



The 2009 Montana Wolf Hunting Season

SUMMARY

The 2009 wolf hunting season was the first fair chase hunting season in Montana's history. Historically, private citizen efforts to kill wolves occurred under eradication programs intended to purposefully remove all wolves from the western landscape. At that time, unlimited numbers of wolves could be killed year long by any means, including poison. This was done for money and commercial profit under a bounty system. Contemporary wolf hunting is based on the principles of fair chase and ethical hunter behavior, with penalties for regulatory violations. Regulations and allowable harvest levels are established consistent with conserving the wolf population in perpetuity.

Most wolves were opportunistically harvested by hunters who were primarily hunting elk or elk/deer in combination. Many of those hunters saw 2-3 wolves prior to harvesting one. Hunters report seeing wolves while hunting deer and elk, and it appears that they are able to detect wolves in their relative degrees of abundance on the western Montana landscape. Therefore knowledge about deer and elk hunter effort and success will provide important insight into future wolf harvest management.

Montana's fragmented landscape is accessible to hunters by either motorized or non-motorized travel. Thus, most wolves are relatively accessible to big game hunters in most places where wolves live and elk/deer hunting occurs. This is in contrast to Idaho where remote, rugged terrain in many wolf districts appeared to contribute to the slower pace of harvest and a season extension.

Through time, wolves might alter their behaviors in response to hunting, as other species have learned to do. However, hunters demonstrated that they can successfully harvest wolves under a fair chase system. Regulated public harvest will be an important population management tool for wolves that can be used, designed, and tailored as appropriate, based on a population's status, just as it has been for Montana's other big game species.

As is the case for many other species, wolf harvest can be successfully managed through a quota-based approach. A quota system establishes the total number of wolves that could be harvested before the season starts. Hunters are required to report harvesting a wolf within 12 hours. FWP can and does track progress towards filing the pre-determined quota levels practically in "real" time. FWP can initiate a season closure in individual hunting units, anticipating that the quota is about to be filled.

There were no biological red flags in the harvest. Harvest was geographically spread out (see map) and age classes were generally representative of what was in the wolf population. Wolf hunter harvest decreased the size of individual packs by one to four wolves just ahead of the February 2010 breeding season. But even so, the level of hunter harvest combined with all other mortality in 2009 will not harm Montana's wolf population.

All of the harvest information will be assessed, in conjunction with other data gathered throughout the year and field-based population monitoring efforts to determine the status and trend of the wolf population at the end of 2009. FWP will consider all of the information prior to proposing changes in the 2010/2011 hunting regulations and the 2010 season hunting season quotas.



BY THE NUMBERS

The following information was gathered when hunters presented whole carcasses or skulls/pelts to FWP for inspection and registration, as required by the regulations. Biological data were collected from the wolves. Successful hunters also provided information about their wolf hunting experiences. In 2010, FWP will conduct a telephone harvest survey of a sample of all wolf license buyers to more fully understand wolf hunting effort and the 2009 season. This will be similar to the telephone harvest survey conducted for other species such as deer and elk.

About the Harvested Wolves

Summary

No biological red flags were raised by what was removed from the population through hunting. Age classes of the harvested wolves approximates what was in the population. Harvest was well distributed geographically. Between 40 and 50 packs sustained harvest of between one and four wolves total per pack. Harvest did not harm the population overall.

Details

General age classification:

- 22 juveniles; 31% of total harvest
- 22 yearlings; 31% of total harvest
- 27 adults; 38% of total harvest
- 1 unknown

Weights:

- Juveniles weighed 62 pounds on average. Yearlings weighed about 80 pounds. Adults weighed 97 pounds. One wolf weighed 117 pounds.

Sex of harvest:

- A total of 41 males and 31 females were harvested.

Color:

- Sixty one percent the harvested wolves were gray; 36% were black and two wolves were white.

Health:

- Most wolves were healthy. Two wolves had slight mange. One wolf had fleas. One had porcupine quills in its shoulder and two wolves reportedly had hernias.

