Wolves of the Northern Rockies

Wolves in the Wild

Wolves are highly social animals, and the family structure is focused around the pack. Packs typically consist of a breeding pair—the "alpha male and alpha female"—and their young from previous years. Pack size doesn't vary much between years because the wolves that either leave or die each year are replaced by newborn pups.

Wolves breed in late winter, and give birth to an average of four to five pups in April. The pups are born in a den dug by the breeding female, around which the pack congregates. Wolf pups spend their first six to eight weeks at the den, and are weaned at around six weeks of age. Once they begin eating meat, the pups are fed by adult members of the pack, which carry partly digested meat back from kills to regurgitate for the young.

As the pups become older the pack typically moves them from the den to "rendezvous sites", which are usually wet meadow areas within a pack's territory where the adults can leave the pups while they go off to hunt. Wolves may use several rendezvous sites during the summer months until the pups are big and strong enough to travel full-time with the pack, generally by late September or October. However, because they typically spend several weeks at a rendezvous site, they are very easily identified by the following sign:

- numerous tracks and scat (both adult and pup)
- bones brought back from kills
- matted grass near streams or in meadows with timbered cover nearby
- well worn trails and bed sites in grass
- howling of adults and pups (pups sound "yippy", or coyote-like)

Historical Perspective

Wolves once ranged throughout much of North America, but strychnine poisoning and bounties on wolves eliminated the animal from most of its range in the lower 48 states by the early 1900s.

In 1995, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service restored the wolf to the Northern Rockies, releasing gray wolves captured in Canada into Yellowstone National Park and the central Idaho wilderness area. However, it was not without controversy. Livestock owners were concerned about wolves attacking domestic animals and sportsmen worried about the effect the carnivore would have on big game herds. To address these concerns, gray wolves were reintroduced in the Northern Rockies as nonessential experimental populations under the Endangered Species Act. This designation allowed Federal, State and Tribal agencies and private citizens more flexibility in managing these populations while allowing for recovery of the wolf population.

The wolf population north of I-90 in Idaho's Panhandle was not part of the nonessential experimental population area. This means wolves were *not* introduced to that part of the state as they were in Yellowstone and central Idaho because it was expected that they would recover naturally.

Wolves and Big Game Herds

Many sportsmen have expressed concern about the effect of wolves on deer and elk herds. Idaho Fish and Game biologists are also interested in the effect of wolves and are closely monitoring trends. The most ambitious study of Idaho's deer and elk populations ever performed began in the winter of 2005. Biologists are capturing and radio collaring up to 700 adult mule deer and elk scattered in several study units across the state. Capture and collar operations represent the first phase of a project designed to investigate elk and deer population performance across a range of habitats. Biologists are particularly interested in survival rates and the specific factors responsible for deer and elk mortality.

Elk and deer will be monitored on a weekly basis. When a radio signal indicates an animal has died, biologists will investigate the site to determine the cause of death. These data will contribute to understanding the role wolves play in a variety of ranges across Idaho's wildlife landscape.

Moreover, big game flights have been increased in some areas to monitor the herds. Also, aerial surveys will track the various wolf packs to find out if and where they are denning in the spring. Biologists will continue to trap and collar wolves in the study areas so each pack has some active radio collars.

Recent studies have shown that the presence of wolves has caused elk to modify some of their behaviors. For example, data from Yellowstone indicate elk have learned to avoid areas frequently used by wolves such as valley or ridge top trails, opting instead for areas with greater cover and security.

Wolves and Livestock

Private Land/South of I-90

1. Wolves seen attacking livestock herding and guarding animals, and dogs on private land can be harassed or shot by the landowners, their immediate family or paid agent without prior written authorization. It must be reported within 24 hours and there must be evidence of a wolf attack such as dead or wounded livestock, trampled vegetation, and mixed wolf and livestock sign. State lands are considered private for the purpose of this rule, and permitted livestock producers on state land can kill a wolf attacking their livestock.

Public Land/South of I-90

2. Wolves attacking, chasing, molesting, or harassing livestock and livestock herding and guarding animals on public federal lands can be shot by grazing permittees and guide/outfitters that use livestock as part of their federal land-use permit, on their active livestock allotments, and on public ceded lands by Tribal members, without prior written authorization. It must be reported within 24 hours and the physical evidence of a wolf attack should be preserved and photographed.
3. Under some circumstances landowners and public land grazing permittees and guide/outfitting permittees may be issued written authorization to use rubber bullets to harass wolves, or shoot-on-sight permits to kill wolves on their private land or their federal grazing federal allotments.

