

Wolves, 20 years after reintroduction

By **BRETT FRENCH**
The Billings Gazette

GARDINER, Mont. (AP) — Twenty years after their ancestors were released here in one of the most controversial wildlife projects of the century, wolf howls punctuated the cold winter air on Monday to the delight of dozens of wolf watchers.

“This is a great day,” said Char Thompson of Eugene, Oregon, as she manned her spotting scope on a snowy hill near Junction Butte to watch the nearby wolves. “To have interaction and so close.”

Members of the Junction Butte pack seemed to be fleeing from the Prospect Peak wolves gathering on the opposite side of the Lamar River. As a black and gray wolf loped south through chest-deep snow, two others sat atop the butte’s ridge as if they had been posted as lookouts to ensure the Prospect Peak wolves weren’t in pursuit.

“Lots of people thought the wolves wouldn’t be very visible when they were reintroduced,” said Rick McIntyre, a veteran with the Yellowstone Wolf Project. “My first day back in the park, I saw the entire Crystal Creek pack, so it’s a big circle of life.”

It was 1995 when the first eight wolves live-trapped in Canada were placed inside fenced enclosures in Yellowstone to acclimate them to the area in hopes they would not immediately bolt back to their homeland — called a soft release.

Lawsuits that had attempted to halt the return of

the predators to Yellowstone had failed. So great was the animosity to the project that the Idaho governor had even threatened to call out the National Guard to stop a shipment of the wolves at his state’s border. That also failed, and four wolves were set free in Idaho’s Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. The second year of the project, just shortly before another round of trapping was set to begin in Canada, Congress stripped all funding for more wolf releases. Wolf advocates stepped into the void, contributing \$110,000 to allow the work to continue.

“It was a really eventful two years,” said Suzanne Stone, the Northwest senior representative for the conservation group Defenders of Wildlife and a participant in the Idaho wolf project. “The American people ended up funding the second year.”

Twenty years later, about 130 wolves in 11 packs inhabit Yellowstone. At the end of 2013, the most recent tabulated accounts, Idaho’s wolf population was estimated at 659, Montana counted 627 and Wyoming outside of Yellowstone was home to 211 of the animals.

Across the Northern Rockies, which includes wolf populations in Glacier National Park, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said at the end of 2013 there were 1,691 wolves in at least 320 packs, and at least 78 breeding pairs — populations that have exceeded government recovery goals since 2002.

“By every biological measure the (Northern Rocky Mountain) wolf population



Wolf watchers line the side of the road near Tower Junction, Mont., Monday to watch the nearby Junction Butte and Prospect Peak wolf packs interact. It was 1995 when the first eight wolves live-trapped in Canada were placed inside fenced enclosures in Yellowstone to acclimate them to the area in hopes they would not immediately bolt back to their homeland. Twenty years later, about 130 wolves in 11 packs inhabit Yellowstone.

AP Photo/The Billings Gazette, Brett French

is recovered and remains secure under state management,” the USFWS says on its website.

Depending on your politics, the revival of wolf populations in the three states is either one of the greatest wildlife restoration projects ever undertaken, or the worst idea that the federal government has unleashed on ranchers, outfitters and hunters.

A recent study calculated the total number of livestock killed by wolves between January 1987 — which is before wolves were reintroduced — to December 2012 in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming at 5,670 animals: 1,853 cattle and 3,723 sheep. The study goes on to suggest that removal of wolves for livestock depredation can in some cases slightly raise the chance for increased livestock kills.

A 2010 study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture showed that out of 1.7 million cattle deaths that year, only 2.3 percent were caused by predators.

A 2008 study by USDA showed that, nationwide between 1991 and 2005, coyotes, dogs and mountain lions were the main killers of cattle. Yet wolves, for centuries, have taken on an almost mythical status as blood-thirsty, wasteful killers.

The animals were removed from Endangered Species Act listing protection, and wolf management was turned over to states when the reintroduced wolves were determined to have met population goals for recovery. The states didn’t hesitate to open hunting and trapping seasons that have seen steady increases in harvest allowances. Montana even cut the cost for nonresident wolf hunting licenses to encourage greater harvest.

Between actions to remove wolves killing livestock, natural mortalities and hunting, in 2013 Idaho documented 473 wolf deaths, Montana counted 230 and Wyoming saw 101 with another seven inside Yellowstone and one on the Wind

River Reservation.

Wolf populations in Yellowstone National Park have leveled off after steadily climbing following reintroduction. That’s because the wolves’ main food source, the Northern Yellowstone elk herd, has fallen from about 19,000 before the reintroduction to about 5,000 to 6,000.

“Having these toothy things back, the story deals with fewer elk,” said Doug Smith, Yellowstone Wolf Project biologist. “One reason the happiness over wolves has not taken greater hold is that elk are iconic in this area.”

Political and legal maneuvering over wolves continues. Last year, Wyoming’s delisting was rescinded by a judge after a lawsuit filed by conservation groups, halting the state’s management. In Idaho in 2014, the Legislature approved \$400,000 in funding to reduce wolf numbers to 150 animals, essentially authorizing the killing of 500 wolves.

“In the last probably two

or three years since the hunting season began, we’ve seen greater and greater animosity toward (wolves), at least in Idaho,” Stone said, despite predictions that state management and hunter harvest might lessen that hostility. “There’s a constant push to try to drop the number of wolves down.”

