

# WOLVES OF AMERICA

*Past, Present and Future*





## DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE

Defenders of Wildlife is a national, nonprofit membership organization dedicated to the protection of all native wild animals and plants in their natural communities.

## AUTHORS

Nina Fascione, Marcia Lesky, Gina Schrader

## MAP

International Mapping Associates, Inc.

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1130 17th Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036-4604  
202.682.9400  
[www.defenders.org](http://www.defenders.org)

Cover photo: Gray wolf in Yellowstone National Park © William Campbell

Once upon a time, wolves were among the most widely distributed mammals in America. Then the settlers arrived, sparking 300 years of extermination campaigns that devastated wolf populations across the lower 48 states. By the 1970s, wolves were present in less than 1 percent of their former range and numbered fewer than 1,000 individuals, all in Minnesota. Today, thanks to the Endangered Species Act and the strong conservation ethic of the American people, wolves are making a comeback. More than 5,000 wolves now live in the wilds of the contiguous states. In Alaska, where wolves have fared much better, there are between 7,000 and 11,000 wolves.

Defenders of Wildlife has been a leader in wolf conservation since wolves were first listed under the Endangered Species Act in 1973. Through innovative conservation programs, extensive public education and outreach and, when necessary, legal action, Defenders helped restore gray wolves to Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho, and played key roles in the reintroduction of Mexican wolves in the Southwest and red wolves in the Southeast.

Defenders lays the groundwork for wolf conservation by building acceptance of wolves, especially among livestock producers and other skeptical constituents. To lessen the economic impact on ranchers, Defenders compensates them for livestock losses caused by wolves through a program known as The Bailey Wildlife Foundation Wolf Compensation Trust. Representatives of the cattle and sheep industry also have a say in wolf conservation through the Livestock Producer Advisory Council established by Defenders. Another Defenders-administered program, The Bailey Wildlife Foundation Proactive Carnivore Conservation Fund, works directly with landowners and communities to prevent livestock losses with nonlethal measures such as fencing, guard dogs, range riders, livestock relocation and alarm systems. And to aid in law enforcement efforts, Defenders offers incentives through the Endangered Species Reward Fund for information leading to the arrest and conviction of individuals who kill wolves.

# A Future for Wolves

Despite the encouraging increases in wolf populations, the future for wolves is far from certain. We must continue to advocate wolf restoration and pursue opportunities to assure the continued survival of wolves. Comprehensive studies and planning are essential for long-term wolf recovery in the United States. To further these goals, Defenders is working with federal, state and tribal agencies, other conservation groups and concerned individuals to:

- Ensure ongoing conservation of existing wolf populations in the northern Rockies through sufficient federal protections and, when appropriate, adequate plans to guarantee continued recovery under state management;
- Guarantee that state protections support the long-term survival of wolves in the Great Lakes region, where federal law no longer protects them;
- Restore viable populations of gray wolves in additional suitable areas, including the Northeast, Pacific Northwest, southern Rockies and Southwest, and of red wolves in the Southeast, through active reintroduction or facilitated natural recovery;
- Encourage wolf restoration on nonfederal lands by working with Congress and the conservation community to develop incentives for private landowners and tribal governments;
- Transfer management responsibility for wolves to state agencies once a state has addressed factors threatening wolves and has developed a management plan that demonstrates a continuing commitment to wolf restoration and long-term recovery;

## WHY RESTORE WOLVES?

**Wolf restoration is a measure of our nation's progress in protecting and restoring our natural heritage, but there are more vital and fundamental reasons for restoring wolves:**

- 1. The long-term survival of wolves depends on the size, number and connectivity of wolf populations.** The larger and more connected wolf populations, the more likely wolves are to persist in the face of natural and manmade events such as drought, habitat alteration, disease and food shortages.
- 2. Viable wolf populations return ecological integrity to native ecosystems and restore the balance of nature.** As predators, wolves play a dynamic and essential role in maintaining the health

- Work closely with federal and provincial governments in Canada and Mexico to encourage maintenance of corridors for wolf dispersal across international borders;
- Work with the Department of State to negotiate a treaty with Canada and Mexico to provide international protection for wolves and other large predators in North America.

## YOU CAN HELP SAVE AMERICA'S WOLVES

Federal, state and tribal agencies, working hand in hand with conservation groups and concerned individuals like you, can create the innovative policies and programs necessary to protect, conserve and restore the wolves of America. Things you can do to help include:

- Call, write or meet with your elected officials to educate them about the importance and benefits of restoring wolves and protecting their habitat;
- If you live in wolf country, discourage activities that attract wolves and cause them to lose their natural wariness of humans, such as leaving food outside or feeding wolves at campsites or other places where wolves and humans share the landscape;
- Help dispel the myths and highlight the benefits of restoring wolves by sharing what you know about wolves with friends and writing letters to the editor of your local newspaper and encouraging others to do the same;
- Become a community activist by holding house parties or other special events to rally support for wolves. Defenders can provide you with materials and pointers.

