped marking on its hip. But, even if he had known, he says he would have killed it nonetheless.

On the other side of the issue are wolf watchers such as Laurie Lyman, a former San Diego teacher who uses her blog to tell the stories of individual wolves. When Counts shot wolf No. 527 Lyman reacted as if someone shot her dog. She wrote, "527 is gone. It is with a heavy heart that I write yet another obituary for a wolf that was part of our lives for seven years ... She was a one-of-a-kind wolf."

Such was the dramatic divide between views of the first modern wolf seasons in Montana and Idaho.

How Did the Season Go?

With an estimated population of at least 1,645 wolves in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) finally followed its own guidelines by removing Endangered Species Act (ESA) protections from wolves in the northern Rockies in May 2009. After a series of court challenges, seasons were enacted in Idaho and Montana last fall and winter to manage the wolf populations. At press time, Wyoming's wolf-management plan had not been approved by the USFWS; as a result, the Cowboy State wasn't allowed to conduct a season in 2009. Wyoming is currently fighting for its plan in court (see sidebar, "Wyoming's Wolf Fight").

Carolyn Sime, wolf coordinator for the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP), is pleased with the results of its wolf hunt. She said, "Hunters killed 72 wolves in Montana. Our goal was to kill 75 of the state's estimated 500-plus wolves. We stopped the season early to prevent hunters from exceeding that number. It was a very successful hunt. We're now confident a public hunt can continue to be a critical population-management tool for wolves, just as it has been for Montana's other big-game species."

Wyoming's Wolf Fight In late 2009, federal biologists estimated there were at least 1,645 wolves in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming, including 300 to 350 in Wyoming. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), however, opted not to approve the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's wolf recovery plan. The USFWS wants Idaho, Montana and Wyoming to guarantee a goal of 15 breeding pairs and 150 wolves in each state. Wyoming's draft plan only commits the state to maintaining seven breeding pairs of wolves. Wyoming's wolf-management plan would also list wolves as a "trophy species" in the state's northwest corner and as a non-game "predator species" in the rest of the state, which would allow people to shoot the wolves without even buying a tag. The USFWS thinks this is too harsh. At press time, they were fighting it out before U.S. District Judge Alan B. Johnson.

Meanwhile, at press time, Idaho's hunters looked like they'd fall short of killing the 220 wolves the state had hoped to take from an estimated population of 850. Michael Keckler, communications director for the Idaho Department of Fish & Game, said, "We're on track to get the wolf population under control thanks to hunter-conservationists."

Montana and Idaho used a quota-based approach, much like they do for mountain lions. A quota system establishes a total number of wolves that can be killed in each unit. Hunters are required to report killing a wolf within 12 hours and to call in before going hunting to make sure a unit is still open. As a result, the kill was "well distributed geographically," said Sime. She added, "Now we can continue to perfect our seasons and quotas regionally to manage the wolf population with other big-game species and to reduce livestock and pet losses to wolves. The wolf is here to stay. Now we just have to learn how to manage them."

The Wolf's Future in the West

So with both states saying they had successful seasons, have environmentalists been crying wolf? After all, animal-rights activists predicted wolf seasons in the West would bring extinction to the burgeoning gray wolf population. Indeed, the least hyperbolic stance from anti-hunters came from *The New York Times*, which opined in an editorial in September 2009: "To us, the wolf hunt in Idaho and Montana seems indecent. Hunters want to kill wolves because wolves kill elk—and the human hunters want the elk. A second reason is a love of killing things. A third is an implacable, and unjustified, hostility to the wolf. It is well past time to let gray wolves find their own balance in the Rockies."

This urban viewpoint doesn't function in reality, says Ed Bangs, USFWS western gray wolf recovery coordinator. He says the wolf season in Idaho and Montana was hardly "indecent." Bangs explains that the ESA is not a good tool for managing a wildlife

256 *By the Numbers* The number of wolves in the northern Rockies wildlife authorities had to kill for preying on livestock

72 The number of wolves killed by hunters in Montana in 2009

\$325,916 The amount of revenue wolf licenses raised for Montana in 2009

15 The number of wolves hunters killed in Montana that came from packs that had a prior history of killing livestock

population. It is only useful for recovering a population, and wolves surpassed minimum numbers set by the USFWS years ago.