During a ceremony marking the reintroduction anniversary at the Roosevelt Arch on Monday, Blackfeet Spiritual Chief Jimmy St. Goddard — or Eesukya, sacred holy paint gatherer — sang a prayer for the wolves and praised those who helped restore the animals to the region.

Saying his tribe loves the wolf — makuyi in the Blackfeet language — St. Goddard looks forward to the day when the divisiveness surrounding the animal disappears.

“There’s no other place on Earth like this,” he said. “This is our Jerusalem.”

Pointing to the gathering, he added, “I love you guys, and I love that wolf.”

John Varley, who worked on wolf reintroduction for 12 years while employed at Yellowstone, was one of the officials being honored. He said it still amazes him that the wild canines are back on the park’s landscape.

“It was a long slog,” said the retired chief of the Yellowstone Center for Resources. “I think the day the wolves came in the trailer under the arch was a big surprise to us because the anti-wolf forces had pulled out all of the stops.”

The years since Yellowstone’s wolf reintroduction has produced the “greatest spate of research that could possibly be brought to bear” about wolves, Varley said, ranging from how much the animals eat, to details on how they hunt.

“I think the only thing that has really surprised me about wolves is how many other things they affect,” Varley said. “The number of other creatures they feed is astounding.”

“It was the ecological ripple they caused that shot throughout the ecosystem,” he added.

That ripple, despite the passing of 20 years, still rises and falls today.



AP Photo/The Billings Gazette, Brett French

Jimmy St. Goddard, left, a spiritual chief for the Blackfeet Tribe, talks as individuals involved in wolf reintroduction and management listen behind him, at Roosevelt Arch near Gardiner, Mont.

COMMENTARY

A hunter’s take on foie gras

By **PAT WRAY**
Corvallis Gazette-Times

The news that a federal judge recently removed California’s ban on serving foie gras in restaurants surprised me because I had no idea that foie gras was chopped duck or goose liver, nor that it had been banned. Now, following a media frenzy, I know more than I wanted to. I’ve been forced to consider some aspects of my food chain more carefully.

Let’s start with this: I’m an omnivore and unashamedly eat the meat of wild and domestic animals. I accept the fact that some domestic food animals will be neither happy nor comfortable during the last stages of their lives. Animals die so that others may live and even in the wild (sometimes especially in the wild) the deaths of prey animals are horrific and painful.

That doesn’t mean I condone cruelty in the treatment of domestic food animals and it seems obvious to me that gavage, a French word for forcing grain mash down the throats of geese and ducks to fatten them and enlarge their livers, is in fact, cruel.

As a hunter, I’ve spent much of my life trying to figure out ways to kill animals quickly and painlessly. I work hard to stay hidden, to stay



AP File Photo/Eric Risberg

In this 2003 photo, Jorge Vargas uses a funneled pipe to force-feed a measured dose of corn mush to a Moulard duck in its pen in Farmington, Calif.

downwind, to move with a minimum of noise, to make as accurate a shot as humanly possible. I want their last thought to be, “Gosh, this is good tasting grass,” or at worst, “Uh-oh.”

What must the foie gras geese and ducks think during the last six weeks or so of their lives, when they are force fed three times each day? And yes, I’m sure they are capable of thought.

I cannot say with certainty, but I feel safe in speculating that the majority of people who eat foie gras in posh restaurants probably do not hunt. They may in fact be anti-hunters. I wonder, how do such people rationalize their beliefs? How can gavage be acceptable treatment of domestic animals while hunting and killing a wild animal in its native habitat is

anathema?

I dislike government interference in our daily lives, so a court-ordered ban on restaurant sale of foie gras goes against my grain. I lean toward letting the market decide. As people learn about the details of gavage and foie gras, they will presumably stop buying and eating it. As the demand dries up, so too will the producers and someday soon foie gras will go the way of veal. It didn’t work!

In fairness the methods of producing veal, at least in the United States, are not nearly as barbaric as they were even 30 years ago.

The truth is, I see no real market pressure to stop the production and sale of foie gras on the horizon. Let’s be realistic, if we counted on market pressure alone, all the rhinos would be dead and a bunch of Asian people would have more sex than usual. All the elephants would be dead and ivory carvings would be flooding the marketplace.

So my Libertarian

SKI REPORT

Spout Springs
Tollgate, Ore.
OPEN
Light snow closed resort last weekend, no new accumulation

Anthony Lakes
North Powder, Ore.
Base depth: 49"
New snow: none
Conditions: Clear, light winds, groomed

Ski Bluewood
Dayton, Wash.
Base depth: 26"
New snow: none
Conditions: Hard pack, poor coverage

Ski Fergi
Joseph, Ore.
CLOSED

Mt. Hood Meadows
Government Camp, Ore.
Base depth: 33"
New snow: none
Conditions: Frozen granular both on groom and off-piste

leanings go only so far. In this instance, and I never thought I’d say this, I side with Wayne Pacelle of the Humane Society of the United States, acknowledged king of the anti-hunters, who is actively working to reinstate the California ban.

Personally, and unlike Pacelle, I’m all for killing and eating geese. And I’m all for someone else eating their unswollen livers, but I hope lawmakers in California and elsewhere will recognize that foodies can’t be trusted to limit themselves, cruelty has no place in livestock production and when market forces fail, they must step in.

■

Pat Wray is a writer for the Corvallis Gazette-Times.

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