Wolves of Idaho

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) reintroduced fifteen wolves into central Idaho in 1995 as an "experimental, non-essential" population under Section 10j of the Endangered Species Act. At that time, the Idaho Legislature strictly limited the Idaho Department of Fish and Game's involvement with wolves and wolf recovery. The USFWS proceeded with recovery and contracted with the Nez Perce Tribe to implement wolf management in Idaho. In 1996 an additional 20 wolves were reintroduced. Since that time, the number of wolves in Idaho has increased, and by December 2004 Idaho had approximately 420-500 wolves, 27 verified breeding pairs and approximately 43 documented packs well distributed from Interstate 90 (I-90) south to Interstate 84 in central Idaho.

In 2003, a bill was passed into state law that allows Idaho Fish and Game to participate in wolf management. Currently, Idaho Fish and Game works closely with the Governor's Office of Species Conservation, the USFWS and the Nez Perce Tribe to monitor and manage Idaho's wolves.

Ending Endangered Status

Wolves reached the Federal biological recovery goal in December 2002, which is "30 breeding pairs of wolves well distributed throughout the three states of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming for three consecutive years".

Under the Endangered Species Act the USFWS will remove wolves from the Endangered Species List when the combined policies of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming provide an "adequate regulatory mechanism" to govern wolf management. Each state must present the federal government with a wolf management plan and establish state laws that provide protections that will maintain a viable population sufficiently distributed among the three states.

Currently, the states of Idaho and Montana have completed their plans and they were accepted by the USFWS. Wyoming's plan was not accepted, therefore delisting will be delayed until issues with Wyoming's plan are resolved.

Modified Management-the New 10j Rule

USFWS has approved changes in the way reintroduced wolves can be managed in Idaho south of Interstate 90 (I-90) and in parts of Montana. The new "10j rule" took effect February 7, 2005. The "10j" refers to the section of the federal Endangered Species Act regarding wolf reintroduction in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming.

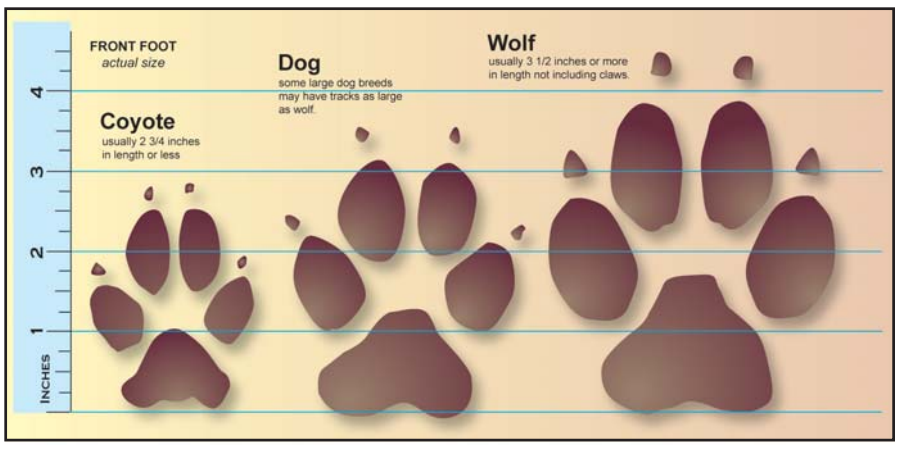
It is an interim measure until wolves are delisted. The new 10j rule allows more flexibility for livestock operators and dog owners giving state residents more latitude in dealing with problem wolves. In addition, it will eventually give the states of Idaho and Montana more authority to manage wolves.

Among other things, the rule provides that wolves attacking livestock, livestock herding and guarding animals and pets on private land can be harassed or killed without a permit if they are attacking or about to attack such animals. Federal permittees such as livestock producers and outfitters would also be able to protect their livestock or herding dogs on federal land. (See box on front for details)

In addition, wolves determined to be causing unacceptable impacts to wildlife populations, such as herds of deer and elk, can also be controlled. This is allowed when such populations are not meeting state management objectives and are unlikely to rebound because of excessive predation by wolves. Idaho Fish and Game would have to develop a scientific proposal and have it reviewed by other scientists as well as the public. Then it would be submitted to USFWS for final approval.

The 10j rule does not allow public hunting of wolves, which is prohibited under the Endangered Species Act for threatened and endangered species. Once wolves have been removed from the Endangered Species List, they will likely be managed similar to black bears and mountain lions. The state will propose hunting wolves to provide opportunity for harvest of wolves, as well as attempt to reduce problems with livestock and to maintain a balance between wolves and their prey.

