

The Outdoorsman

Bulletin Number 9

January 2005

The Impact of Wolves in Yellowstone Park

by George Dovel



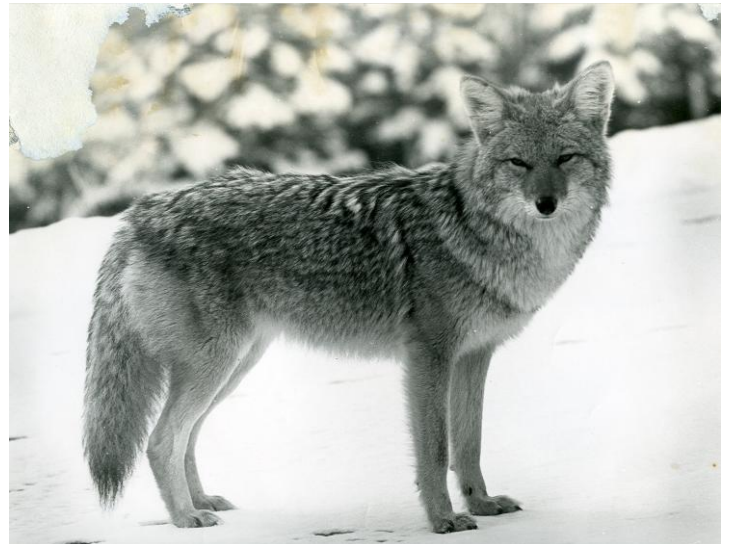
Gray wolf in Yellowstone National Park (YNP photo). Adult males brought from Canada averaged 111 pounds, females 94 pounds.

From 1906-1927, the reported take of large predators from Yellowstone National Park was 127 wolves, 134 mountain lions and 4,352 coyotes. This resulted in speculation that as wolf numbers decreased the number of coyotes increased.

Similar theories from Great Britain hold that when wolves were exterminated by man several centuries ago, fox populations expanded and destroyed more ground nesting birds. The introduction of species such as rabbits, rats and domestic cats also impacted the predator-prey relations in many obvious ways, as well as some that may not be so obvious.

Can't Go Back 8,000 Years

British biologists realize that it is unrealistic to attempt to go back in time 8,000 years to the mesolithic period when man was a tribal hunter and bears and wolves were next in line, dominating the lesser predators in the food chain hierarchy. With the exception of animal rights extremists who recently outlawed fox hunting, many British biologists believe we should intervene and manage existing wildlife species just as we manage forests and farms.



Coyote in Yellowstone Park. Adult males in the Northern range average 30 pounds, females 26 pounds.

In both scenarios (8,000 years ago and the present) man was/is both the dominant predator at the top of the food chain and the only creature endowed with intelligence to manage natural resources to benefit both the resources and man. The no-management alternative, restoring wolves and letting predators and prey sort out among themselves which will be the eventual winners and losers, ignores reality in a constantly changing ecosystem.

Along with droughts, floods, wildfires and extreme winters; parasites, disease and plagues alternately take their toll of predators, their prey and the habitat that controls their existence. Without man's intervention, a foot and mouth or rabies epidemic or a plague of insects or blight infestation can result in wholesale destruction that may take decades to repair.

There is substantial evidence that humans have been manipulating the flora and fauna in Yellowstone for perhaps the past 10,000 years. But now biologists have introduced Canadian gray wolves and excluded man in order to achieve their concept of a "natural" ecosystem.

continued on page 2

continued from page 1

Coyotes on Yellowstone's Northern Range

In response to the Yellowstone fires of 1988 and the anticipated introduction of wolves into the Park, an intensive long-term study of coyotes on the Park's Northern Range was initiated in 1989. The Lamar Valley was chosen as one of two study areas for its ease of observation.

Part of this study by biologists Gese and Grothe, describing eight coyote attacks on elk with five of them successful, was reported on page 3 of the July 2004 Outdoorsman Bulletin No. 5. A strong similarity between coyote packs and wolf packs and their hunting techniques was apparent.

In a YNP Science article entitled "The Ecological Role of Coyotes on Yellowstone's Northern Range," biologists Crabtree and Sheldon detail how coyotes have survived in the Park since wolves were introduced in 1995. Prior to that time coyotes were the major elk predator, killing an estimated 1,276 elk annually.

Approximately 450 coyotes in the Park killed an estimated 750 elk calves in calving season and during the summer, another 320-626 yearling elk throughout the year, and 20-35 adult elk during the winter. That reflects an average of three elk killed by each coyote every year.

According to the Biologist D. Scott's antelope study, coyotes also killed more than 80 percent of radio-collared antelope fawns. The coyote study emphasized that coyotes are capable of killing healthy adult elk during the winter, and the number killed is logically determined by the amount of elk carrion that is available.

Although the average pack size was 6.7 coyotes, normally only two or three adult coyotes participated in an attack on elk while the rest watched or were not present. In their observation of 26 coyote attacks plus the record of nine more by Gese and Grothe, the alpha (dominant) male almost always led the attack but the entire pack eventually fed on the kill.

During the same period that 450 coyotes were killing ~1,276 elk per year, 17 mountain lions were also killing an estimated 611 elk per year, including only 35 calves. Biologist B. Blanchard estimated that ~60 grizzly bears killed 750 elk calves and "a few" adults.

Although the 36 elk killed per lion and 13 elk killed per bear is much higher than each coyote's annual average of three elk killed, coyote density, like wolf density, makes the big difference in total kill. With the potential for producing a large litter every year, both coyotes and wolves can quickly repopulate an area once their numbers are reduced below carrying capacity.

The survival rate of adult coyotes in the study area was 91% before wolves were introduced. Estimated litter size varied from 6.9 pups in 1992 to only 2.6 pups in 1994, reflecting a population that may have reached its optimum territorial carrying capacity.

The average coyote litter size during the entire study was 5.4 pups but a high incidence of parvovirus infection resulted in the death of 72% of the pups by the end of August. The increase of 1.5 pups per pack still allowed coyote populations to expand until wolves began killing some of the coyotes.

