

People & Places

At the center of Oregon's wolf debate

Russ Morgan played a key role as endangered wolves returned to Oregon

By **ERIC MORTENSON**
Capital Press

He still gets chills recalling the first time Oregon wolves answered him.

It was mid-July, 2008, near the Wallowa-Union County line in the northeast corner of the state. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife knew wolves would eventually disperse from Idaho and had prepared a management plan. Wildlife biologist Russ Morgan, appointed to implement the plan, was checking to see if they had arrived.

Over weeks, on intermittent nights, he and Chase Brown, then an intern and now an ODFW wildlife unit manager, drove dirt logging roads in the Wenaha Unit. They'd stop, get out, howl, and listen for replies. Wait five minutes, howl again, listen, move on. For weeks, nothing.

But that night, as they turned to get back in their vehicle, came the long and low response of a male wolf somewhere in the darkness, within a couple hundred yards. The men returned to the spot an hour later and tried again.

Chorus of howls

This time a wondrous chorus of howls rose in the night, adults and pups answering from all about them in the forest. They were in the middle of what came to be known as the Wenaha Pack.

Wolf howls have always had that effect on Morgan. "I'd almost rather hear a wolf howl than see one," he said.

The chorus of argument, claim and accusation erupting from some rural livestock producers and from some urban environmentalists, however, is something he could have done without.

"Wolf management is the ultimate balancing act, there are extremes on both sides," Morgan said. "I always viewed my job as trying to walk down that middle line."

He calls himself an "advocate of thoughtful management," which comes with the recognition that every wolf decision is going to be controversial to someone.

"I got a lot of arrows lobbed my way," he said.

People often told him to not take criticism and scrutiny personally, but he couldn't help it. Being a wildlife biologist wasn't a job to him and others, it was a lifestyle.



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Russ Morgan, praised for his calm professionalism in implementing Oregon's wolf management plan, retires from ODFW effective Oct. 1.

Western Innovator

Russ Morgan

Occupation: Retiring coordinator of Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's wolf program. Roblyn Brown has been appointed interim coordinator; a formal hiring process will occur.

Personal: Age 54; lives in La Grande, Ore., with wife Dana Reid, a fire management specialist with the U.S. Forest Service. Two grown sons, Seth and Cole. Enjoys bow hunting, hiking, birding and photography.

Career path: Grew up in Bend, Ore., earned a wildlife science degree at Oregon State University. Started with a seasonal position at ODFW and worked for the department 31 years at a series of regional offices. Spent the last 10 as wolf program coordinator.

Demands of the job: Every wolf decision potentially angers one side or the other, ranchers or environmentalists. "I've said a million times, wolves are the only species I've ever worked with where there's more misinformation available than factual information. I've never seen anything like it. It's almost like an intentional misinformation campaign."

On wolves and livestock predation: "There are some people who like to think maybe we can just get wolves to change their minds, but that goes against what a wolf is. It's a predator first, as long as something is made of meat, there's going to be take."

"We always think there must be something that can just stop this, but predatory behavior is exactly why wolves exist."

Now it can be told: He admires wolves and likes bears, but birds are his favorite animal.

The long view: "I really believe wolves will become kind of a normal and expected part of Oregon's fauna again. They were once, and will be again. But there will always be conflict."



wolf debate, said Morgan was "thoughtful, gracious and sincere."

"He worked hard to find common ground on the wolf plan, which is a very contentious issue in Oregon." Rosa said by email. "The collaborative process is often very difficult and yet Russ navigated it quite successfully."

Steve Pedery, conservation director for Oregon Wild, a Portland-based group usually on the opposite side of wolf issues, had a similar response.

"We have not always agreed with him, but Russ has always been a person of tremendous integrity and commitment to conservation," he said by email.

He said Morgan's retirement is a major reason why Oregon's wolf plan needs a clearer set of rules. "Without Russ, it is hard to trust ODFW to do the right thing when they come under pressure from livestock interests or anti-wildlife politicians."

Morgan said it helped immensely that Oregon had a management plan in place when wolves arrived.

"I can't imagine coming into this job without a wolf plan," he said. "It gave me the ability to have the backbone of a program already. The wolves came and we put meat on it."

Morgan said he purposefully announced the department intended to implement the plan. The simple clarity of the statement was crucial.

"The people who wrote the plan did it before we had wolves," he said. "That's why this wolf plan is important. Wolves are not that complex, but it becomes our agreement with the public."