Radio Collars:

Of the total 72 wolves harvested, 7 wore radio collars. The radio collar is a very important tool to gather a variety of data, including mortality information. As used in many other wildlife monitoring and research efforts, data gathered from radio collared animals allows biologists to estimate survival and cause specific mortality rates with unbiased statistical confidence, including hunting.



About the 2009 Wolf Hunt

Summary

Most wolves (78%) were opportunistically harvested by hunters who were primarily hunting elk or elk/deer in combination. The harvest was well distributed geographically, though more clumped in WMU 3 during the early backcountry season than expected. Once the general season opened on October 25, the pace of wolf harvest was steady and averaged about 20 wolves per week. The season closed statewide on Nov. 16 when quotas were nearly filled in WMU 1 and WMU 2 and the quota in WMU 3 had already been exceeded by one wolf. Had the final quotas been higher, they would likely have been filled.

Details

The total statewide quota was 75. A total of 72 were harvested during the early and general seasons combined. The season closed statewide on Nov. 16. Had the final quotas been higher, they would likely have been filled.

- WMU 1 quota was 41; 38 harvested total
- WMU 2 quota was 22; 21 harvested total
- WMU 3 quota was 12; 13 harvested total

During the early backcountry season, 12 wolves were harvested. The pace of harvest during the WMU 3 backcountry season was faster than many expected, and FWP closed it prior to the entire WMU 3 quota being taken in the backcountry, thus reserving the opportunity for the remaining 3 wolves during the general season elsewhere in WMU 3.

- 3 wolves were harvested in WMU 1 (deer/elk hunting districts 150/151/280) from Sept. 15 to Oct. 24
- 9 wolves were harvested in WMU 3 (deer/elk hunting district 316) from Sept. 15 to Oct. 4; this backcountry area closed temporarily on Oct. 9 and permanently on Oct. 13

During the general season, 60 wolves were harvested between Oct. 25 and Nov. 15, which corresponds to first three weeks of the general deer/elk firearm season. The general season closed one half hour after sunset on Nov. 16 after quotas were nearly reached in both WMU 1 and 2. WMU 3 had previously closed on Oct. 26.

- 35 wolves harvested in WMU 1
- 21 wolves harvested in WMU 2
- 4 wolves harvested in WMU 3

Ten wolves were harvested statewide on Oct. 25, the most of any day. The pace of the harvest was steady and averaged about 20 per week. After opening day, the most wolves harvested statewide on any one day was six. On most days, however, between one and four wolves were harvested. After the general season opened, there were only two days during which no wolves were harvested.

Hunter harvest decreased individual pack size ahead of the 2010 breeding season. The greatest number of wolves harvested from a single pack was four. Of all the packs from which wolves were harvested, 70% lost one wolf, and 20% lost two wolves. Thus, 90% of the packs sustaining harvest lost only one or two wolves. The overall harvest was well distributed across packs geographically.

Most wolves (73%) were harvested before noon during both the early backcountry and the general seasons.



Most hunters did not use predator calls during either the early or the general season. A few hunters did and/or reported howling.

About 15 wolves were harvested from about ten different packs that had a prior history of confirmed livestock injury or death. Hunter harvest did not appear to accelerate or contribute to livestock conflicts. Some of these packs had injured or killed livestock or domestic dogs before the hunting season started and did so again after the season closed. Others had confirmed livestock conflicts before the hunting season started but not injure or kill livestock during the remainder of the year.

Wolves were harvested at an average distance of 150 yards using firearms (range 10-430 yards; a reported outlier of 600 yards was omitted from the average). No wolves were harvested with archery equipment, although it would have been lawful during either the early backcountry or general season. There was no archery only season in 2009.

Most wolves (82%) were harvested on public lands:

- public lands: U.S. Forest Service n=57; Bureau of Land Management n=1; state land n=1
- private: deeded land n=9; Plum Creek Timber Company n=4
- Even though most of the harvest was on public land, harvest did occur in about 10 packs having confirmed prior incidents with livestock or domestic dogs

Wolves were harvested in 15 counties in western and southwestern Montana. Neither the Blackfeet Nation nor the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes opened a 2009 wolf hunting season.

