



The Gray Wolf

While today it would be the experience of a lifetime to see a wolf in the wild, wolves used to be a common sight in North America. Historically, wolves roamed coast to coast, through deciduous forests in the east, lush river valleys in the midwest, great plains dotted with buffalo, deserts of the southwest, alpine meadows in the Rocky Mountains and frozen tundra in Canada and Alaska. Gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) were once found throughout the U.S., except for the southeast, where another species, the red wolf, lives.

Roaming the Wilderness

Although they can survive near populated areas, wolves are shy of people, and they need wide open spaces to hunt and roam. Wolves live in tight family groups, called packs, led by an alpha pair who carves out their territory. By hunting in packs, wolves can take down large ungulates such as deer, elk and moose. They also eat smaller prey such as rabbits, rodents, birds, nuts and berries.



As a top predator, wolves are a critical part of their ecosystem. Wolf predation helps keep herds of ungulates healthy by targeting weak and old individuals. Other animals such as eagles and bears benefit by scavenging wolf kills. In addition, scientific studies suggest that wolves help the growth of new trees by reducing large concentrations of herbivores, and thus preventing them from over-browsing young vegetation.

Decades of Extermination

As European settlers arrived, they began widespread extermination of predators, including gray wolves. The government hired trappers and offered bounties, \$20 to \$50 per wolf. From an estimated 400,000 wolves when the settlers first arrived, populations plummeted to about 60,000 in the late 1960's. Wolves were eliminated from the lower 48 states, except for small populations in Minnesota and Isle Royale, an island in Lake Superior. In 1967, the gray wolf was declared endangered in the most of US. The species is listed as threatened in Minnesota and unlisted in Alaska.

Protection and Reintroduction

Once wolves were protected under the ESA, the species began to recover. The naturally occurring Minnesota population had increased to over 3,020 individuals in winter of 2005 and wolves have returned to Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

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Gray wolves were missing from the entire western United States by 1973. In order to help the process of recovery, the Fish and Wildlife Service began capturing wolves in Canada and releasing them in the U.S. In 1995, wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming and the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness in Idaho. Because wolf reintroduction was politically controversial, the FWS designated these “experimental” populations, which allowed wildlife managers to kill wolves who preyed on livestock. With large wild areas and ample prey sources, the wolf population began to thrive in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming, growing to over 1,679 individuals in 2009. Tourists traveled from all over the world hoping to see a wild wolf in Yellowstone, injecting millions of dollars into local economies around the Park.

In 2011, after years of debate and litigation about whether or not wolves in the northern Rockies were recovered enough to remove Endangered Species Act protections, Congress intervened and ordered the controversial delisting of wolves in the Northern Rockies, over the objections of some conservationists who argued that wolves were not fully recovered in the region and elsewhere.

The Mexican gray wolf, a subspecies unique to the American Southwest and Mexico, was completely exterminated from the United States by the mid 1920's. An experimental population of 11 Mexican wolves was reintroduced into Arizona and New Mexico in 1998. Today there remain only about 50 Mexican wolves in the wild, as this recovery program continues to face challenges.

The Fate of Wolves

Although wild wolves in America are still threatened by habitat loss, illegal hunting and other threats, in June 2013 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed to remove protections from ALL gray wolves in the lower 48 states. Conservation groups are concerned that the delisting is premature, as there are many areas of suitable habitat where wolves should still be restored. In addition, scientists have expressed concern that this proposal does not accurately reflect the conclusions of their research and that the proposal is not based upon the best available science concerning gray wolf recovery.

This delisting proposal would leave the management of the recovery of the gray wolf to individual states. This was shown to lead to increased killing and aggressive management practices when wolves were previously delisted in the Northern Rockies. There are still significant areas of suitable habitat in the Pacific Northwest, Colorado, Maine, New York, and California that could support thriving populations of wolves if Endangered Species protections would remain. The fate of wolves in the wild depends on public attitudes about and commitment to these magnificent animals. Please submit a comment to Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service voicing your commitment to the future of gray wolves in the United States.

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