

Deer and elk act as buffer between wolves, livestock

By ERIC MORTENSON
EO Media Group

SALEM — They weren't on the agenda when the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife Commission voted Nov. 9 to take wolves off the state's endangered species list, but Oregon's elk and deer population likely will be key factors in wolf management decisions in the years ahead.

Mark Henjum, a retired wildlife biologist who was ODFW's original wolf program coordinator, said healthy deer and elk populations are a buffer between livestock and the state's increasing number of predators.

Oregon has 25,000 to 30,000 black bears, an estimated 6,200 cougars and a minimum of 82 wolves, according to ODFW.

Biologists fully expect the

state's wolf population to continue growing. Wolves occupy only 12 percent of their potential range in the state, and continued dispersal from Northeast Oregon will put them in contact with elk and deer and possibly in competition with other predators. Bear and cougar are much more widely dispersed in the state.

Sharp, localized drops in ungulate prey, as deer and elk are known, could drive predators to attack sheep, cattle or other domestic animals, Henjum and other biologists say.

Bears are primarily omnivorous but will take young deer and elk, especially in the spring. Cougars, meanwhile, are solitary ambush hunters and can take just about any animal at will, Henjum said. "They're amazingly good at what they do," he said.

Wolves travel in packs and chase down prey. They can kill

solitary adult cougars, or females and kittens, and chase cougars off carcasses. Pressure from wolves can force cougars into steeper, brushier terrain. The competition for ungulate prey could produce a bad turn for livestock.

Biologists say wolves prefer elk, but attacks on livestock are what anger cattle and sheep producers and gain media attention. From 2009 through June 2015, Oregon's confirmed losses to wolves stood at 79 sheep, 37 cattle, two goats and two herd protection dogs. Ranchers believe wolves are responsible for much more damage, saying livestock often disappear in wolf country. In addition, many livestock attacks are written off as "probable" or "possible" wolf depredations.

"This buffer thing is one of the main reasons we haven't seen so high a rate of loss of livestock," Henjum

said. "I think down the road, trying to maintain the ungulate populations is something that's going to be more important as we move on."

Although wolves were taken off the state endangered species list, their existence in Oregon is still governed by a wolf management plan. Hunting and trapping are not allowed, and there's no sport season for wolves. The plan does allow "controlled take" of wolves in cases of chronic livestock attacks or decreases in prey.

Phase 3 of the wolf plan, the next step after delisting, calls for wolves to be managed "in concert with its wild prey base," a move strongly supported by groups such as the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. "Oregon's wolf population is rapidly approaching the point where human tolerance and unacceptable impacts upon the wolf's deer and elk prey

base must be addressed," the foundation said in a letter to the ODFW Commission.

Jerome Rosa, executive director of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association, said his organization's members report seeing fewer deer and elk in some areas, and more in others.

What's ahead for wolves might be found in Oregon's cougar management plan, which allows for targeted killings to address problems.

In October, the ODFW Commission authorized killing 95 cougars in four wildlife management units during 2016. One area was chosen because of human, livestock and pet safety concerns, and three were selected to help mule deer recover. The kills, to be done by ODFW employees, federal wildlife service agents, or contractors, are in addition to whatever other cougar deaths occur.



Zander Richardson, 4, stares at deer hanging from a buck pole during the opening day of deer hunting season in Michigan at Knutson's Sporting Goods in Brooklyn, Mich. on Nov. 15.

Jessica Christian/Jackson Citizen Patriot via AP

OSP hunting for poachers on the High Desert

By KANDRA KENT
KTVZ.com

MADRAS — Down a long gravel road east of Madras, the headlights hit the trail of blood, then shone further, where the suspect waited next to the body.

State Police say it happens all the time in Central Oregon. What's more rare is catching these poachers in the act. But that's exactly what happened on Oct. 11, just before dusk.

Jefferson County sheriff's deputies and OSP Sgt. Lowell Lea responded to a call regarding a hunter suspected of poaching an elk on private land.

"The owner does want to pursue the charges for trespass," Lea told the suspect. "I really can't let the shooting from the roadway go either, and I'm going to have to take the elk."

The suspect was criminally cited on both charges and will have to appear before a judge.

It's just one of several cases KTVZ witnessed on a series of ride-alongs to profile OSP's Fish and Wildlife Division.

The program is rare, as Oregon and Alaska are the only states with a police force dedicated strictly to enforcing wildlife crimes.

The division has a \$45 million biennial budget and 119 sworn fish-and-wildlife troopers, a handful of which are based in Central Oregon. Last year, the agency investigated hundreds of poaching cases around the state, the majority deer and elk.

"Around here, for our big game season, probably the most poached species is the mule deer," Lea said.

On a forest road in La Pine, Senior Trooper James Hayes found a doe he suspected was shot illegally and left to rot.

Illegal kills, however, are just a small part of the troopers' work. According to data compiled by OSP, the agency deals with thousands of hunter violations each year.

