

The Northeast



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Maine's Moosehead Lake region is one of the areas in the Northeast with the habitat and prey density that make it a perfect potential place for wolves.

Wolves have yet to regain a footing in the Northeast since disappearing as a result of the widespread extermination campaign that began when the colonial settlers arrived. Individual wolf sightings have been documented in the Northeast, but no breeding pairs are known to exist.

In 2003, Defenders and other conservation organizations petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to explore wolf recovery in the Northeast by designating it a separate wolf recovery region that would fully protect wolves under the Endangered Species Act. Claiming they were under no legal obligation to do so, FWS did not act on the petition.

The Potential

Defenders has long advocated for a careful examination of biological conditions, such as habitat and prey availability, to ensure they meet the requirements for wolf restoration. Several studies indicate that suitable habitat and sufficient prey exist for wolves in the swath of New England extending from northern and central Maine across northern New Hampshire and Vermont to Adirondack Park in northeastern New York (Carroll 2003, Mladenoff and Sickley 1998, Harrison and Chapin 1997, Hosack 1996). There are also several habitat corridors that could bring dispersing wolves from Canada into the Northeast (see map on back).

The Challenges

Considerable debate has centered on whether wolves could naturally recolonize the Northeast on their own or whether FWS should relocate eastern timber wolves from Canada to the region (Wydeven et al. 1998; Carroll 2003). Although potential dispersal corridors between Canada and the northeastern United States exist (Carroll 2003), barriers such as the St. Lawrence River hinder

southward wolf movement. Development patterns and landscape change also pose real challenges for wolf dispersal and recovery (Carroll 2003). In addition, Canada's wolf-management policy and strong hunting and trapping practices are likely to have a significant effect on wolves' ability to naturally disperse (Carroll 2003). Wolf recovery could happen more quickly if FWS captured gray wolves in eastern Canada and released them in suitable areas in the Northeast (Carroll 2003, Wydeven et al. 1998). Releasing wolves from Canada would also reduce the possibility of lone wolves moving into the northeastern states interbreeding with coyotes.

Before any wolf restoration efforts can take place in the Northeast, a detailed analysis to determine the best source population would have to be conducted. Wolf restoration also requires public support to succeed. According to a 2002 study conducted in New England, 63 percent of residents surveyed believe it is important to reintroduce the wolf in this region to ensure the balance of nature (Belden, Russonello and Stewart 2002). In addition, several conservation groups have been founded to advocate and garner support for wolf recovery in northeastern states.

Defenders continues to call for a comprehensive wolf-recovery plan that explores the biological and sociological issues surrounding wolf restoration, evaluates the potential for natural recolonization and determines the next steps toward recovery in the Northeast.

In addition, Defenders will fight to maintain federal protection for wolves that do manage to disperse to the region. Federal involvement is vital because most northeastern states do not have protection or restoration plans in place in the event that wolves naturally recolonize.

Suitable Wolf Habitat and Potential Dispersal Corridors in the Northeast



Defenders advocates the restoration of wolf populations in appropriate suitable habitat in their historical range in the Northeast at densities sufficient to ensure the long-term survival of wolves and maintenance of the critical role they play in the ecosystem.

Note: The suitable habitat for wolves designated on the map is an approximation based on peer-reviewed studies, expert opinion of our staff and habitat modeling, a complex science that involves superimposing multiple factors such as wolf range and dispersal routes, road density and usage, vegetation types, prey density, presence of livestock, development, slope and elevation.

References

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