The researchers estimated that elk made up 74% of the coyote diet during the five winter months and 21% during the seven non-winter months. The following chart from their article illustrates the most important coyote food sources based on examination of scats (droppings) and projection of observed predation:

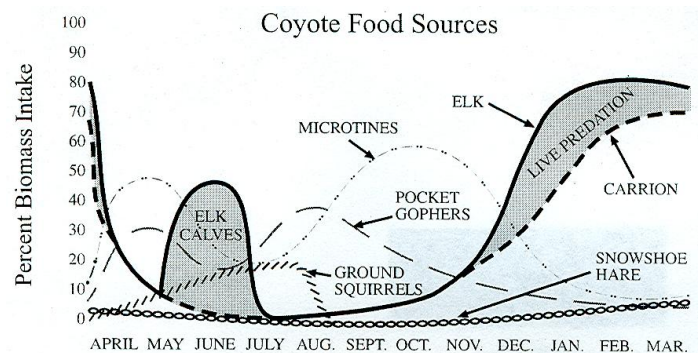


Figure 6. The two most important coyote food sources are microtines (voles) and elk carrion (1990-1995).

Coyotes Adapt To Wolves

During the first two winters after wolves were turned loose in the Park, they killed enough coyotes on the northern range to reduce both total numbers and pack size by 50 percent. But as the wolves gained experience killing larger prey, coyotes that had been traveling singly or in groups of two or three, began traveling with their pack.

Coyote packs on the fringe of wolf territories now number from 6-10 individuals and experience almost no mortality when they scavenge wolf kills during the winter. Groups of several coyotes have been observed chasing and attacking single wolves and wolf pups.

When the researchers observed wolves digging out six coyote dens, the coyotes relocated their dens further away and in rocky ground. Each year wolves still kill a handful of coyotes, about the same number killed by mountain lions, but the coyote population continues to outnumber the wolves.

Other Wolf Impacts

The additive nature of wolf predation is evident in the continuing decline of the northern elk herd described on page 12. Despite near total elimination of sport hunting in the northern elk herd this year, Montana biologists predict elk numbers will continue to drop.

As wolf populations in parts of the GYE reached the highest densities in North America two years ago, sarcoptic mange began to show up. Instead of allowing the parasite to kill off wolves naturally, wolf biologists are scrambling to halt its spread.

Sarcoptic mange has been confirmed by testing in three wolf packs just east of Yellowstone Park and in one northwest of the Park in Montana. All wolves that are captured for collaring or other reasons are reportedly being injected with Ivermectin in the hope it might help the healthier animals fight off the infection.



Gray wolf that died as a result of sarcoptic mange.

In Minnesota as many as 500 wolves may have died from sarcoptic mange during the last 3-4 years according to APHIS agent Bill Paul. Wolf Biologist David Mech also reported that parvovirus has reduced wolf pup survival in some Minnesota wolf packs, allowing insufficient recruitment to enable Minnesota wolves to continue to increase, until the disease “burns itself out”.

The wolf recovery program in Minnesota ignored the reality that moose and caribou - not deer - were the historical wolf prey in the northern zones. Once the deer herd in northeast Minnesota had been decimated by wolves they turned to moose as their alternate prey.

Hydatid Cysts In Elk/Moose

Despite no increases in wolf numbers for the past several years, moose populations in northeast Minnesota continue to decline and biologists say they don't know why. Speculation that cystic hydatid disease may have been introduced into the moose population by wolves has not been confirmed.

E. granulosus tapeworms attach themselves to the wolf's gut and grow to maturity consuming gut contents. Then they lay eggs in the intestine of a wolf and the eggs come out in the wolf's droppings and contaminate plants, which are eaten by a herbivore.

The eggs hatch into larvae that travel to the herbivore's lungs where they form cysts. Elk and moose are the principal wild herbivores affected by hydatid cysts but caribou, deer and humans can also be secondary hosts.

The tapeworms' presence in wolves is rarely detected and early stages of cyst development in the lungs of elk or humans may also go unnoticed. It may take some

time for the cysts to develop enough to cause serious problems but they will reach golf-ball-size or larger and impair the function of lungs, liver or other internal organs.

Throughout Alaska and most of Canada, these cysts are found in moose and some caribou wherever wolves are present. In Alaska, over 300 cases of echinococcosis (hydatid disease) in humans have been reported since 1950 and both Alaska and Canadian F&G agencies publish warnings urging trappers and hunters to wear rubber gloves and protective clothing when skinning or handling a wolf carcass.



Two hydatid cysts in moose lungs displayed on moose hide.

They also warn dog owners not to let their dogs eat internal organs, to prevent ingesting the cysts (which contain thousands of larvae) and becoming a host for the tapeworm. In the lower 48 states concerns from APHIS and CDC about the spread of this disease resulting from the importation of wild canids from areas where it exists have been ignored by wolf biologists.

What Happens Next?

By allowing wolf populations to exceed biologically sound densities inside the Park the FWS Wolf Recovery Team has also created serious problems outside the Park. Declining wild game numbers have already resulted in increased livestock killing in Montana and Wyoming (Defenders of Wildlife paid three times the usual compensation to ranchers in 2004).

Wolf density is already too high in many areas outside the Park and will increase as less desirable habitats reach saturation. The next severe winter will increase wolf production and facilitate additional wolf migration to more densely populated farmland.

On page 1-20 of the 1994 EIS to Congress, FWS stated, “Wolf recovery is unlikely to have any measurable impact on disease or parasite transmission.” Yet Alaska and all of the Canadian provinces publish scientific literature describing the parasites and diseases transmitted by wolves to a variety of wildlife and domestic species.

Legislatures from Idaho, Montana and Wyoming would benefit from the accurate unbiased information that is available from these and other sources.

Pheasant Recovery in Idaho – Part 1

By George Dovel

When the first ring-necked pheasants were released in Idaho and some other states, they had little to fear from most predators. Suitable cover was abundant and predators, including hawks and magpies, were controlled by game wardens, private trappers, varmint hunters, and anyone else who could use a few extra bucks in bounty money.

