DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE — WILDLIFE FEATURE

For Release On Receipt (prepared 4/2/74) — McGarvey 202/343-5634

WORLD'S FIRST WOLF TRANSPLANT SUGGESTS HOMING TENDENCY

The world's first transplant of four endangered eastern timber wolves from Minnesota to upper Michigan took place on March 12 and already is showing interesting results. Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service Director Lynn A. Greenwalt announced today that three of the four wolves apparently are trying to find their way back to Minnesota.

The fourth wolf, an 11 month old immature female, remains in the general release area in the Huron Mountains of upper Michigan.

The unique experiment is designed to see if territorial predators as large as wolves can, in fact, be resettled. Further, the test is an attempt to reestablish the eastern timber wolf in parts of its former range.

Since their release, the four radio-collared wolves--two males and two females--have been monitored from an airplane. The radio collars will remain active up to 12 months. The wolves' movements, at first, were erratic as they surveyed the terrain in the release area. From the start, a mature male and mature female paired. The other two--a younger male an an immature female--went separate ways.

The wolves, known as "ten, eleven, twelve, and thirteen," can be identified by different radio frequencies. The immature female is "ten." "Eleven" is the mature female, who is believed pregnant after mating with the male known as "twelve" during the period between captivity in January and release in March.

Within days after release the other male, "thirteen," crossed the trail of "eleven and twelve," followed them for a day or so and finally joined them. The three are now 50 to 60 miles west of the release point.

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Their movements are random, with the longest single move noted covering 20 miles in a day. Overall, however, their drift is westward, and Dr. William Robinson of Northern Michigan University believes they may be exhibiting a not-too-surprising homing tendency.

The first sign that the wolves are going to establish in Michigan that Dr. Robinson is looking for is a week or so of stabilization in a territory of, perhaps, 120 square miles.

Robinson and Dr. David Mech, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist, also expect the presumed-pregnant female to start "denning" in the next couple of weeks as her suspected late April delivery date arrives. "She may dig two or three dens in a general area and move from one to another or she may occupy a coyote den," Mech said. "The males doubtless will remain with her, as wolves exhibit strong family tendencies."

Since release, Robinson reports the aerial sighting of a kill by the pack of three wolves. Ground inspection, however, showed the wolves had dug up and eaten the buried heads and feet of seven apparently poached deer. The wolves also have been spotted eating frozen apples in an orchard.

The trial is a joint effort of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Northern Michigan University that has the backing of the Natural Resources Departments of Minnesota and Michigan. It is funded by the Huron Mountains Wildlife Foundation, the National Audubon Society, and Northern Michigan University.

The four wolves were trapped near International Falls, Minnesota, at the turn of the year. Before they were moved to Michigan they were weighed, measured, tagged, tested, and inoculated. Dr. Mech said "They are the healthiest wolves in the Nation at this time. They were vaccinated against rabies, distemper, leptospirosis, and hepatitis. Penicillin was given as a precaution against infection, and they were dosed with enough vitamins to hold them for several weeks. The Veterans Administration Hospital of Twin Cities, Minnesota, consulted on this aspect of the program.

The eastern timber wolf is on the Secretary of the Interior's List of Endangered Species. It formerly ranged over Minnesota and eastern Canada, south to Ohio, and into the Northeastern United States. The species is greatly reduced in range and numbers in the United States but stable in Minnesota where the population is estimated to be 500-1,000. The area of upper Michigan was chosen for release because it was once part of the species' range and because a remnant population of about six eastern timber wolves is thought alive there today.

The experiment is being watched with interest by wildlife scientists who hope to reestablish other endangered species in parts of their former ranges. The Swedish government is also interested because it is considering a similar wolf transplant program.

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