For more information, visit Defenders' Wildlife Action Center at <http://action.defenders.org>.

of ecosystems. Their disappearance across the United States altered the natural relationships among other animals found in the same ecological niche, leading to increases in some species and declines in others. In Yellowstone National Park and other areas where reintroduced wolves are established, scientists continue to document beneficial impacts on the health of the whole ecosystem.

- 3. Wolves are good for the economy.** Wolves have cultural, aesthetic and recreational value that translates into tourism dollars. For example, a 2006 study showed that more than 150,000 people visit Yellowstone annually specifically because of wolves, bringing \$35 million to Idaho, Montana and Wyoming each year. In Minnesota, the International Wolf Center added \$3 million to the local economy in 1995 and created the equivalent of 66 full-time jobs.

# Places for Wolves

Despite the success of wolf recovery efforts to date, only a fraction of the potential for restoring wolves has been met. As the map below indicates, many areas with suitable wolf habitat remain devoid of wolves. The following pages highlight the wolf populations that currently exist throughout the United States as well as areas with potential for wolves.

## North America



## ALASKA

Alaska is home to the largest remaining population of gray wolves in the United States. Some 7,000 to 11,000 wolves roam the state in habitats as diverse as barren arctic tundra and lush temperate rainforests. In Alaska as elsewhere, wolves play an essential role in maintaining healthy prey populations and biodiversity in the ecosystems they inhabit. They are also vital to the state's tourism economy. People from all over the world come to Alaska for the opportunity to see a wild wolf. Yet even as extraordinary efforts are



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underway to restore wolves in the lower 48 states, the persecution of wolves in Alaska continues.

Because wolf populations in Alaska have never declined to the extent they have in other states, Alaskan wolves are not on the endangered species list. That means that it is still legal to hunt and trap wolves in Alaska. These pursuits claim about 1,500 wolves per year, not including “unreported harvests which may equal or exceed the reported harvest,” according to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

In addition, ignoring a number of studies that show that predators rarely are the sole cause of significant or long-term declines in prey populations, wolf control supporters in Alaska continue to push for intensive control, including the highly controversial practice of aerial gunning. This unsportsmanlike control method is nearly impossible to regulate and leads to many other violations of hunting regulations such as chasing, herding and harassing wolves.

# THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Gray wolves once lived throughout much of the Pacific Northwest, but most were gone by the 1930s. Fortunately, many areas of potentially suitable habitat remain. In the 1990s, scientists even found that several wolf packs from wolf populations in British Columbia and Alberta denned and raised pups in North Cascades National Park and in Ross Lake National Recreation Area on the Canadian border. Since then, several confirmed—and several hundred unconfirmed—sightings of wolves in Oregon and Washington have been reported.

Areas with potential for wolf recovery in the Pacific Northwest include the Blue and Wallowa Mountains in eastern Oregon and Washington, the Cascade Mountains in western central Washington and Oregon, Washington's Olympic Peninsula (although its size and proximity to cities limit its potential), the Klamath-Siskiyou region and Modoc Plateau of southwestern Oregon and northern California, and the northern Sierra Nevada in California.



OLYMPIC NATIONAL PARK COURTESY OF NATIONAL PARK SERVICE





## THE NORTHERN ROCKIES

The northern Rockies were once a stronghold of wolves, but control programs initiated in the 1880s essentially wiped out the species there by the 1930s. The 1995 and 1996 reintroductions of Canadian gray wolves in Yellowstone National Park and in Idaho's Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness Area were remarkable wolf restoration achievements. Today, there are more than 1,300 wolves in the northern Rockies. This includes the descendants of the wolves reintroduced in the greater Yellowstone area and central Idaho, and a separate gray wolf population in northwestern Montana established by animals that crossed the border from Canada on their own beginning in the late 1970s.

In 2007, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced plans to remove federal protections for wolves in the northern Rockies region. However, only Montana has a plan that meets long-term wolf conservation objectives. Idaho and Wyoming remain hostile toward wolves. Until all factors that threaten long-term wolf viability are resolved, it is premature to delist wolves in this region.



SAN JUAN MOUNTAINS © MARY LIZ AUSTIN

## THE SOUTHERN ROCKIES

The southern Rockies in Colorado, southern Wyoming and northern New Mexico offer several potential gray wolf restoration sites, including Colorado's San Juan Mountains, Flat Tops and Grand Mesa areas. The federal government administers 55 percent of this region, including 9.5 million acres of roadless areas. Wolf habitat and prey abound. Indeed, Colorado hosts an estimated 292,000 elk, the greatest statewide elk population in the United States and nearly one-third of the nation's total elk population. A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service study completed in 1994 indicates that Colorado alone could hold more than 1,000 wolves.