Many states, including Idaho, constructed game bird hatcheries and introduced other exotic game birds, such as Hungarian and chukar partridge, to provide a greater variety of upland bird hunting. Pheasant harvests reached record highs during the 1940s and remained high through the early 1960s.

In 1944 South Dakota estimated a preseason pheasant population of 15 million and a harvest of 6,439,000, with an average of 54.1 birds killed per hunter. In a nationwide ad campaign it declared it was the “Pheasant Capital of the World” and added another 56,000 upland bird hunters in 1945.

The 1945 record harvest of 7,507,000 pheasants still averaged 42.9 birds per hunter but the harvest declined after that. In 1963, a record 212,000 hunters killed 3,095,000 birds, averaging 14.6 birds per hunter.

Predators Increase – Pheasants Decline

But as predators, including hawks, owls, magpies, crows and foxes achieved either partial or total protection and the methods used to control coyotes were restricted, harvest success in all states dropped dramatically.

In the 1970s Idaho sportsmen insisted that hen pheasant shooting be halted in most of the state. But biologists responded by extending seasons into December when pheasants were often struggling to survive in deep snow.

A cliché frequently used by IDFG biologists to justify the overharvest of upland birds is, “You can’t stockpile pheasants.” Another cliché says that extended seasons have no impact on upland bird populations as long as you only kill males.

When fish biologist Jerry Conley was hired as IDFG Director in 1980, he immediately increased the daily bag limit from three birds to four in the one-third of the state where hunters kill most of the birds. This increased the harvest through 1981 to the highest level in two decades but too many birds were killed.

The combined hunter take and predator kill failed to provide enough brood stock and the 1982 harvest dropped by 200,000 birds. Determined to apply the flawed theories he had been taught, Conley and his biologists retained the four-bird limit and extended the season into December in the snow country in southeast Idaho, the Upper Snake and the Salmon area.

A severe winter hit southern Idaho and the sage grouse and sharptail seasons were closed in all but one area, with the bag limit reduced from three to one in that area. Yet the four-cock pheasant limit and seasons ending in December were retained.

The following table, prepared from IDFG harvest records, illustrates the dramatic eight-year-decline in statewide harvest of the four species whose seasons and bag limits were not reduced by IDFG biologists:

	<u>1981</u>	<u>1989</u>	<u>% Change</u>
Sage grouse	70,000	40,000	-43%
Quail	155,600	55,000	-65%
Hun. Partridge	174,000	10,000	-94%
Chukar	221,900	55,800	-75%
Pheasant	502,500	102,700	-80%

Low Rooster Carryover

Well-known Pocatello area sportsman Harvey Peck urged IDFG to shut down the season and prevent the wholesale pheasant slaughter in deep snow. Instead, IDFG suggested he kill the roosters because “many die anyway every winter and they are not needed, so ‘sportsmen’ could just as well harvest them.”



IDFG pheasant management advocates limited carryover of adult male pheasants like this one.

Upland bird biologists generally rely on juvenile male pheasants to supply the bulk of the hunter harvest each year. Because hen-to-rooster ratios in the winter indicate there are adequate males for breeding, existing management strategy emphasizes providing maximum hunting opportunity in late fall or winter rather than a carryover of roosters to provide additional harvest the following year.

But when a severe winter takes a heavy toll on pheasants, conservation management dictates preserving a viable population rather than exploiting adult males. If more males are allowed to survive until winter, fewer productive females will be taken by predators during the winter.



Well-camouflaged hen pheasant in tall grass. Each additional hen that survives the winter increases the odds of better hunting.

Upland bird managers tend to attribute all of their successes to sound biology and blame all of their failures on the weather. A prudent manager who adjusts pheasant hunting seasons and bag limits to assure a high carryover of birds will mitigate the lack of nesting success caused by a cold, wet Spring.

Providing good cover for nesting and protection from predators is only part of the equation. Conservation management dictates minimizing the impact of predators and natural disasters in order to provide a reasonable supply of birds for harvest every year.

It's Time To Act

Despite years of special habitat funding and extensive planning, Idaho pheasant populations and harvests remain depressed. Yet some states are achieving near record harvests with practical solutions funded with matching federal excise tax dollars.

A continuation of this series on pheasant restoration will describe the programs other states are using successfully. It will also present facts on pheasant stocking, limiting predation and providing appropriate habitat.

Revised "Compass" Approved

Prior to the January 2005 F&G Commission meeting, a revised version of the controversial 15-year strategic management was presented to the members for tentative approval. With one additional change it was unanimously approved during the January meeting.

Many of the changes involved changing a word or two to make it sound more palatable to hunters, fishermen and trappers who fund game, fish and furbearer management. A significant change consisted of a promise that sportsmen license dollars would not be used to fund non-game/fish programs.

However, the Department's/Commission's support of "Watchable Wildlife" programs and providing "diverse fish and wildlife-based recreation" was still emphasized in the revised plan as was its continuing commitment to "managing all wildlife and native plant species." It reiterated its intent to continue to provide "nonconsumptive opportunities in addition to traditionally emphasized hunting and fishing" and described these as "viewing, photographing, and learning about wildlife" and other activities, which "increase recreational opportunities, tourism, and economic benefits to local communities."

The plan allows IDFG to continue in the dual role traditionally assigned to Parks and Recreation and Commerce and Development. The plan did not change "Assess and report on the values, attitudes, and opinions of citizens regarding fish and wildlife," which means the Commission plans to continue to fund opinion surveys, including non-hunters and anti-hunters.

Wolf Classification Not Settled

In what turned out to be a lively debate, the House Rules Subcommittee chaired by Rep. JoAn Wood sent the Commission rule classifying the wolf as a big game animal back for further study. Opponents of the rule, stressed that it would not allow trapping or snaring of wolves as claimed by IDFG, without significant changes to existing Big Game rules and a section in the law, which will be loudly opposed by some groups.