The idea that wolves should find "their own balance in the Rockies" is also a false premise proved with each cow and sheep wolves kill, says Sime. People live in every ecosystem in the West—no matter what a Manhattan-based newspaper says—so people have to participate in the predator-prey system. Wolves and grizzlies don't belong near Montana school bus stops any more than they do in Central Park.

A winter drive out of ski resorts in Jackson Hole, Wyo., or Big Sky, Mont., and into the lower-elevation valleys below would illustrate this point, as doing so would show any visiting wolf lover herds of elk that have come down out of the snow-laden mountains to wintering areas. These wintering areas are habitat that groups, such as the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, have worked hard to preserve. Seeing thousands of elk and deer wintering along roads and near ranch houses and towns should be evidence enough that people and wildlife share the same habitat and so have to find a balance with each other, a balance maintained with science-based hunts, say the game agencies.

That's the reality, says Bangs, who adds, "Because of the hunts, the wolf's overall population will likely be the same in hunted areas in 2010 as it was in 2009. Stabilizing the wolf population is a positive step forward. These hunts will not lead to wolf extinction in the West."

In fact, Bangs says the USFWS is hoping hunters can be used in future seasons to lower the wolf population in the northern Rockies to around 1,200 animals, from at least 1,645 today. In 2009, Montana hunters killed about 15 percent of the state's wolf population. At press time, Idaho was still trying to kill about 25 percent of its wolves. Bangs says hunters would need to kill 30 percent or more of a wolf population to bring it down. Bangs says, "Another benefit of hunting is that hunters typically kill the boldest wolves. These wolves are the ones that are most likely to attack livestock and pets, so we see hunting as a critical part of the wolf's recovery and their continued acceptance in the West."

One reason for having a wolf season, say biologists and hunters, is that elk populations are being severely impacted in some areas by wolf predation. In Montana's Madison Valley, for example, a study done by FWP indicated that during the winter of 2002-03 wolves killed 125 elk per day, which was the equivalent of each wolf killing 23 elk from November-April. In the Northern Yellowstone Range—the area where

Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Population Trends

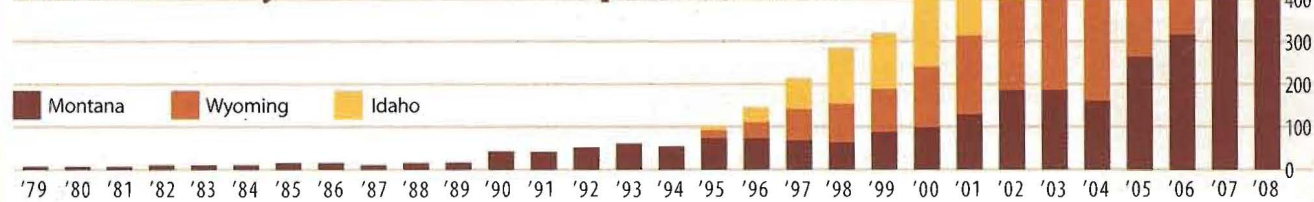


Photo: Michael Gallacher / Missoulian

wolf No. 527—wolf kills on elk fell from an estimated 11 per wolf from November through April to about seven as the elk herd plummeted.

Idaho has seen similar declines. Survey results indicated the elk population in the state's Lolo Zone, which was once one of the best public areas in the state, has declined 57 percent (from 5,110 to 2,178) since 2006. "This survey, combined with ongoing research showing wolves are the primary cause of elk mortality

today, is further scientific evidence of the impact wolves are having," said Cal Groen, Idaho Fish & Game Department director.

Also, when wolf populations outgrow wild areas and/or their natural prey base declines, more wolves kill livestock. In 2008, for example, Wildlife Services, a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, spent more than \$1 million killing 264 wolves that preyed on livestock in the Rockies. Agencies also paid livestock owners more than \$500,000 for losses to wolves in 2008. Bangs believes licensed hunters will make Wildlife Services' job of controlling depre-dating wolves easier and cheaper.