Morgan said that stance was backed or at least accepted by the majority of the public, the stakeholder

groups, the department and up through the governor's office.

"I'm very proud of that, we kept things on track," he said. "Maybe I'm most proud of following through to do what we said we were going to do."

At Morgan's last appearance before the ODFW Commission on Sept. 15, members praised his work. Commissioner Gregory Wolley, from Portland, said constituents and stakeholders agreed.

"They recognize what a tough spot you've been in," he told Morgan. "What I've found is respect for your professionalism and objectivity. That reflects on the whole department and on all of us."

Morgan certainly will miss work. He loved catching and collaring wolves, either by darting them from a helicopter or drugging them with an 8-foot injector pole after they'd been caught in a foot-hold trap.

Favorite wolves

He counts three favorites.

OR-2 was the first female wolf he captured, and she had previously been captured and tagged in Idaho, where she was known as B300, by his mentor, Niemeyer. Morgan called him and said, "Carter, I think we've got one of your wolves here."

OR-3, a large black male, was "The prettiest wolf I ever saw," Morgan said.

But his favorite, and the most impressive, was OR-4, the longtime "alpha" or breeding male of the infamous livestock-killing Imnaha Pack of Wallowa County. Among OR-4's progeny is OR-7, which dispersed into Northern California after a criss-cross journey across Oregon from Wallowa County, then returned to the Southern Oregon Cascades to establish a pack of his own.

OR-4, his longtime, limping mate and two sub-adult wolves were shot and killed by ODFW staff — not Morgan — in 2016 after a series of livestock attacks. OR-4 was 9 or 10 years old by then, old for a wolf in the wild.

"We caught that wolf four times, five times, in his lifetime," Morgan said. "All the predations — that guy was an incredible wolf, and his skill is what ultimately ended him."

Much of what the department knows about non-lethal ways to deter wolves, it learned because of OR-4, Morgan said.

"OR-4 and the Imnaha Pack," he said. "That single wolf and the pack he was in charge of occupied 90 percent of our time and resources for many years. I admired that wolf."

Capital Press

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Index

- California 9
- Idaho 10
- Markets 13
- Opinion 6
- Oregon 8
- Washington 11

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Tuesday-Wednesday Oct. 3-4

Drone World Expo 2017. San Jose Convention Center, 150 W. San Carlos St., San Jose, Calif. The Expo will feature a robust exhibit floor, visionary keynote speakers, timely and industry-leading educational programs and networking events. The business-to-business event attracts over 3,000 professional attendees from a variety of industries from agriculture to law enforcement. Website: www.drone-worldexpo.com

Wednesday, Oct. 4

Sustainable Community Stewards Volunteer Training. 6-9:15 p.m. McCollum Park, 600 128th St. SE, Everett, Wash. Cost: \$30 Website: http://bit.ly/2hjyXC4

Friday, Oct. 6

Goat workshop. 5:30-8:30 p.m. Creswell Community Center, 99 S. First St., Creswell, Ore. Basic health topics such as diseases to be aware of, vaccinations and hoof health. Nutritive values of feeds including browse, hay, grains, and protein and mineral supplements. Poisonous plants for goats and methods for weed management. The presenters will be Dr. Charles Estill, Shelby Filley, OSU Extension Service

Livestock and Forage Specialist and Melissa Fery, OSU Extension Service small farms agent. Website: http://smallfarms.oregonstate.edu/south-valley/events

Saturday, Oct. 7

Hoop House Production Workshop. 9 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Western Nevada College Fallon Campus, 160 Campus Way, Fallon, Nev. Taught by a seasoned professional with a background in research and commercial production, the workshop is ideal for intermediate or advanced growers. Attendees will learn about best practices that apply to all hoop house production, the eight most profitable crops, best practices for vining, fruiting and leafy crops and advanced practices and techniques for hoop house production. Website: www.wnc.edu/specialty-crop-institute

Saturday-Sunday Oct. 7-8

Alpaca Harvest Fest. 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Alpacas of Oregon, 21345 SW Aebischer Road, Sherwood, Ore. Help EasyGo Farm and Alpacas of Oregon celebrate our bountiful harvest of colorful alpacas and beautiful fleeces. Get up close to the alpacas — hand feed them and meet the babies, females, herdsires and "fiber boys" — less expensive alpacas for fiber artists, companions and pasture mowers. Shop for sweaters, gloves, scarves and more. Website: www.easygofarm.net/AOOHarvestFest

Tuesday, Oct. 10

Living Peacefully with Beavers. 6-8 p.m. Cabela's in Marysville, Wash. Beavers, and how to live

and oversaw or consulted on wolf recovery work throughout the West, including Idaho.

