



## Wolf Recovery in North America



Before the arrival of European settlers, wolves ranged widely across the continent, from coast to coast and from Canada to Mexico. Two species are found in North America, the gray wolf, with its various subspecies, and the red wolf. Historically, gray wolves were found throughout most of the United States, Canada, and Mexico, with red wolves primarily inhabiting the southeastern United States.

Wolves play an important role as predator in the ecosystems they inhabit. They feed primarily on large mammals, such as deer and elk, removing sick and injured animals from the populations. They are highly social, living in packs and hunting and raising young cooperatively.

As the country was settled, native prey species dropped and numbers of domestic animals increased. As wolves turned to livestock for prey, efforts were made to eradicate wolves throughout their range. In the United States, large-scale

predator control programs were carried out, with wolves hunted and killed nearly to extinction.

By the middle of the 20th century, few wolves existed in the Lower 48 States. Only several hundred gray wolves in Minnesota and an isolated population on Michigan's Isle Royale remained, with an occasional Mexican wolf and a few red wolves reported.

Gray wolves in the Lower 48 States now number over 3,700. Currently all gray wolves in the Lower 48 States, with the exception of the Mexican wolf in the Southwest, are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Mexican wolves are listed as endangered.

Recovery plans have been developed for wolves in various parts of the country, with the goal of ultimately removing the wolf from the list of endangered and threatened species. The recovery plans identify the population levels and distribution that would be necessary for the species to be considered recovered. When recovery criteria are reached, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reviews the population status to determine if reclassification or delisting is appropriate. Recovery criteria differ from population to population depending on the threats to the species, the connectivity of the population to other wolf populations, and local ecological circumstances.

### Gray wolves in the eastern U.S.

Gray wolves in the eastern part of the United States were eliminated from the landscape, except in

northern Minnesota and on Isle Royale, Michigan. Protection under the ESA allowed the Minnesota population to grow, and there are now an estimated 2,445 wolves in that State. In addition, wolves returned to Michigan's Upper Peninsula and Wisconsin, and these populations total about 600 animals.

Because wolf populations achieved recovery goals for the eastern population, the Service recently changed the status of wolves in the region from endangered to threatened (wolves in Minnesota were already listed as threatened, so their status did not change). We may propose delisting the eastern wolf population in the near future.

### Wolves in the Rocky Mountains

Probably the best-known wolf recovery effort was the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho in 1995 and 1996. After an absence of more than 50 years, the Service brought wild Canadian gray wolves to the Park and to the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness Area in Idaho. The goal was to speed up the recovery of wolves in the Rocky Mountain region, where they were eliminated in the late 1920s.

Wolves were released as family groups in Yellowstone and individually in central Idaho. The program has been extremely successful, with wolves in both areas forming packs and reproducing. There are now an estimated 271 wolves in Yellowstone, and about 285 wolves in central Idaho. Coupled with natural recovery occurring in

northwestern Montana (where there are now approximately 108 wolves), the reintroduction program has boosted wolf recovery progress in the Rocky Mountain region.

In 2003, naturally occurring wolves in the Rocky Mountain region were reclassified from endangered to threatened, while in the Yellowstone and central Idaho reintroduction areas, wolves are designated as “non-essential, experimental” populations.

### Mexican gray wolves

Mexican gray wolves, called Mexican wolves or lobos, were once common through western Texas, southern New Mexico, central Arizona, and northern Mexico. By the early 1900s, growing numbers of livestock in the region and fewer and fewer natural prey species resulted in increasing numbers of livestock losses to wolves. Intensive control efforts were largely responsible for eradicating Mexican wolves by the middle of this century. The last

confirmed wild Mexican wolf was reported in the United States in 1970 and in Mexico in 1980.

Mexican wolves were listed as endangered in 1976, and a joint recovery effort with Mexico began. Using animals captured in Mexico in 1977, a captive breeding population was established. These animals are the foundation of the recovery effort for Mexican wolves. Wolves that are candidates for reintroduction undergo a “pre-acclimation” period at Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico and other remote facilities. This helps foster behavior and characteristics that enhance their ability to survive in the wild.

In 1998, 13 captive-reared Mexican wolves were released in eastern Arizona. Additional releases are planned to reach the goal of a wild population of 100 animals. As with wolves reintroduced in Yellowstone and central Idaho, these Mexican wolves are designated “non-essential, experimental” to allow more flexibility in management.

### Wolves in Alaska and Canada

Gray wolves in Alaska and Canada have never reached the point that protection under the ESA is necessary. In Alaska, the State manages wolves, which number 6,000 to 8,000 animals. Similarly, Canada’s 50,000 gray wolves are managed by provincial governments and are not considered endangered or threatened.

### Red Wolves

Red wolves once ranged throughout the southeastern United States. As with gray wolves, fear of conflict between red wolves and human activities resulted in eradication efforts. As red wolf numbers declined, the remaining animals in the wild were removed to zoos and other facilities to save the species. By 1980, the red wolf existed only in captivity, with a founder population of 14 animals.

### Number of Gray Wolves in the Continental U.S. for 2002

<b>Western Great Lakes States</b>	
Michigan	278*
Minnesota	2,445
Wisconsin	323
*not including Isle Royale’s 17 wolves	
<b>Western States</b>	
Yellowstone	271
Northwest Montana	108
Central Idaho	285
<b>Arizona/New Mexico</b>	
(Mexican Wolf)	21

Captive breeding efforts were successful and red wolves have returned to the wild. Current reintroduction efforts are being carried out at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in North Carolina.

There are now approximately 100 red wolves comprising 20 packs in the wild in northeastern North Carolina. An additional 156 wolves are part of captive breeding efforts at 31 facilities throughout the United States. The captive rearing program is vital to maximizing genetic diversity among red wolves. Recovery goals for the red wolf call for a total of 550 animals, including at least 220 in the wild.

For more information about the status of wolves, contact one of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service offices listed below or the Service’s homepage at [www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov).

#### Eastern United States

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
1 Federal Drive  
Ft. Snelling, MN 55111-4056

#### Rocky Mountain region

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
100 North Park, Room 320  
Helena, Montana 59601

#### Mexican Wolves

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
P.O. Box 1306  
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87103

#### Red Wolves

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
160 Zillicoa Street  
Asheville, North Carolina 87103