Some of the livestock kills have been horrific; for example, in Dillon, Mont., on Aug. 16, wolves killed 122 sheep on the Rebish/Konen Livestock Ranch. Wildlife officials later opted to kill the entire wolf pack.

Jon Konen, one of the ranchers, told *The Spokesman-Review*, "I had tears in my eyes, not only for myself but for what my stock had to go through. They were running, getting chewed on ... they'd cripple them, then rip their sides open."

So activists, especially the anti-hunting group Defenders of Wildlife, are indeed crying wolf, say state and federal officials.

What Does the Future Hold?

After Montana's wolf hunt, environmentalists began using the killing of wolf No. 527 to raise money to help fund their



Wolves have had massive impacts on deer and elk herds. Wildlife managers see these first wolf hunting seasons as an opportunity to balance the ecosystems.

anti-wolf-hunting lawsuits. To them, the killing of No. 527 is an example of man's war on nature. For example, in response to a blog by wolf watcher Ramey Channel on the death of wolf No. 527, in which she called on others to protest the "wolf slaughter," one person, Joanne, made this comment: "I really love wolves and feel so sorry for them. They always look like they want to come in from the cold and be pets."

Another person, Nora, wrote, "[Hunters] kill with the excuse that there are too many [wolves]. There live also too many people on our planet: don't we have all the luck?" (The typos are Nora's.)

Many environmentalists have expressed Nora's opinion that people don't have a place in the wildlife's habitat; in fact, the radical group the Center for Biological Diversity recently began distributing condoms wrapped in endangered-species-themed packages to "raise awareness about overpopulation's serious impacts on our planet." (To read how anti-hunters really feel, check out <http://wolfcomments.blogspot.com/>. After appearing in *National Geographic* with a wolf he legally killed in Idaho, Robert Millage put up this blog to show the hate speech he's receiving from animal-rights activists.)

Wolves Kill Jogger On March 11 Alaska state troopers determined Candice Berner, a 32-year-old schoolteacher, was chased down and killed near Chignik Lake, Alaska, by wolves. According to the state medical examiner, the manner of death is "accidental" and the cause of death is "multiple injuries due to animal mauling."



So the anti-hunter's ideology can be anthropomorphic, but conversely it can also be anti-human. Their reaction to wolf No. 527's life story is a case in point. Wolf No. 527 left the Druid Peak pack and joined the rival Slough Creek pack in 2005. Later, No. 527 rose in the pack's hierarchy and bore pups. The pack's den was then attacked by another wolf pack. For 12 days, No. 527 and probably four of the pack's other females and their pups

were pinned inside their den. A PBS special documented this siege. Wolf No. 527 finally escaped. The pups didn't.

Not long after, 527 left the Sloughs and joined up with a male wolf in an area along Hellroaring Creek. That spring, they encountered a young wolf pair in the area. Wolf No. 527 and another wolf killed that female wolf in her den and carried out the wolf's pups and ate them.

"I've seen a lot out here," Lyman told the *Los Angeles Times*, "but I understood why 527 was doing what she did. Because she couldn't afford to have a pack that close to her territory."

Lyman and other activists seem able to understand a wolf's need to defend its food source, territory and right to exist, yet they somehow can't comprehend that people have these same needs and inherent rights. They actually give wolves, and other wildlife, more rights than humans.

This attitude is making responsible wolf management a constant uncertainty. At press time, a group of anti-hunting organizations, represented by the environmental law firm EarthJustice, was suing the USFWS and state game agencies to force them to again list the wolf in the northern Rockies as endangered. The suit was due to be heard by U.S. District Judge Donald Molloy this spring. The decision could go either way. Last year, Molloy overturned a decision by the USFWS to remove grizzlies from the ESA because he felt the decision didn't take the effect of global warming on grizzlies' food supply into consideration.

Therefore, the future of responsible wolf management remains far from certain.

Photo: Michael H. Francis