

CROSS-STATE
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| THE WARR
ON WOLVES

Wisconsin *Trails*

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WISCONSIN'S WAR ON WOLVES

After bouncing back from extinction, the wolf is taken off the endangered species list, but controversy continues to dog its future.

By Deborah Hufford | Photography by Linda Arndt

As a young man in the early 1900s, conservationist Aldo Leopold wrote of killing a wolf: "We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes ... I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that ... no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view." ▶

For the past four decades, the gray wolf has been both the hunted and the hunter in this state as it has been repeatedly taken off and put on federal and state endangered species lists. In January 2012, the wolf was federally delisted, putting the management of the species here under the jurisdiction of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and tribal conservation departments, which are often at odds regarding wolf management. The recent Wolf Management Act, proposed the same day the species was delisted, recommended an annual wolf-hunting season, igniting instant opposition from Wisconsin's Native American tribes, which regard the wolf as sacred.

The debate about the wolf is as ambivalent as the human regard for the species itself. From fear to awe, feelings about the wolf prompt powerful impulses to both chasten and champion this storied carnivore.

Who's afraid of the big, bad wolf?

Before white settlers arrived in North America, an estimated 2 million wolves roamed North America, including 3,000 to 5,000 in the land now known as Wisconsin. The state's native Ojibwe (also known as Chippewa) tribe regarded "ma'iingan" (wolf) as a brother to original man. "We didn't have stories [about] Little Red Riding Hood or werewolves," says Joe Rose Sr., an elder of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa and professor emeritus of Native American studies at Ashland's Northland College.

European immigrants, however, were reared on terrifying tales of wolves that ate children. With a primal mythology and almost pathological fear of the creature, the immigrants arrived in a New World teeming with wolves. Pioneer fear of the wolf was so deep-seated that the wolf became the most widely hunted animal in American history. By the early 1900s, it was nearly extinct.

At the end of the Civil War in 1865, Wisconsin instituted a bounty to eradicate the wolf that would last into the 1950s. By 1900, the animal was gone from the southern two-thirds of the state, and by 1914 the last wolf in central Wisconsin was killed in Waushara County. Across the nation, the species suffered the same carnage; by 1926, Yellowstone's last wolf was gone.

The politics of protection

In 1973, the wolf finally got a reprieve when it was among the first animals protected by the Federal Endangered Species Act. The following year, a wolf pack was found along the Minnesota–Wisconsin border near Duluth–Superior, and the population began to slowly rebound. This comeback was heavily engineered by decades of



A timeline: The wolf in Wisconsin

1832

3,000–5,000 wolves roam the land now known as Wisconsin.

1865

Wisconsin institutes bounty to eradicate the wolf. Discontinued in 1957.

1880s

Wolves exterminated in southern Wisconsin.

1914

Last wolf in central Wisconsin killed in Waushara County.

1930s

Wolves decimated to 3% of original population: just 150 left in extreme north.

1950s

Last wolves disappear in Wisconsin.

**1974**

The wolf is among first to be listed on federal Endangered Species Act.

1975

First wolf pack sighted in Wisconsin near Minnesota border south of Duluth–Superior. Wolf listed as state-endangered.

1978

Wolf is first species listed as endangered in the contiguous U.S.

1979

With the help of the USFWS, WDNR starts intensive monitoring and collaring program.

1980

25 wolves sighted in Douglas and Lincoln counties.

1980–1985

Parvovirus decimates wolf population to 14. ▶

scientific study and partnerships among state and federal agencies and volunteers. Central to these efforts were seminal recovery and management plans created by the WDNR and partners throughout the 1980s, '90s and '00s.

The federal government, through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the state government, through the WDNR, each maintains its own lists of threatened and endangered species.

The regulatory process and politics are more complicated at the federal level, says Adrian Wydeven, lead WDNR wolf biologist. While the federal government first "downlisted" the wolf from endangered to threatened in 2003, the wolf landed back on the endangered list in 2005 after a series of legal dogfights. In 2007, the wolf was delisted again, but it was relisted and delisted multiple times over the next two years due to legal action spearheaded by the Humane Society of the United States, the Center for Biological Diversity and others that feared delisting would open up the species to hunting, inhumane treatment and decimation. On January 27, 2012, the wolf was removed from the federal endangered species list in the state of Wisconsin.

Preying on fear

As intended by the Endangered Species Act, wolf populations rebounded each time the species was listed, in part due to the adaptability of the species. "We used to think that wolves needed real wilderness areas to survive, but that's not true," says David Mladenoff, a UW-Madison professor of forest ecology who studies wolf habitat. "All they need is a place with enough prey (such as white-tailed deer) where people wouldn't kill them."

But as wolf numbers rise, so does the fear factor. The wolf is a carnivorous, natural-born killer with jaws that have twice the crushing power of a pit bull; both have 42 teeth, but the wolf's are twice as big. For all its ferocity, however, the wolf poses minimal danger to humans. According to the USFWS, only two human fatalities have been attributed to wolves in North America (both in Alaska) in the past 100-plus years. In fact, more humans have been killed by alligators (17 since 1948), cougars (22 since 1890)

and bears (70 since 1900). Statistically, the wolf's domesticated cousin is far more dangerous than any wild carnivore: Dogs kill about 30 Americans each year, but even they are not the biggest killer. Deer in Wisconsin have caused more than 400 fatalities and hundreds of millions in property damage and government costs since 1970, according to the Wisconsin Department of Motor Vehicles.