IDFG Director Huffaker was very vocal in his opposition to changing the classification to "Special Predator With Controlled Take", one of three classifications already approved by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Editorial Comment

Lack of space and time constraints prevent inclusion of additional information about big game harvests and other legislative subjects that were planned for this issue. Pages 6 and 7 discuss some of the pros and cons of proposed legislation to require Idaho hunters to wear fluorescent orange clothing while hunting. The proposed legislation has not yet been presented as this goes to press and remains the property of the author.

An Alaska Judge has rejected another legal attempt by "Friends of Animals" to halt aerial wolf control. Score another one for sportsmen.

The Facts About Hunter Orange

By George Dovel

For several decades, wildlife managers and legislators in most states have responded to hunting incidents involving deaths or serious injuries by passing laws intended to make hunting safer. As more youngsters grew up without becoming familiar with guns and hunting, mandatory hunter education offered them a basic course in safe gun handling in the field.

Forty-nine of the 50 states now require newly licensed hunters to pass a hunter education course and the results are encouraging. From 1981-2001 the number of annual hunting accident fatalities in the United States decreased from more than 400 to fewer than 75.

In 40 of the 50 states and 6 of the 12 Canadian Provinces wearing some form of hunter orange clothing is mandatory for hunting, but hunting some species and using bows or muzzleloaders are excepted in some states. Seven of the 12 western states, including Alaska, have no safety-clothing requirement.

The rationale for requiring fluorescent orange clothing for hunters is based on the fact that it is a color not seen in nature and a hunter wearing it normally stands out "like a sore thumb" to another hunter. Obvious exceptions are in poor light and when the other hunter happens to be red-green color blind.

Some hunters who objected to "dressing up in a pumpkin suit" changed their mind when Fish and Game agencies convinced them that deer and elk were color blind. Research with deer later disproved that theory, although that color is apparently not as visible to a deer as it is to a human or a turkey.

Failed Legislation

A mandatory hunter orange bill was presented to the Idaho Legislature in 1971 and it was resisted by a majority of Legislators and their constituents. A second try in 1988 proved that Idaho hunters and legislators do not like being told how to dress while hunting, especially when there was a lack of evidence supporting the benefits of wearing hunter orange.

In 1999 five hunters were reported killed in Idaho hunting accidents and the debate surfaced again. IDFG I&E Specialist Ed Mitchell pointed out that since Idaho passed a law in 1980, requiring all hunters born after 1975 to go through a hunter education course, the rate of fatal hunting accidents has dropped from 7.9 per season to 1.9.

He suggested the high accident rate in 1999 was just an anomaly but Hunter Education Coordinator Dan Papp said older hunters who haven't been through the education courses are still vulnerable to accidents. He said making all hunters wear orange would save lives.

During the 2004 hunting season in Idaho, four hunting fatalities were reported before the end of October.

A November *Idaho Statesman* editorial correctly pointed out that IDFG knows there have been 26 accidental shootings since 1988, 10 of which were fatal, but it has no idea how many of the victims were wearing hunter orange.

Although that is true in some states, other states and several foreign countries have kept precise records of virtually every factor in each incident. These included the distance to the victim, species hunted, weapon used, color of hat, jacket or vest and trousers, and whether or not the shooter or victim violated game laws or gun safety rules.

The majority of hunting accidents involving either one or two people result from careless handling of a gun and violation of common sense gun safety rules. These include carrying a gun in or on a vehicle with a round in the chamber, taking a hasty shot from inside a vehicle on a road (which violates the law in every state) failure to properly identify the animal or bird before the shot, and pointing the gun at a hunting companion while swinging to shoot a moving bird or animal.

California Statistics

California has lower injury and fatality rates from hunting than some other states yet it has never required hunters to wear hunter orange. The decline in hunter incidents began back in 1954 with passage of the Davis-Abshire Hunter Safety Training Law, which required all juvenile hunters to take a Hunter Safety Class prior to obtaining their first hunting license.

Because adults who are unfamiliar with hunting and gun safety rules also caused accidents, the law was subsequently changed to include all first time hunting license buyers regardless of age. A study of eight annual California Hunting Accident Reports from 1994-2001, involving 141 injuries or deaths caused by the discharge of firearms, revealed only two fatalities (both in 2001) where the victims were mistaken for deer.

One of the two victims was wearing fluorescent orange clothing but was shot and killed anyway. Seven non-fatal shootings, where the victims were mistaken for turkeys or small game, were reported prior to 1999, with some of the victims also wearing hunter orange.

Mind Plays Tricks

Several of the shooters said they were stalking turkeys and saw red or blue so identified the victim as a tom turkey strutting. California Fish and Game officials warned turkey hunters not to wear red, white or blue and not to stalk turkeys or assume that a response to their call was a turkey.

While hunting when walking conditions are noisy, I have encountered bird hunters who mistook me for a quail or grouse and big game hunters who mistook me for a deer or elk. When they hear or see something while they

are hunting, overeager hunters sometimes allow their imagination to overrule common sense.

On November 21, 2004 at about 7:30 A.M. a deer hunter from Caldwell, Idaho, saw another hunter climbing a ridge on the opposite hillside in the St. Joe area in the Panhandle Region. Because he was deer hunting and the light was poor, he assumed the other hunter was a deer and took a shot, which missed.

Then, although he was shooting from a road, which is illegal, he reportedly rested his rifle on the hood of his vehicle and shot a second time, severely wounding the other hunter. The scarcity of game creating urgency on the part of the shooter, his failure to identify the victim in the poor light before he shot and his willingness to disobey the law, all contributed to the incident.

A similar incident occurred at about 7:15 A.M. on November 6, 1970 on the paved road north of Salmon, Idaho. Something darted across the road and two non-resident deer hunters swerved to a stop 200 yards away, poked a loaded .30-06 out the window of their pick-up and shot.

Severely wounded, six-year-old Karen Prestwich slumped to the ground at the school bus stop, the victim of another senseless tragedy that should never have happened. The hunters later explained that IDFG had advertised good deer hunting and they had hunted hard for days without seeing a deer.

With only a couple of days left in the Unit 21 either-sex deer season, they decided to compete with dozens of other road hunters covering more territory in search of a deer. The little girl's grandfather wrote a poignant letter criticizing IDFG for killing off the deer and then lying to nonresidents about how plentiful big game was in order to sell more licenses and tags.

