Wolf numbers growing in Mount Emily, Meacham

By George Plaven
EO Media Group

Contributed photo/ODFW

A collared wolf is photographed in the Mount Emily area in northeast Oregon.

A misty rain fell Wednesday morning in the Blue Mountains east of Pendleton, where Greg Rimbach drove the muddy forest roads scanning for wolf tracks.

"Once you see one, now you're an expert," said Rimbach, district wildlife biologist for the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife. "When they want to go somewhere, they like walking along roads down ridges. It's just easier."

Since wolves dispersed from Idaho and returned to northeast Oregon in the late 1990s, more of the predators are settling and forming packs in the Walla Walla and Mount Emily wildlife units. The district is now home to seven packs or groups of wolves totaling at least 36 animals — nearly one-third of the state's known wolf population.

Rimbach figures he spends a quarter of his workdays managing wolves, from trapping and collaring to investigating claims of livestock predation. His latest project involves finding and re-collaring OR-11, a male wolf from the Walla Walla pack that initially split to form the Mount Emily pack, and has split once again and paired up with a new mate at the south end of the Mount Emily Unit.

The trajectory of increased wolf activity comes as no surprise to Rimbach.

"This is absolutely what we expected," he said. "It certainly is tracking with what other states have seen."

Meacham pack

The presence of wolves, however, remains a polarizing issue as ranchers contend with livestock losses. Most recently, ODFW determined the Meacham pack was responsible for attacking cattle four times in eight days last month on the same 4,000-acre private pasture owned by Cunningham Sheep Company.

Predations occurred less than a mile from Interstate 84, and two miles from the community of Meacham. In response, ODFW issued a limited duration wolf kill permit, allowing Cunningham Sheep to shoot two adult or sub-adult wolves on sight within the densely forested pasture.

One of the wolves, a non-breeding female, was shot Sept. 7. The action sparked a wave of anger on both sides of the debate, with environmental groups criticizing ODFW for allowing any wolves to be killed and the Oregon Cattlemen's Association arguing the entire pack should be removed.

Wolf-livestock conflicts were anticipated when wolves re-entered Oregon, Rimbach said. That is why ranchers and environmentalists were both included at the table when the state wrote its Wolf Management and Conservation Plan, to balance conservation with protection of livestock.

"This is exactly what came out on the back end of those discussions," Rimbach said.

ODFW is still in the process of revising the plan, which it hopes to present back to the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission by December or early 2018.

Personally, Rimbach said he sees wolves as another part of the local ecosystem that needs to be managed.

"Hopefully someday, we can start normalizing wolves into our fauna," he said.

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Wolf packs in Walla Walla, Mount Emily units

East Oregonian

The Walla Walla and Mount Emily wildlife management units are home to seven wolf packs, pairs or groups of wolves totaling at least 36 known animals, according to the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife. They include:

- Walla Walla pack — 11 known animals
- Mount Emily pack — 8 known animals.
- Meacham pack — 7 known animals.
- North Emily wolves — 3 known animals.
- OR-52 group — 3 known animals.
- OR-11 pair — 2 known animals.
- OR-30 pair — 2 known animals.

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