- Of the total harvest statewide, 75% occurred in 7 counties: Flathead (11), Ravalli (9), Beaverhead (9), Park (9), Lincoln (6), Sanders (6), and Lewis and Clark (4)
- The other counties were: Missoula, Mineral, Lake, Teton, Granite, Gallatin, and Sweetgrass

Harvest was well distributed spatially with the exception of the early backcountry season north of Yellowstone National Park where harvest was more concentrated. See map. Where more wolves were harvested at a local scale, more wolf packs exist or the existing wolf packs were larger than the average of 6 wolves.

During both the early backcountry and general seasons, hunters reported seeing an average of 2-3 wolves prior to harvesting a wolf. Some hunters harvested the first wolf seen, while others hunters reported seeing 6-27 wolves before harvesting a wolf.

During both the early backcountry and general seasons, hunters reported seeing 2-3 wolves in the group from which they killed a wolf. Some hunters reported that the wolf was by itself and some reported seeing as many as 10 in the group at the time of harvest.

During the early season, most wolves were skinned in the field, and the pelt/skull were presented for inspection and registration, as allowed by the regulations. During the general season, about half of the wolves were skinned in the field and about half were retrieved whole.

Three illegal wolf mortalities were documented during the fall months. Only one was clearly affiliated with the wolf hunting season as the hunter reported harvesting a wolf after the season had officially closed. The other two wolves were found dead in circumstances resembling illegal mortalities documented at other times of year – wolves were shot from a road. It is unclear whether these incidents were related to the fact that there was an open hunting season or not. Regardless, all three incidents are classified as illegal mortality and will be reported as such in the 2009 annual report.



About the Successful Wolf Hunter

Summary

Most wolves were harvested by hunters who reported hunting primarily for elk or elk/deer in combination. They had purchased a wolf license in case an opportunity to harvest a wolf presented itself. Therefore, consideration of elk and deer hunting activities (i.e. amount and distribution of hunter effort) relative to wolf pack distribution and wolf density would be appropriate when considering future wolf hunting regulations and quota levels. From the deer/elk telephone harvest surveys in 2007 and 2008, FWP learned that roughly 5-8% of deer/elk hunters who hunted in those two years reported seeing at least one wolf while hunting deer and elk. The vast majority of those observations occurred during the 5-week general deer/elk season.

Details

Early season backcountry hunters were evenly split between whether they were primarily hunting wolf or another species. In contrast, the majority of general season hunters were not primarily hunting wolves. Wolf harvest was incidental to hunting elk or hunting elk/deer, in that order respectively.

Overall at the statewide level and both seasons combined, 78% of the wolves were harvested opportunistically by individuals hunting for elk or elk/deer in combination.

Most successful hunters were hunting on their own, without an outfitter. Six wolves were harvested by hunters with an outfitter.

Most successful wolf hunters were Montana residents. Three successful non-residents were from Washington, Ohio, and Georgia.