With the poor light well before sunrise in both incidents, it is doubtful that hunter orange garments would have prevented either accidental shooting. Since other states do not require non-hunters to wear hunter orange, it affords no protection for the loggers, fishermen, hikers and children who live work and play in rural areas.

Education – Not Legislation

Shortage of game, lack of sex/antler restrictions, and "spookiness" of game where hunting pressure is prolonged, all influence some hunters to ignore laws and rules designed to make hunting safer. The national organizations that are largely responsible for reducing firearms accidents in the United States (NRA, National Shooting Sports Foundation, Sporting Arms and Ammo. Manufacturers, and International Hunter Education Assn.) all recognize that education - not more restrictive laws - is the answer to reducing hunting accidents.

Nevada has a law prohibiting carrying a gun in or on a vehicle with a bullet in the chamber. Some states interpret "the chamber" to include the cylinder of a revolver but most agree that interferes with self-protection.

In almost every state that keeps accurate records over a period of years, accidental discharge of a gun accounted for about half of the serious injuries or fatalities attributed to hunting. In states with significant upland game bird populations, "victims being in the line of fire" was the number one cause of fatalities.

An Associated Press analysis over a nine-year period in Wisconsin revealed 27 fatal and 228 non-fatal injuries from weapons. Careless handling ranging from resting the muzzle on the hunter's foot to hoisting a loaded gun up to a tree stand with a rope occurred in 109 (43%) of the incidents.

During the any-firearm deer season in Wisconsin all hunters, except waterfowl hunters, must have 50% of their outer garments above the waist, including any hat, colored hunter orange. Of the 27 fatalities, six wore one article of blaze orange clothing (the minimum required by law), 10 wore two articles (a jacket or vest and hat), and nine were fully dressed in blaze orange.

Only the two non-hunter victims were not wearing hunter orange. In one incident the bullet went through a home killing a 2-year-old child playing inside; in the other a bullet went through a vehicle, killing the driver.

In other words, Wisconsin's mandatory hunter orange law obviously did not prevent any of the victims from being killed. As in other states, no evidence exists to indicate how many, if any, other hunters were saved from being shot by wearing hunter orange.

New York, where hunter orange is not mandatory, claims it helped reduce hunting accidents but offers no real proof. Once hunter orange was required in Pennsylvania, the number of hunting accidents (and hunters) dropped for one season but then returned to former levels.

The Pennsylvania Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation points out that the number of turkey hunting accidents per 100,000 is now more than double the number in states with no hunter orange requirement. They argue that the law encourages hunters to believe it's all right to shoot if they don't see any blaze orange.

Thanks to sound education programs, hunting is one of the safest recreation forms in America. National Safety Council and CDC reports reveal that hunting entails fewer injuries per 100,000 participants than fishing, boating, swimming, cycling and 22 other similar activities.

The recent 10-year summary of all U.S. hunting accidents reveals that 71% occurred with shotguns, which involve carrying a shell in the chamber and making snap decisions. Groups of hunters such as exist in deer or pheasant drives normally choose to wear bright colors to help keep track of their companions.

But many Idaho hunters who live, work and play in Idaho's more sparsely populated areas view being forced to don a gaudy "uniform" in order to hunt as an unnecessary intrusion into their lives. They feel that hunter orange is a poor substitute for good judgment.

Wildlife Management vs Philosophical Agendas

By George Dovel

In 1972 Minnesota Professor of Biology Dr. Lester McCann, a former game biologist with the Wyoming Division of Game and Fish and the Minnesota DNR, exposed some biologists' activism in a book entitled, "Time To Cry Wolf!" Citing over 100 studies involving predation, he cautioned that just because a biologist has studied an animal and recorded many facts, it does not necessarily mean his (or her) conclusions are accurate or that his rationale is logical.

A classic example is Alaska wolf biologist/activist Gordon Haber who is hired by environmental groups to promote their predator preservationist agenda. In 1977, following a limited study in a small area in Mt. McKinley National Park, Haber produced a biased computer model which blamed a tiny increase in hunter harvest for severe long term declines in moose, dall sheep and, ultimately, wolves.

Haber's model was not supported by extensive studies conducted by other biologists who challenged it based on qualitative flaws. Yet he continued to use it in his efforts to reduce or eliminate hunting, both as a legitimate use of a renewable resource and as a management tool.

Two "Tame" Wolf Packs

Haber's wolf observations spanning several decades, have been confined primarily to Denali National Park and Preserve (formerly Mt. McKinley National Park). Of the 20-40 wolf packs located in Denali during that period, two have often become "tame" to the point they ignore vehicles and humans.

These two packs are the wolves sighted by about one-in-ten visitors to Denali, photographed by professional wildlife photographers, and zealously protected by Haber. His recent claim that one of the packs is descended from an original pack studied by Adolph Murie from 1939-1941 was denounced by a team of wolf experts who studied Denali wolves from 1986-2002.

Headed by David Mech and Layne Adams, the team reported that Denali wolf packs were constantly changing. In that 16-year period they identified 44 different packs - with most lasting three years or less.

Twenty-five packs "died out" from natural causes (avalanches, drownings, starvation, disease, old age, and, above all, other wolves) while only two were destroyed by human harvest during their travels outside of the Park.

Then Haber changed his story, admitting the wolves weren't genetically related to older packs but claiming the lineage is based on learned behavior and traditions. "I'm talking about a social group that has persisted in a cultural sense," he said and insisted that the two tame packs be protected from hunters and trappers outside of Denali Park boundaries.

Wolves Kill Most Wolves

The researchers found that humans killed only three percent of Denali's wolves, which do not recognize Park boundaries and are sometimes trapped or snared outside of the Park and its wolf buffer zone. About **60 percent** of the Denali wolves that die are killed by neighboring wolf packs invading each other's territory because prey species are scarce.

