

Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery 2006 Interagency Annual Report

A cooperative effort by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Nez Perce Tribe, National Park Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Idaho Fish and Game, and USDA Wildlife Services



MFWP photo by Liz Bradley

This cooperative annual report presents information on the status, distribution and management of the Northern Rocky Mountain wolf population from January 1, 2006 to December 31, 2006. It is also available at:

<http://westerngraywolf.fws.gov/annualreports.htm>

This report may be copied and distributed as needed.

Suggested Citation: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Nez Perce Tribe, National Park Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Idaho Fish and Game, and USDA Wildlife Services. 2007. Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery 2006 Annual Report. C.A. Sime and E. E. Bangs, eds. USFWS, Ecological Services, 585 Shepard Way, Helena, Montana. 59601. 235pp.

Note to Readers:

Because of the transition to state-led management in Montana and Idaho, the 2006 Interagency Annual Report has a different organization and look than in previous years. This year's interagency report is comprised of separate sections, one each for the individual annual reports from the states of Montana and Idaho respectively, federal agencies for Wyoming and Yellowstone National Park combined, and the overall U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Northern Rockies Recovery Program. This type of organization makes for some degree of overlap and duplication between sections. However, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service requires Montana and Idaho to submit an annual report each year. By incorporating their state annual reports in this modified structure, the public can still access information about gray wolves in the northern Rockies in a single, comprehensive report. I hope you find this useful.

Please let us know what you think so we can make improvements next year.

Thank you,

Ed Bangs
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Northern Rockies Wolf Recovery Program Coordinator

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NORTHERN ROCKIES SUMMARY

The gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) population in the Northern Rocky Mountain (NRM) states (Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming) continued to increase in distribution and abundance (Figure 1, Tables 4a, 4b). Estimates of wolf numbers at the end of 2006 were 739 wolves in the Central Idaho Recovery Area (CID), 390 in the Greater Yellowstone Recovery Area (GYA), and 171 in the Northwest Montana Recovery Area (NWMT) for a total minimum estimate of 1,300 wolves (Figure 1, Table 4a). By state boundaries, there were an estimated 673 wolves in the state of Idaho, 311 in Wyoming and 316 in Montana (Table 4b). Of approximately 173 packs (groups of 2 or more wolves), 86 packs met the definition of “breeding pair,” defined as an adult male and female raising 2 or more pups until December 31 (Tables 4a, 4b). This made 2006 the seventh year in which 30 or more breeding pairs were documented and well distributed within the 3-state area. Biological recovery criteria have been met for removing NRM wolves from the Endangered Species list. By the end of 2006, no confirmed wolves or wolf packs were documented in states adjacent to Montana, Idaho and Wyoming. In 2006, one lone GYA wolf was confirmed killed in north Central Utah (near Tremonton) and another was confirmed killed in western South Dakota (near Sturgis).

Wolves in the NRM subsisted mainly on elk, white-tailed deer, mule deer, moose, and bison. Livestock depredations in 2006 included 184 cattle, 247 sheep, 8 dogs and 1 horse, and 2 llamas that were confirmed as killed by wolves (Tables 5a, 5b). Approximately of 43 out of 179 NRM wolf packs (24%) were involved in confirmed livestock depredations, six of these packs no longer existed at the end of 2006. In response, 142 wolves were lethally removed within the 3-state area (about 12% of the 2006 wolf population). No wolves were relocated in 2006. In Montana, about 21% of packs were confirmed to have killed livestock, the majority of which had territories in the Montana portion of CID (35%), Montana GYA (21%), and MT – NWMT (13%), respectively. Two of these packs were removed by the end of 2006. In Wyoming outside of Yellowstone National Park, about 33% of wolf packs had confirmed livestock kills. One pack was removed. In Idaho, 29% of wolf packs had confirmed livestock kills. As new packs form within the original core recovery areas and individual animals disperse, the 3 populations increasingly resemble and function as a single, large meta-population (Figure 1). Numerous research projects are underway, examining wolf population dynamics, predator-prey interactions and livestock depredation.

NORTHERN ROCKIES BACKGROUND

Gray wolf populations were extirpated from the western U.S. by the 1930s. Subsequently, wolves from Canada occasionally dispersed south into Montana and Idaho but failed to survive long enough to reproduce. Eventually, public attitudes toward predators changed and wolves received legal protection with the passage of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1973. Wolves began to successfully recolonize northwest Montana in the early 1980s. By 1995, there were 6 wolf packs in northwest Montana. In 1995 and 1996, 66 wolves from southwestern Canada were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park (YNP) (31 wolves) and CID (35 wolves).

The NRM wolf population contains 3 core recovery areas: the NWMT (Figs. 1, 2) includes northern Montana and the northern Idaho panhandle; the GYA (Figs. 1, 3) includes Wyoming and adjacent parts of Idaho and Montana; the CID (Figs. 1, 4) includes central Idaho and adjacent parts of southwest Montana. Wolves in the 3 recovery areas are managed under different guidelines, depending upon their designated status under the ESA.

In 2003, NWMT wolves were reclassified from endangered, the most protected classification under the ESA, to threatened, a less restrictive classification. On January 31, 2005, and August 19, 2005, the U.S. District Courts in Oregon and Vermont, respectively, concluded that the 2003 final rule was “arbitrary and capricious” and violated the ESA (*Defenders of Wildlife v. Norton* 03-1348-JO, D. OR 2005; *National Wildlife Federation v. Norton* 1:03-CV-340, D. VT. 2005). The Court’s rulings invalidated the April 2003 changes to the ESA listing for the gray wolf. Therefore, the gray wolf in the Rocky Mountains, outside of areas designated as nonessential, experimental populations, reverted back to the endangered status that existed prior to the 2003 reclassification.

The GYA and CID wolves are classified as nonessential experimental populations (as allowed by section 10(j) of ESA) and managed with more flexible options than an endangered or threatened population. In 2005 a new 10(j) experimental population regulation allowed even more management flexibility for wolves in the experimental population areas in states with approved wolf management plans (Montana and Idaho). Currently the states of Montana and Idaho manage wolves in their states, with federal funding and according to federal guidelines.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), responsible for administering the ESA for terrestrial and freshwater species and some marine mammals, determined that at least 30 or more breeding pairs composed of at least 300 wolves, with an equitable distribution among the 3 states for 3 successive years, constitutes a viable and recovered wolf population. That criterion (including the temporal element) was met at the end of 2002. USFWS has proposed delisting throughout the NRM except northwestern WY. Until Wyoming’s regulatory framework for wolf management can be approved, wolves in northwestern Wyoming will remain protected by the ESA.