



## Gray Wolf (*Canis lupus*)

The gray wolf is a highly social animal and lives in packs of two to more than a dozen animals. Within the pack there is a definite hierarchy of dominant and subordinate individuals. Typically, only the alpha (lead or highest ranking) male and female mate, which helps limit the size of the pack and the number of newborn pups. The alpha pair along with their offspring forms the pack. Wolves hunt in packs and will share their food with the pups and other adults in their pack. This arrangement is rare in the animal world.

Gray wolves can survive in a variety of habitats as long as food is plentiful. They usually live in isolated forested habitats interspersed with grassy areas where their prey—deer, elk, moose, and other ungulates—graze. Wolves are large animals and can weigh up to 175 pounds and measure up to 6.5 feet in length, but most wolves are about half this size. Although named the “gray” wolf, the color of this mammal varies in shade from black to white to gray.

The gray wolf once was found throughout North America from Canada to Central Mexico. When European colonists began to settle in North America, they relied on many species such as deer and elk for food, clothing, and trade. They had very little knowledge about predators. Wolves, like other predators, were viewed with fear or as competitors for important food sources. Settlers also were concerned that wolves would attack the humans or their livestock. So, as early as 1630, large bounties were paid to people to kill wolves. The Massachusetts Bay Colony paid an average month’s salary for the head of a wolf.

As more people settled the land, the pressure on wildlife drastically increased. Between hunting and loss of habitat, many wildlife species, including elk, bison, and deer, were almost eliminated from parts of the country. The wolf was being pushed into an ever-decreasing range with a greatly reduced food supply. Conflicts between wolves and people grew. Programs, including those subsidized by the government, were established to eradicate the wolf. By 1897, the eastern timber wolf (*Canis lupus lycaon*), a subspecies of the gray wolf, was eradicated from the northeastern United States.

Wolves remained fairly common in the wild lands of the northwest through the early 1900s. However, habitat loss and eradication programs persisted. By 1950, wolves had been eliminated throughout the contiguous United States except for remote wild areas in northern Minnesota. In 1967, the eastern timber wolf was listed as endangered. In 1973, the northern Rocky Mountain wolf (*Canis lupus irremotus*), another gray wolf subspecies, was also listed as endangered. With a relatively good eastern timber wolf population surviving in parts of Minnesota, there was some confusion as to the legal status of the gray wolf in the United States. To clarify the situation, in 1978 the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) reclassified the Minnesota gray wolf population as “threatened,” and all other gray wolf populations south of Canada were listed as “endangered.”

The Endangered Species Act of 1973 provides protection for endangered species and requires that plans be prepared for the recovery of these species. Over the course of many years, federal and state agencies, as well as interested organizations, conducted studies, held public hearings, and conducted opinion polls to help determine recovery strategies for the gray wolf. In 1987, the USFWS approved a Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan, which designated three official recovery areas in the northern Rockies. These areas were in northwestern Montana (including Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall Wilderness), central Idaho (the Selway-Bitterroot and Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness Area), and the Yellowstone ecosystem (including Yellowstone National Park and surrounding areas).

During the early 1980s, wolves began naturally to re-colonize northwestern Montana as they dispersed south from Canada. By 1994, there were approximately 64 wolves in Montana forming five packs. As a result, final plans for wolf reintroduction centered on central Idaho and Yellowstone National Park. Between 1995 and 1996, 66 wolves were brought to the United States from Canada. Thirty-one were reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park, and 35 were reintroduced into central Idaho.



## Gray Wolf (*Canis lupus*) - continued



The reintroduction of wolves into these states has been extremely controversial. Wildlife biologists, environmental organizations, and many individuals applauded the return of wolves as a step in restoring the natural balance in the ecosystem. Chambers of commerce, shopkeepers, and entrepreneurs viewed the wolves as a way to attract tourists to the areas and increase profits.

In contrast, some hunting and outdoor outfitters were concerned that the wolves would decrease the elk, deer, and bighorn sheep species that help them make a living. Others were concerned that timber harvests would be restricted where wolves were reintroduced. A number of outdoor enthusiasts and homeowners expressed safety concerns. Sheep and cattle ranchers feared wolves would prey on their livestock, thereby affecting their livelihood. Wolves can and sometimes do prey on livestock. However, not all wolves do so, even those near livestock. Wolves that do prey on livestock tend to continue to do so and teach their pups to do so, as well.

Prior to reintroducing the wolves, the USFWS examined several options in an Environmental Impact Statement. These included: 1) reintroduction of wolves with the wolves classified as “experimental populations”; 2) no action—allow wolves to naturally expand into Idaho and Yellowstone; 3) change laws and prevent wolf recovery; 4) establish legislation so that states would implement wolf recovery with no federal oversight; 5) reintroduction with wolves classified as endangered—giving a high level of protection to wolves.

Since the initial reintroduction, the status of the gray wolf has changed several times. In an effort to address the concerns of local citizens, the reintroduced gray wolves in Yellowstone and central Idaho were soon re-classified as “nonessential experimental” populations under the Endangered Species Act. This classification allowed more involvement on the state level and broader flexibility in management of both individual wolves and packs—all of which would not have been allowed if the wolves remained listed as endangered. Should a wolf or pack pose a threat to livestock, pets, or property, the problem or nuisance wolves could be relocated or, if necessary,

killed by designated personnel. In addition, the classification of “experimental population” allowed private landowners to kill a wolf if it was in the act of wounding or killing livestock on private land.

Amidst all of the publicity, issues, and controversies, wolf populations began to grow. In 2002, the Rocky Mountain population met all of the goals of the reintroduction program, and the USFWS began measures to delist the gray wolf. However, these measures proved to be more difficult than usual. Between 2008 and 2010, wolf populations in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and parts of Oregon, Utah, and Washington were added to and then removed from the endangered species list several times. Each time the populations were delisted, several conservation groups challenged the delisting and won. However, the subsequent reclassification of the gray wolf was then challenged by others, resulting in the wolves being delisted yet again. Much of the controversy surrounds management practices that would allow a regulated hunting season for wolves. Some oppose regulated hunting of wolves and want the wolves to have the protection from hunting afforded to endangered species. Others support regulated hunting of wolves and believe the wolves should not be listed.



As of 2013, the gray wolf was removed from the endangered species list. Subsequent challenges to this delisting were found to be unwarranted. Gray wolf populations continue to grow with over 5,500 wolves found in the contiguous United States. The populations appear to be healthy and self-sustaining. However, the Mexican wolf, a subspecies of the gray wolf found in the Southwest, is a listed endangered species.