Haber admits to these facts but continues to make a living by sabotaging wolf management while collecting money from assorted predator preservationist groups. These include Defenders of Wildlife in Washington, D.C., Wolf Haven International in Tenino, Washington, Friends of Animals in Darien, Conn., The Wolf Society of Great Britain and Alaska Wildlife Alliance in Anchorage.

Outdoorsman Bulletin No. 6 described how several of these organizations organized a tourism boycott, which caused Alaska Governor Hickel to cancel a 1992-93 aerial wolf control program. That article titled "Wildlife Conservation - A Question of Balance," also mentions the 1993-1994 effort by ADF&G biologists to snare wolves, which was also abruptly halted by Hickel thanks to Haber.

Haber Exploited ADF&G Wolf Snaring

Trapping and snaring wolves is not one of the skills acquired by most fish and game biologists. Although snaring is easier than trapping, it still requires the correct loop size and distance from the ground and a knowledge of where to place the snare in order to kill the wolf quickly rather than catch it by the leg or chest.

While working for Friends of Animals, Haber secretly followed ADF&G biologists' airplanes to locate their snare sets in the hope of getting some graphic photographs and video to provide to national media. On November 30, 1994 he departed early and flew two TV cameramen to a location containing several snared wolves, including at least one caught by the leg, before the biologist arrived.

When ADF&G arrived an hour later, agent Ed Crain reportedly loaded his revolver with the wrong bullets and took several shots to kill one of the wolves. The following evening, Dan Rather and Tom Brokaw showed the unfortunate incident to millions of television viewers and generated national sentiment against both trapping and wolf control.

Haber basked in the publicity and promised on national television, "wherever there's wolf control, I'll be there." Shortly after that, in a gala "star-studded" presentation in Hollywood, he received the Genesis Award from the Humane Society of the United States Hollywood Office "for almost single-handedly stopping the state-sponsored wolf kills in Alaska."

Haber Harasses Private Trapper

Governor Hickel promptly halted the wolf trapping by ADF&G biologists, leaving any wolf control up to private fur trappers and hunters. Several well-known hunting organizations offered a wolf bounty as an added incentive for the trappers and this was denounced in a nationwide media campaign by Friends of Animals, Defenders of Wildlife and several other animal rights organizations.

With no new wolf “crisis” to generate donations for his employers, Haber embarked upon a campaign to end private trapping and snaring in Alaska. Early in 1997 Haber found a live two-year-old wolf caught by one foot in a snare. Before the trapper arrived, Haber called ADF&G and demanded they release the wolf.

He was told it was the trapper’s property and he should leave it alone. Instead he videotaped the wolf struggling to get away from him and then used a Leatherman tool to cut the snare.

The snare wire was embedded in the wolf’s paw but Haber made no effort to remove it. Three weeks later ADF&G biologists found the injured wolf and amputated the foot with a pocket knife but the wolf later died.

Trapper Sues Haber and “Friends”

Friends of Animals used the photographs and videotape to raise money ostensibly to ban trapping as a form of wolf control. But native Alaska trapper Eugene Johnson sued Haber and Friends of Animals, charging that the wolf was his property and the videotaped release was used to damage his reputation and raise money.

During the July 2000 trial defendants Haber and FOA claimed Haber had permission from ADF&G to release the wolf and said he was not working for FOA. ADF&G testified that he was told to stay away from the wolf and a jury ordered Friends of Animals to pay the trapper \$150,000 and ordered Haber to pay him another \$40,000 plus costs.

FOA and Haber appealed the decision but the verdict was upheld by an Alaska Superior Court, with changes in the amount of the awards because the judgment could not legally exceed \$100,000. In its September 2002 decision, the court awarded \$100,000 to Eugene Johnson from FOA and other \$79,000 to the trapper from Haber.

Trapper Eugene Johnson died five years after the incident in June 2002, and Haber and FOA appealed the decision to the Alaska Supreme Court. On May 15, 2003 that court refused to hear the case, which ended the appeals process since federal issues were not involved.

Same Tactics – Different Target

A series of unsuccessful efforts by Friends of Animals and Defenders of Wildlife in 2003 and 2004 to halt aerial wolf control in the courts were described in Bulletin No. 6. When these failed, Haber and other activists decided to videotape an aerial gunning team either killing a wolf from the air or landing and shooting one.

In April 2004, Anchorage Press reporter Amanda Coyne accompanied animal rights activist Scott Moran and the pilot in a Cessna 185 flight over the Nelchina Basin. In a front-page story entitled “Hunting the Hunters,” she described how they flew over the vast area hoping to photograph “a hunter shooting a wolf, a freshly skinned carcass or even just a pool of blood.”

In the article, she described how the three major groups, the Alaska Wildlife Alliance, Friends of Animals and Defenders of Wildlife compete with each other using cameras to try to end the use of airplanes to reduce excessive populations of wolves. She also wrote that it’s hard to catch a photo of a wolf hunted from the air and “Gordon Haber is unsure he’ll ever land the money shot.”

Coyne’s article describes a scene from a movie produced in 1967 by well-known Alaska Master Guide and bush pilot Leroy Shebal in which a gray wolf was apparently missed by an aerial hunter with the first shot, wounded with the second and killed with the third. Although the film received rave reviews when it was shown all over the U.S. in 1969-71, wolf advocates now denounce it as an example of “inhumane” wolf control.



Photo by Leroy Shebal of black wolf taken using ski-equipped Piper Super Cub.

Shebal was part of a USFWS aerial wolf control team that accounted for about 300 wolves during the early 1950s (see pages 7-8 in Bulletin No. 4). In an April 1973

continued on page 10

continued from page 9

article in *The Outdoorsman*, Shebal described how moose populations began to decline where he guided a small number of hunters along Beaver Creek north of Fairbanks about five or six years after wolf control was halted.

Moose numbers continued to drop until he saw only wolf tracks flying a 45-mile stretch of the Beaver where 25-30 bull moose were seen before. He was forced to quit guiding moose hunters in what had been a prime hunting area.

Leroy Shebal described the wolf as one of the most intelligent and beautiful animals in Alaska but cautioned that wolves must be managed the same as the animals they prey on. Following his death in September 2003, animal rights extremists began pirating his photography, without credits, to support their opposition to aerial wolf control.