Another area in the southern Rockies that shows great promise for supporting wolves is media executive Ted Turner's Vermejo Ranch, which straddles the Colorado-New Mexico border and nearby Carson National Forest. Turner's lands exemplify the potential of private landowners to contribute to wolf restoration and the need to develop mechanisms at the state and federal level to encourage more private participation in recovery efforts.

## THE SOUTHWEST

Prior to European settlement, the southwestern United States and Mexico were home to the Mexican wolf, a gray wolf subspecies. Biologists captured the last Mexican wolves in the wild, four males and a female, in Mexico between 1977 and 1980 to establish a captive-breeding program.

Today, the reintroduction plan calls for returning at least 100 Mexican wolves to the wild. Biologists released the first of these in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area in Arizona in 1998. These wolves immediately demonstrated their ability to adapt and survive. They formed packs, killed elk, established territories and reproduced. There are currently about 60 wolves in this region.

However, because of local opposition, these wolves cannot roam outside set boundaries. Wolves that do are captured and returned to the designated wolf area. This restriction undermines the ability of these wolves to form stable packs and expand their range, and inhibits progress toward Mexican wolf recovery.

Other potential recovery sites include the Grand Canyon and the adjacent Kaibab Plateau, which has been identified as one of the best places for wolves in the lower 48 states; Big Bend National Park; Black Gap Wildlife Management Area in Texas; the Sky Islands region of Arizona and New Mexico; and several sites in Mexico. Habitat corridors between Mexico and the United States could allow for dispersal and interbreeding among future populations, increasing the Mexican wolf's chance of long-term survival.



MEXICAN WOLF COURTESY OF U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE (CAPTIVE)

## THE GREAT LAKES

The gray wolf found in the Great Lakes region, commonly called the eastern timber wolf, once ranged from Minnesota to the Atlantic Ocean and from southern Canada to the Ohio River and perhaps even farther south. Wolf recovery in this area has been notably successful. In the 1960s, this population was limited to northeastern Minnesota, where fewer than 1,000 wolves roamed. Today, wolves are thriving in northern Minnesota and have also crossed into northern and central Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Individuals continue to disperse into areas with suitable habitat, with recent wolf sightings in Michigan's Lower Peninsula and other states in the western Great Lakes region. Now the combined total of gray wolves in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan is more than 4,000.

As a result of this incredible success, federal protections were removed for this population of wolves in 2007. Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin now manage the wolf populations within their boundaries. Each state has produced a wolf management plan that maintains policies that help reduce human-wolf conflicts and encourages the use of proactive, nonlethal management tools, while at the same time ensuring ongoing wolf recovery and conservation.



U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE



ADIRONDACK MOUNTAINS © ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

## THE NORTHEAST

The last gray wolves in New England were killed around the end of the 19th century. The good news is that several studies have shown that suitable habitat and sufficient prey still exist for wolves in New England, from Maine across New Hampshire and Vermont to the 6-million-acre Adirondack Park in New York. These studies suggest that the Northeast could support at least 1,200 wolves and perhaps as many as 1,800. Even better news is that the public supports these efforts.

Key to the successful return of the wolf to this region is the careful examination of the social and biological factors necessary to meet the needs of wolf restoration. Development, insufficient travel corridors and uncertainty about the taxonomic status of eastern wolves and coyotes all complicate reintroduction and recovery. Public involvement in promoting wolf restoration in the Northeast is needed to persuade state and federal officials to undertake the necessary studies.



## THE SOUTHEAST

The red wolf once roamed throughout the southeastern United States as far north as Pennsylvania and as far west as central Texas. Because of its wide distribution, the red wolf played an important role in a variety of ecosystems. However, by the 1970s, persecuted like their gray cousins, red wolves existed only along the Gulf Coast of Texas and Louisiana. Biologists pronounced the red wolf gravely endangered, and captured the few remaining for animals for a last-ditch effort to save the species by working with zoos and captive-breeding facilities.

Reintroduction to the wild began in the late 1980s with a successful but limited release of red wolves on Bulls Island, part of the Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge off South Carolina's Atlantic coast. The reintroduction of red wolves in the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge and later in Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in North Carolina followed. Currently, nearly 100 wild red wolves roam more than 1.7 million acres in North Carolina, and 207 red wolves reside in 38 captive-breeding facilities. The recovery plan calls for reintroduction in at least two additional locations. Like gray wolves, red wolves face myriad threats to their recovery, including illegal killings and deaths caused by motor vehicles and severe weather. Current and proposed developments also threaten to degrade wolf habitat. Hybridization, the interbreeding between coyote and red wolf populations, is yet another constant threat to the recovery of the imperiled wolf of the Southeast.

“I’ve always said that the best wolf habitat resides in the human heart. You have to leave a little space for them to live.”

—Ed Bangs

*Northern Rocky Mountains Gray Wolf Recovery Coordinator*

*U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

To learn more about wolves and efforts to protect  
and restore this majestic predator, visit

[www.defenders.org](http://www.defenders.org)



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