Morgan, he said, was a "natural self-starter" who was cool, calm, collected and self-confident. Morgan asked for advice and training, and prepped himself every step of the way, Niemeyer said.

Simple clarity

"I'm very proud of Russ," he said. "I think he's the ultimate professional, without a doubt."

Jerome Rosa, executive director of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association, one of the chief protagonists in the

with them, will be the topic of three seminars in October sponsored by Snohomish Conservation District and Beavers Northwest. While beavers can cause headaches for landowners, they can also be invaluable for protecting and preserving water resources and wildlife habitat. If beavers are causing issues on your property, there may be solutions available to help you to live peacefully alongside them. The October seminars are taught by local beaver experts Alex Pittman and Ben Dittbrenner and will cover the benefits that resident beavers provide, cost-effective devices that can help you manage the impact of beaver flooding on your property, and technical and financial assistance available from Snohomish Conservation District and Beavers Northwest. Cost: Free. Website: http://scdbbeavers.eventbrite.com

Tuesday-Thursday Oct. 10-12

Oregon Vegetation Management Association, Seaside Civic and Convention Center, 415 First Ave., Seaside, Ore. Hours for the event are 10-6 p.m. Tuesday, 8 a.m.-6 p.m. Wednesday and 8 a.m.-noon Thursday. Website: ovma.net

Wednesday, Oct. 11

Sustainable Community Stewards Volunteer Training. 6-9:15 p.m. McCollum Park, 600 128th St. SE, Everett, Wash. Cost: \$30 Website: http://bit.ly/2hjyXC4

Thursday, Oct. 12

Living Peacefully with Beavers. 6-8 p.m. Stanwood PUD, 9124

271st St. NW, Stanwood, Wash. Beavers, and how to live with them, will be the topic of three seminars in October sponsored by Snohomish Conservation District and Beavers Northwest. While beavers can cause headaches for landowners, they can also be invaluable for protecting and preserving water resources and wildlife habitat. If beavers are causing issues on your property, there may be solutions available to help you to live peacefully alongside them. The October seminars are taught by local beaver experts Alex Pittman and Ben Dittbrenner and will cover the benefits that resident beavers provide, cost-effective devices that can help you manage the impact of beaver flooding on your property, and technical and financial assistance available from Snohomish Conservation District and Beavers Northwest. Cost: Free. Website: http://scdbbeavers.eventbrite.com

Saturday, Oct. 14

Northwest Farmers Union 2017 Convention 8 a.m.-11 p.m. Walla Walla Community College, 500 Tausack Way, Walla Walla, Wash. The Northwest Farmers Union annual convention, which hosts producers and supporters of agriculture from around Washington, Idaho and Oregon, is an event that has a multitude of educational speakers, farmer/rancher speakers/attendees, honorary awards and general networking and camaraderie. The event is our gathering for our membership to come together and enact our grass-roots policy for the upcoming year as well as help guide the many programs that we work to implement

for our membership. Members can vote on changes to the policy and structure of the organization as well as take part in leadership opportunities and network with other leaders from around the region. Cost: \$50 Website: www.nwfu.org

Wednesday, Oct. 18

Sustainable Community Stewards Volunteer Training. 6-9:15 p.m. McCollum Park, 600 128th St. SE, Everett, Wash. Cost: \$30 Website: http://bit.ly/2hjyXC4

Thursday, Oct. 19

Living Peacefully with Beavers. 6-8 p.m. Monroe Library, 1070 Village Way, Monroe, Wash. Beavers, and how to live with them, will be the topic of three seminars in October sponsored by Snohomish Conservation District and Beavers Northwest. While beavers can cause headaches for landowners, they can also be invaluable for protecting and preserving water resources and wildlife habitat. If beavers are causing issues on your property, there may be solutions available to help you to live peacefully alongside them. The October seminars are taught by local beaver experts Alex Pittman and Ben Dittbrenner and will cover the benefits that resident beavers provide, cost-effective devices that can help you manage the impact of beaver flooding on your property, and technical and financial assistance available from Snohomish Conservation District and Beavers Northwest. Cost: Free. Website: http://scdbbeavers.eventbrite.com