Wildlife "Management" in Denali Park

Haber continues to deliberately misinterpret biological data in an effort to support his claim that wolves left alone will overpopulate an area, die from starvation, and then allow caribou and moose herds to recover. Yet exactly the opposite has occurred in the National Park area he studies.

With the expansion of Denali National Park to 7,300 square miles in 1980 it is considered a unique natural laboratory to study a large mammal system that is virtually unaffected by human harvest. Instead of the thousands of caribou that could be seen by visitors several decades ago, a visitor may now see only a group of 20 or so.

The team of researchers led by Mech and Adams reported that caribou numbers in Denali were increasing slowly in 1986 following eight mild winters averaging only 39 inches of annual snowfall. Caribou were not vulnerable and wolves were forced to kill mostly moose, with poor production of pups, high dispersal rates for young wolves and frequent killing by other wolves.

There are only about 1,800 moose on the north side of the Alaska Range in the 7,300 square miles of Denali National Park and Preserve. This density of only one moose per four square miles is far below the healthy density of 9-11 moose per four square miles in areas where wolves are controlled. It is also lower than the two moose per four square miles where Alaska moose populations are depressed by excessive wolf and bear predation outside of Denali (see Bulletin No. 6 pages 4-5).

Beginning with the winter of 1988-89 the mild winters ended. In each of the 1990-91 and 1992-93 winters more than 154 inches of snow fell, four times as much as in any of the previous 10 years.

Caribou populations were extremely vulnerable to wolf predation and the wolves switched from moose to caribou as their major food source. Adult cow losses increased eight-fold to nearly 20% and fewer than 9% of the calves survived to 4 months old compared to nearly 60% following the light snow winters.

Haber's Theory Proven False

Caribou populations in the 3,860 square miles they occupy in Denali declined from 3,300 in 1990 to only 1,700 by 1993. Wolves in that same limited area nearly doubled their numbers in two years, from 46 to 81, a predictable response.

But, unlike Haber's predictions, once the weather returned to normal, caribou populations remained low and wolf populations in the caribou range only declined to 60, an increase of 30% over their 1990 numbers. With wolf populations in Denali fluctuating from 50 to 170 depending on their food supply, neither moose nor caribou can produce enough surviving offspring to emerge from the severe predator pit they are in.

The unsupported claim by Haber and other predator advocates that the erratic fluctuations in predator and prey populations represent a healthy ecosystem lacks credibility. "Natural" management simply means leaving predators and their prey in a constant state of change where both are subject to recurring die-offs from starvation, disease, inbreeding and predation.

Habituated Wolves

Although up to 150 wolves have inhabited Denali's 6.2 million acres since the mid-1980s only two of the 12-24 packs in the Park ever pass within sight of the Park road. In order to afford additional protection for those two packs viewed by sightseers, the Alaska Board of Game established a 600 square mile no-harvest wolf buffer zone in state land surrounding the Park in 1992.

Haber and biologist Vic Van Ballenberghe insisted the two "semi-tame" packs be given even more protection and in 2000-2003 the BOG approved several additional demands to increase the size of the wolf buffer zone. Van Ballenberghe, who also disagrees with aerial wolf control, insists the two wolf packs that have become used to humans are far more valuable to tourists visiting the Park than when trapped for fur outside the Park.

Park Superintendent Paul Anderson disagrees and insists no wolf pack merits special protection because none is unique. "Contrary to what Gordon Haber and others have to say, I'll be the one held accountable if someone is threatened or harmed and we have to kill a wolf."

During the past 30 years a significant number of wolf attacks on humans have occurred just north of Denali Park by wolves involved in research or otherwise habituated to humans. Allowing a wolf pack to mingle with tourists is considered irresponsible in most other national parks.

Wood Buffalo National Park

The largest game preserve in North America covers 17,300 square miles in Northeast Alberta and the Northwest Territories. Lying between Lake Athabaska and Great Slave Lake, Wood Buffalo National Park was established in 1922 to save fewer than 1,000 remaining bison that were headed for extinction.

From the mid-1930's, Wood Buffalo National Park sustained a total population of about 12,000 bison for four decades under a management regime that included wolf control and periodic buffalo harvest. But in the late 1960s a policy of "non-intervention" was adopted and the bison began to decline.

Like Denali Preserve, but unlike Denali National Park, hunting and trapping by natives is allowed in Wood Buffalo National Park. Bison, caribou, elk and deer are protected and only one moose per year may be killed but unlimited numbers of all predators, including wolves, can be taken during five-month-long seasons.

Yet without intensive wolf control, the bison herd has declined more than 75% since 1970. Although wolves kill mostly calves, two or three wolves easily pull down an adult bison weighing a ton according to Park officials.

"Moose Are Not in the Diets of Wolves"

A September 15, 2004 Associated Press release from Casper, Wyoming announced "Malnutrition and starvation have drastically reduced moose numbers in Northwest Wyoming, according to the author of a new study that debunks the belief among some that wolves are a leading cause of the decline." "I know people don't want to believe this...but moose are not in the diets of wolves," Joel Berger, a senior scientist with the Wildlife Conservation Society, told Wyoming Game and Fish Commissioners at a recent meeting.

The Wildlife Conservation Society of the Bronx Zoo in New York (formerly the "New York Zoological Society") is dedicated to preserving large predators around the world. At its wildlife parks in the New York City Area it accommodates 4.5 million annual visitors.

Sounds and Smells?

After "conducting a series of moose behavioral studies" in Wyoming and the Talkeetna Mountains of south-central Alaska, Berger "discovered" that Yellowstone herbivores are less responsive to the "sounds and smells of predators" than Alaskan herbivores are. He used tape recordings of ravens and piles of grizzly bear scats (droppings) to determine this but said that bison in both states did not react to raven calls, bear scat or wolf urine, but did react to African lion roars.

He concluded from this that Wyoming elk have already forgotten that the sound of ravens indicates a predator kill, but that buffalo still remember the sound of lions from 35,000 years ago. Several current studies in Yellowstone Park by Berger are being conducted to support claimed benefits of wolf re-introduction.