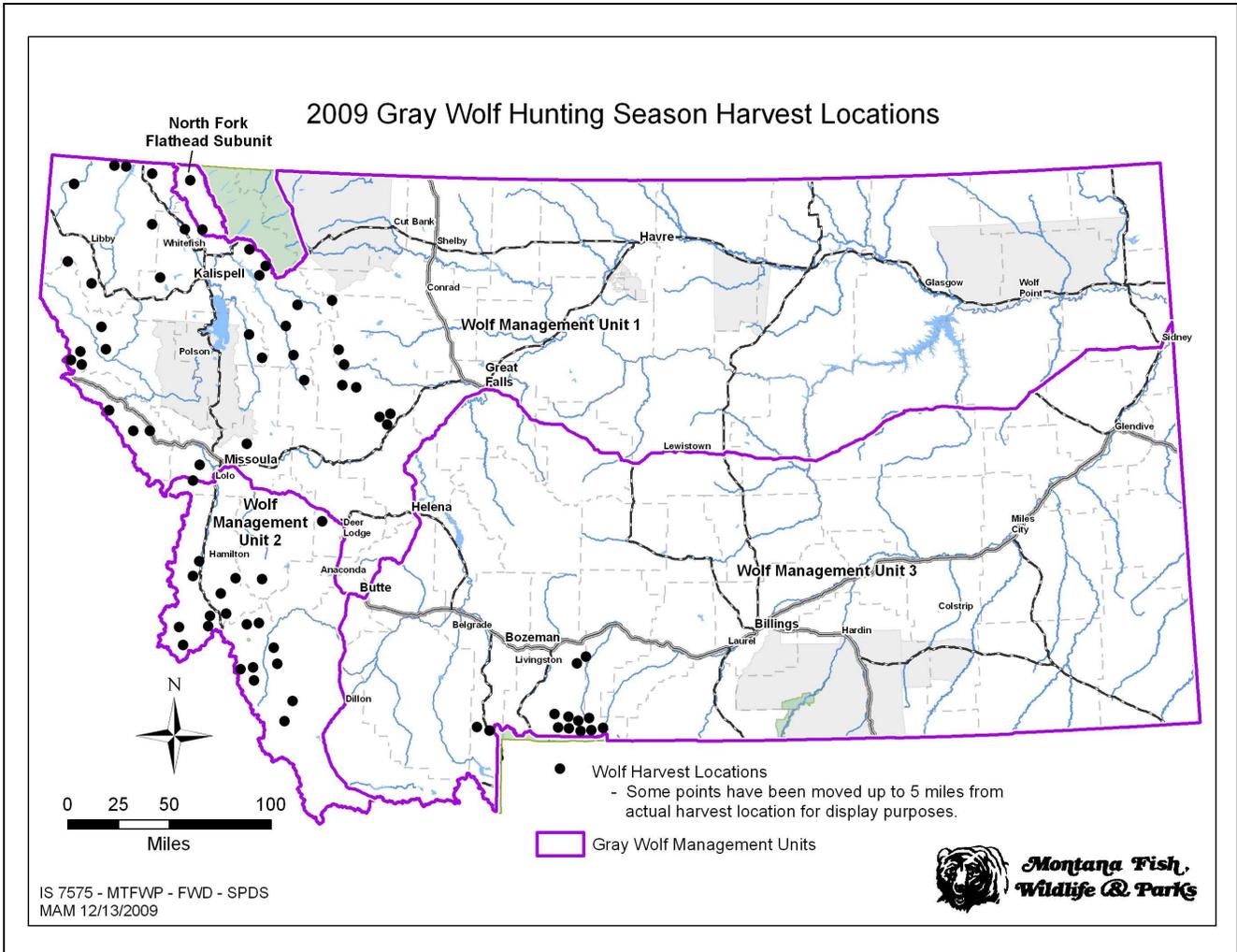
Successful wolf hunters were primarily male and averaged 42 years of age. The oldest was 70 years old and the youngest was 13 years old.

FWP sold a total of 15,603 licenses (15,514 residents; 89 non-residents). FWP stopped selling wolf hunting licenses on Nov. 16, as there was no longer a hunting opportunity once the quotas were nearly met and the season closed.

The Montana Legislature set the price of a wolf hunting license at \$19 for residents and \$350 for non residents. Licenses were available for purchase from August 31 to November 16 to anyone who had an interest in buying one. No licenses were sold after the season closed. Total license revenue was \$325,916. These funds were deposited into the FWP general license account and will be budgeted and spent for future FWP programs in the next biennium, as approved by the 2011 Montana Legislature.

Based on 2007 elk license sales figures, about 12% of Montana resident elk hunters also bought a wolf license in 2009.

FWP will be conducting a telephone harvest survey of wolf license buyers similar to those conducted every year for deer and elk hunting. This will yield additional information about the 2009 season and wolf hunting effort statewide and at the WMU level.



To learn more about Montana's wolf population, visit FWP at: www.fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/wolf.

Hunters, other recreationists, and landowners can help FWP monitor the population by reporting wolf observations, tracks, or sign through the FWP online reporting button [Contact Us - Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks](#), by contacting the closest wolf specialist or FWP office, or mailing a wolf observation card.

To anonymously report a dead or injured wolf or any suspected illegal activity, call: 1-800-TIP-MONT.