Police told KTVZ they don't even come close to catching everyone breaking the rules in the woods.

"It's too big of an area, and too few of us," Lea said. "We don't catch most of the poachers."

"Our goal is really to find the serious wildlife violator, the person who is really stealing from the citizens of Oregon."

— Lowell Lea,

Oregon State Police sergeant, Fish and Wildlife division

To maximize effectiveness, troopers also take to the skies. OSP operates a plane with a pilot who looks for people spotlighting wildlife in the forests.

Police also spread out in popular hunting areas around the High Desert. They set up decoys, then hide and wait.

In La Pine, a stuffed deer was shot illegally within minutes after police set up the sting. The hunter took the shot from the middle of the road, which is against the law.

"I've hunted all week, and got all excited," the suspect told Trooper Hayes. "I totally understand you're just trying to do your job — and I'm wrong."

In other decoy operations, people shot at the deer after dark and cast spotlights while they were armed. Both are illegal.

"Most poaching is the crime of opportunity. The opportunity presents itself — and before the person has really thought through their action, they've committed a crime," Lea said.

There are serial poachers, too. OSP keeps a reminder in its Bend evidence room: a big stack of elk and deer antlers that were seized from one poacher.

"This person did have to pay \$7,500 in restitution to ODFW," Lea said. "He also lost his hunting license for three years, and he had other court fines as well."

But even those convicted of more serious wildlife crimes rarely go to jail. Data released by the Crook County Court shows the few wildlife cases that were prosecuted within the last five years ended in plea deals. Most pay fines.

For biologists, the crimes contribute to a troubling trend. Deer numbers are on the decline, in Central Oregon and across the Northwest.

ODFW biologist Corey Heath in Bend estimated

there's about 22,000 deer left in Central Oregon. That's only half the number he would like to see. Heath attributes the decline to a variety of reasons, including loss of habitat, disease, vehicle collisions and poaching.

A 2012 ODFW report found at least 13 percent of mule deer in its study were poached. That's slightly more than the 11 percent that were hunted legally. Almost half of the deer died for unknown reasons, and Heath said it's likely many of those deer were also poached.

"It's frustrating, because we work very hard," Heath said. "And then you have this fairly significant mortality factor that's a wild card that we have no control over."

Even those who consider hunting more than just a hobby were surprised by the study results.

"That shocked me," said Bill Littlefield, Bend president of the Oregon Hunter's Association.

Police and ODFW say there's a variety of reasons why people poach, and agree it has become an industry.

"I think the price this year got up to \$12 to \$15 a pound for antlers," Lea said. "Commercialism of wildlife is a big issue."

Experts say it's a misconception that hunters poach to feed their families.

"Most of the animals that are taken illegally, they're either left for waste or they're only taking the head," Littlefield said.

Heath also thinks some motives could be more sinister: "Whether they're doing it out of spite, or they just want to shoot something — they know it's illegal, and they know it has an impact on populations."

It's these people state game police hope to catch.

"Our goal is really to find the serious wildlife violator, the person who is really stealing from the citizens of Oregon," Lea said.

Ski season is coming, time to tune your body

IDAHO FALLS, Idaho (AP) — When the snow starts falling, people think of tuning up their skis or snowboard. You might check out your boots and bindings to make sure everything works right for the coming season.

But tuning up your body for the coming winter season is probably more important.

Many major ski resorts plan to open around the Thanksgiving holiday weekend. There's still time to get yourself in shape to enjoy the good snow when it piles up by mid-December. I've compiled a few good reasons to get off your duff and tune up your body.

Perhaps the best is to prevent injuries. A body that's in shape is less likely to suffer injuries from falls, muscle tears and fatigue-related problems.

You might feel great after the first run down the hill or three miles into the backcountry on the trails, but on that third run down the hill when you need the extra power to make a certain technical turn or to avoid someone or something, the body just may not respond when you need it to. Then pow! You've twisted your



AP Photo/Jack Dempsey, File

In this Oct. 29 photo, a skier goes airborne during opening day at Arapahoe Basin in Dillon, Colo.

ankle or knee or slammed down on a wrist or shoulder.

Another good reason (my favorite) is that you'll enjoy your activity more when you're in shape. I like being able to slap the skins on my skis and chug up hills away from the crowds while cross-country or backcountry skiing. Rather than an out-of-breath grind up and down the slope for your fourth run of the day — just to get your money's worth — in-shape skiers find it a joy to get in that extra last run.

The simplest and fastest way is to start running. If

you have a treadmill, use it. If not, get outside or to the gym. If your joints don't enjoy the pounding of running (like mine), an elliptical running machine works great. Or you can join a spinning class at a local gym. These exercises tune up the three most important areas: heart, lungs and legs.

As for the rest of your body, simple exercises such as push-ups, sit-ups and pull-ups will do wonders. (Of course, there's always indoor rock climbing.) Stretching and yoga exercises also work wonders to prevent injuries.

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