Contrary to Berger's unpublished claim that moose are not included in wolves' diet, the Annual Reports from the Yellowstone Wolf Project indicate a steady increase in the number of bison and moose killed each year by Yellowstone wolves. Elk continue to make up more than 80% of the wolves' prey but as elk populations continue to decline the average wolf weight is decreasing.

Predator Preservationists Join Forces

Like Haber and Berger, cougar biologist Maurice Hornocker has a history of interpreting biological data to fit the false theory that protecting predators benefits their prey. He worked with the Craigheads in Yellowstone when they ignored evidence that spring predation by Grizzly bears reduced the central Yellowstone elk herd.

Then his 1960s Big Creek lion study in Idaho reported that mule deer populations increased when IDFG aerial surveys showed they had declined by 89% (see Bulletin No. 7). Twenty years later in a July 1992 National Geographic article entitled, "Learning to Live With Lions," Hornocker repeated the false claim, "During our (Unit 26 Idaho) study the deer and elk actually increased while the number of lions remained stable."

On March 5, 2002 Hornocker AKA "Hornocker Wildlife Institute" issued a press release announcing he had joined forces with the Wildlife Conservation Society that employs Berger. The release said, "The new relationship, which combines the talents of each of these world-class conservation organizations, will result in the world's largest carnivore protection program."

A companion press release from WSC Science Director George Schaller claimed Hornocker and Schaller are considered to be among the world's foremost "conservation" biologists. Currently Hornocker and Berger and their assistants are being paid to conduct seven different studies in the greater Yellowstone ecosystem.

Congressional Intent Ignored

In a recent television documentary showing wolves killing elk in Yellowstone Park, Yellowstone Wolf Project Leader Doug Smith said, "This is what 'nature' intended." This and similar pronouncements from people who claim to be research scientists, raises doubts about the validity of their study conclusions and the integrity of their management.

Allegiance to a philosophy that embraces so-called "natural" forces management rather than to the intent of Congress when it approved the ESA and the reintroduction of Experimental Populations of Gray Wolves, explains the unprecedented destruction of wildlife that is occurring in and outside the national parks.

The FWS projections to Congress in the 1993 Gray Wolf EIS said that YNP wolves would be delisted in 2002 and there would be ~129 wolves each in Central Idaho and in the entire Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE). No one knows the total number of wolves in either area because uncollared wolf packs are providing all three states with undocumented pups, yearlings and adults.

But Smith admits there have been ~170 wolves just within the Park Boundaries for the past two years, with almost that many more in the rest of the GYE recovery area. Smith says the Park wolves are killing an average of 17-18 elk per wolf each year (about 2,890-3,060 total elk).

continued on page 12

continued from page 11

EIS Predictions To Congress Grossly Inaccurate

That exceeds by ~50% the 12 total ungulates FWS said would be killed per wolf each year in the 1994 EIS to Congress. Even worse, the number of elk killed per year just in the Park is three times greater than FWS predicted for all ungulates in the entire GYE.

When the wolf recovery population goal for the entire GYE was reached just inside the Park in 2000, Smith held a press conference and announced that the wolves had reached saturation in the Park. He said surplus wolves would begin dispersing to the remainder of the GYE and wolf numbers in the Park would stabilize at the predicted 80-100.

That too was grossly inaccurate as the number of wolves remaining inside the Park has doubled since then. In a January 15, 2005 interview in the Bozeman *Daily Chronicle*, Smith said, "Right now, we've got as many wolves as the park can handle."

Smith was reminded that he had said the same thing in 2000 when there were only half as many wolves. Then he admitted that the number of wolves found killed by other wolves each year has increased from two or three during the first eight years to 10 or 12 during the last two years.

With 170 wolves in its 3,468 square miles of land and water area, wolf density is four times higher than the average wolf density in Denali Park and more than twice as high as the highest wolf density ever recorded in Denali.

Gardner Elk Hunting Reduced 95 Percent

Although Smith says the wolf population inside the Park will decline once the prey base declines, the northern elk herd population has already declined more than 50% since wolves were reintroduced. In the 1994 EIS to Congress the FWS wolf "experts" predicted there would be no reduction in hunter harvest of the northern herd during recovery, and said hunter harvests "may be reduced slightly following recovery" (*Environmental Consequences* EIS page 4-31.).

From 1994-2000 the number of elk permits was reduced from 3000 to a little more than 2,800. But rapidly declining elk counts and fewer than 10 surviving calves per 100 cows each year have forced drastic cuts since then.

In 2004 the number of elk permits was shaved to only 1,180 but this still didn't stop the decline. On January 17, 2005, Montana's Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission cut the Gardner elk hunt permits to only 148. Regional Wildlife Manager Kurt Alt said the hunt is likely to be discontinued altogether due to wolves decimating the herd.

Livestock Killing Increasing

Meanwhile, in 2004 Defenders of Wildlife paid claims for twice as many cattle and sheep killed by wolves as were paid in 2003 (three times the EIS estimate). Yellowstone Park officials have also admitted that, despite the widespread interest in viewing wolves by tourists, the increase in visitors and tourist income predicted to Congress in the EIS has not occurred.

Each month, Outdoorsman articles reveal little known facts about a variety of fish and game management issues that affect every Idahoan, especially those who cherish Idaho's hunting, fishing and trapping heritage. Please help distribute these facts to help stop the destruction of our billion-dollar wildlife resource and restore sound wildlife management for future generations. A donation in any amount will help defray the cost of printing and mailing these informative bulletins to elected officials. A donation of \$20 or more will pay the cost of printing and mailing all bulletins to you for the next 12 months, and will guarantee they will also be sent to the Senator and Representatives in your District.

To receive future bulletins, please fill out and clip the coupon below and mail it with your donation to:

**The Outdoorsman
P.O. Box 155
Horseshoe Bend, ID 83629**

PRSR STD
US Postage Paid
Horseshoe Bend, ID
83629
NO. 3

Name _____

Mailing Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Amount Enclosed _____