Rules governing management of wolves north of I- 90 in Idaho differ from south of I-90. North Idaho wolves were not re-introduced and were expected to recover naturally. There, wolves are listed as endangered and can only be controlled by government agency personnel unless killed in self-defense.



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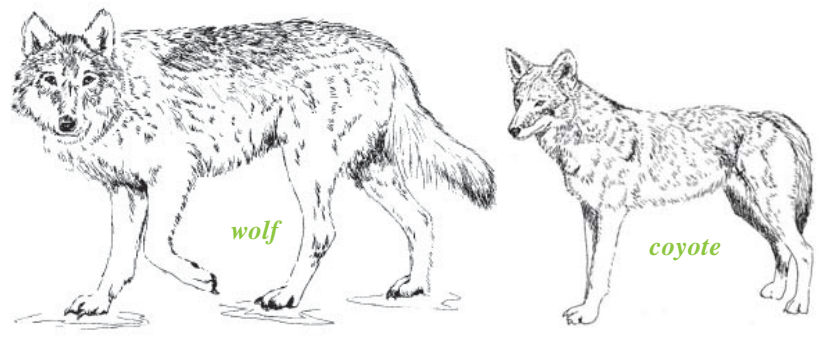

Wolf Identification

An adult male wolf stands about 30 inches at the shoulder and can be over six feet long from the tip of nose to point of tail. It will weigh 70 to 110 pounds. Females are slightly smaller, usually 60 to 80 pounds. In the wild, wolves can live up to 13 years. A coyote may be 20 inches at the shoulder and weigh 20-35 pounds. However, identifying a coyote or wolf by its size alone may be difficult in an open meadow or field.

Because wolves tend to travel the same trails that people do, wolf sign can often be found if wolves are nearby. Look for:

Scat: Wolf droppings or "scat" can be distinguished from other canid scat based on size and content. Scat is generally 1-1$^1/_2$" in diameter with tapered ends. In contrast, coyote scat is much smaller. Wolf scat usually contains elk and deer hair, as well as shards of bones.

Travel and tracks: Wolf tracks are generally much larger than dog tracks usually 3½ -4 inches wide by 4-5 inches long and with distinct claw marks (see life-size watermark at left). When wolves are traveling, they usually move in a straight line, while a dog will meander back and forth. The distance between one set of wolf tracks and the next set is usually greater than 26 inches and likely more than 30. Wolves tend to have narrow chests, so their tracks appear almost in a straight line. Mountain lion tracks will usually not have any claw marks and appear rounder. Their stride is usually shorter than 26 inches, and due to their broader chests, lion tracks will not appear in a straight line. Also, when a pack of wolves are traveling together in the snow, they will often walk directly in each others tracks so that there appears to be only one animal.

Wolves and Pet Dogs

Wolves guard their territory and recent kills from other canids, including coyotes and domestic dogs. This territorial behavior stems from the need of wolves to maintain a sufficient food supply and decrease competition. Because humans and their pets may not understand or recognize the wolf's complex behavioral system, they could place their pets in harm's way without realizing it. To reduce the chance of conflicts:

- Keep your dog on a leash when you are walking in wolf habitat if possible—dogs running loose, away from people may attract wolves.
- If you let your dog run loose, bring a leash so you can restrain your dog if you encounter wolves or wolf sign.
- Be able to recognize wolf sign: wolves are particularly territorial around den/rendezvous sites and kills, so knowing how to recognize the signs associated with these areas will help avoid them.
- If you live near wolves, kennel your dogs or bring them in at night—wolves are most active during the evening and early morning. Don't leave food out that may attract wolves, bears or other unwanted guests.
- Make noise and/or place a bell on the dog collar to alert wolves that humans are associated with the dog; wolves are more likely to avoid contact with a dog when they are aware of humans nearby.

Help Us Manage Wolves!

More information and wolf reporting forms are available at http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/wildlife/wolves. Reports will be sent to biologists tracking wolves. If you believe you have a wolf depredation, wolf mortality, or other related incident requiring immediate attention, contact your local Fish and Game Officer or Regional Office at:

Headquarters (Boise)	208-334-3700
Coeur d'Alene Region	208-769-1414
Lewiston Region	208-799-5010
Nampa Region	208-465-8465
McCall Subregion	208-634-8137
Jerome Region	208-324-4350
Pocatello Region	208-232-4703
Idaho Falls Region	208-525-7290
Salmon Region	208-756-2271

For sightings or more information on wolves in the Lewiston or McCall area, you may also contact the Nez Perce tribe at 208-634-1061.