More than the risk to humans, the larger concern is predation of livestock and pets. From July 1, 2010, through June 30, 2011, the DNR listed 81 cases of wolf depredation of domestic animals, which were mostly young livestock plus 24 pet and hunting dogs. Over the past 30 years, damage claims for wolf depredations of livestock and dogs have cost the state nearly \$1 million, according to Dick Thiel, a leading Wisconsin wolf expert and chair of the Timber Wolf Information Network. He adds that wolves cause problems on 30 to 50 farms annually.

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promotes coexistence between humans and large carnivores.

Wydeven points out that many claimants are too quick to cry wolf. "Only half the reports of wolf predation are actually caused by wolves in the state," he says. Central to the DNR's wolf-management plan is the identification and removal of problem wolves by the U.S. Department of Agriculture-Wildlife Services, whose specialists are trained in the best and most humane ways to dispatch problem wolves, says Wydeven.

In addition to reviewing and compensating wolf-damage claims, a key part of the state's wolf-management plan is helping farmers prevent attacks. There are a number of techniques to prevent wolf predation on livestock, says Wydeven, like installing flashing lights and special fencing, using guard animals like dogs or donkeys, and enclosing newborn and young animals closer to the barnyard.



► 1986-1989

WDNR Wolf Recovery Plan sets goal of 80 wolves for three years.

1992

With protected habitat and ample deer, wolf population grows to 83-86.

1999

WDNR reclassifies wolves from endangered to threatened and sets goal of 350-500 wolves with its Wolf Management Plan.

2003

Wolves federally reclassified from endangered to threatened in April.

2004

With numbers at 373, wolf reclassified in Wisconsin as protected.

2005

Wolf relisted as endangered in January.

Wisconsin wolf experts are also joining in the fight to keep livestock and pets safe. A 2011 study co-authored by UW-Madison's Treves and Kerry Martin and the DNR's Wydeven and Jane Wiedenhoef produced a "risk map" of wolf attacks on livestock with prediction accuracy of 88 percent. The highest-risk areas comprise only 10.5 percent of wolf habitat, concentrated in the northwest and north. "Prediction promotes prevention. It's a good start to help farmers," says Treves. "Every single wolf pack in Wisconsin has access to people, pets or livestock," he says, but only a few are implicated in attacks. "The majority of the wolf population is not causing problems."

Carnivore quandary

In fact, the wolf plays an important role in the Wisconsin ecosystem. Wolves help control deer populations, which reduces car accidents and property damage caused by deer, says Wydeven. The wolf presence also helps disperse existing deer herds, allowing trees in forests across the state to regenerate, he adds. Another surprising benefit is that trout numbers seem to be up in wolf habitats. The wolf is the primary predator of beavers, whose dams destroy trout streams. With fewer beavers, the state, counties, towns and the USFWS have had to spend less time and money trapping beaver to control overpopulation, says Wydeven.

Groups like the DNR, Sierra Club, Defenders of Wildlife and the National Wildlife Federation triumphed the wolf's delisting, lauding it as a win for conservation and the Endangered Species Act. But in the fight to get the wolf delisted, groups like these had unlikely allies in the state's hunters and farmers, who saw an opportunity to take control of attacks on their property and livestock.

In March, the Wisconsin Senate and Assembly passed the Wolf Management Act; the bill was signed into law in April by Gov. Scott Walker. Under the new law, for the first time in Wisconsin, wolves may be hunted and trapped from mid-October through the end of February. Hunting with bows, crossbows, firearms, bait,

electronic calls (of prey in distress) and hunting dogs (up to six per pack) will be allowed, as well as trapping with cable restraints and steel-jawed foothold traps.

Wydeven says that any public harvest of wolves will be carefully regulated by the WDNR, which has the authority to limit hunting licenses and restrict hunting to certain zones, as is done for bear hunting. "The WDNR's goal is to allow the wolf to act as a normal part of the ecosystem, and part of that goal means maintaining their natural pack structure," says Wydeven.

The WDNR has said it will involve the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Game Commission as the agency formalizes the terms of the hunting policy. The GLIFGC, which represents the Ojibwe tribes of Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota, maintains that tribes legally should have been consulted about the wolf-hunt bill and were not.

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with the new law, contending it is, well, a wolf in sheep's clothing and not a "management" solution at all, especially so soon after the wolf was taken off the endangered list. They would prefer to give the wolf population a chance to stabilize and take a more measured approach to stewardship. In addition, they maintain that the

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proposed hunting season lasts too long, extending into the wolf-breeding season.

The WDNR, meanwhile, is trying to stay above the fray in an attempt to strike a balance between ecology, humanity and the law. Its goal, says Wydeven, is to find a fair and ecologically sustainable middle ground in which the wolf can exist.

One thing is certain: As one of nature's most feared and revered creatures, passion and controversy will follow the wolf into the future. Perhaps Aldo Leopold was right: "Only a mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf." **WT**

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2007

Delisted in March.

2008

Relisted in September.

2009

Delisted in May; relisted in July.

2011

Estimated Wisconsin wolf count is 782-824.

2012

Wolf federally delisted on January 27. Wolf-hunting proposed in Wisconsin and Minnesota legislatures the same day. Wolf-hunting bill passed by state Senate and Assembly in March and signed into law by Gov. Walker in April.



Photo By Linda Arndt

The war on wolves

Wisconsin's tumultuous relationship with the gray wolf

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