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Now that wolves have been restored to the northern Rockies, all that stands in the way of the biggest success story in the history of the Endangered Species Act is ignorance and superstition.

By Ted Williams

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The wolves have done their part. So have the feds. The first animals, trapped in Canada, were carried into Yellowstone National Park in 1995 by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service director Mollie Beattie. Yellowstone got 15 that year; central Idaho, 17. Just 12 years later there are more wolves in the northern Rockies than any wildlife advocate had hoped or any wolf hater had feared.

Before this "distinct population segment" in Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana could shed its endangered status it would have to meet the Fish and Wildlife Service's "recovery goal" of at least 100 wolves and 10 breeding pairs in each of the three states. And the states would have to convince the service that their management plans would not let the population slip below this minimum. As of February 2007 the population estimate for the region—an accurate one because few, if any, large mammals are more closely monitored—was 1,294 wolves and 86 breeding pairs.

But at this writing delisting hasn't happened, and even if it does, Rocky Mountain gray wolves face an uncertain future. Despite 12 years in which they've accounted for less than one percent of all livestock deaths and in which, in most areas, elk (their preferred prey) have proliferated past management objectives to the point that the states are trying to *reduce* their numbers, wolves are still widely reviled by outfitters, hunters, ranchers, and politicians.

It's not difficult to keep the wolf population healthy, and it's child's play to convince the Fish and Wildlife Service you can do it. Montana's plan, rightly described by the feds as a "class act," was approved in 2004. Idaho's plan—approved the same year after 16 rejected drafts—was, well, good enough, at least by federal standards. As a result, the service has ceded most wolf-management responsibility to these two states. When and if wolves are delisted, Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming will get *full* management authority.

If the Endangered Species Act is to retain credibility and if limited funds are to save creatures truly in danger of extinction, it's imperative that recovered species be delisted. But attitudes in Idaho threaten to undo recovery, and attitudes in Wyoming prevent delisting.

All Wyoming had to do to get federal permission for most wolf management was change the animal's status from vermin (the official label is "predatory animal") to "trophy game." It refused. According to Wyoming law, wolves—once they're delisted—can be dispatched at any time by any means for any reason virtually everywhere they occur save national parks. Game status—acceptable to the Fish and Wildlife Service—would have meant that Wyoming could shoot wolves almost to its heart's content, provided it implemented a hunting season and bag limits.

"The Wyoming law treats wolves like coyotes," says Ed Bangs, the Fish and Wildlife Service's brilliant and embattled western gray wolf recovery coordinator. "That's what caused wolves to disappear in the first place. Coyotes can thrive under those conditions, but wolves vanish. Predator status is fine with us for much of Wyoming because wolves probably won't live there anyway. But you can't have predator status in the good

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habitat right up to the national parks. The legislature developed this very detailed law, gave it to the fish and game guys, and said, okay, make it work. The biologists did their best—they really did—but they had to keep going back to the law. And that just ain't gonna work for us."

In January 2007 an impending "compromise" imploded after legislation that would have *increased* the area in which wolves could be exterminated as vermin was reported out of the Wyoming senate and house. The sponsor of one of the bills—Representative Pat Childers (R-Cody), chairman of the House Travel, Recreation, Wildlife and Cultural Resources Committee—was quoted by the *Casper Star Tribune* as suggesting that the service place "some duct tape on Mr. Bangs' mouth." According to the *Tribune*, the service's new regional director, Mitch King, "indicated he would do his best to silence Bangs." Fortunately for the wolves, that's not possible.

Wyoming Governor Dave Freudenthal (a Democrat who apes for one of the nation's most conservative electorates by, among other things, calling the Fish and Wildlife Service the "Fish and Wolf Service") and Idaho's Republican Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter (who calls for eradicating 500 of the state's 673 wolves and says he wants to shoot the first one) never miss a chance to whip the public into a froth of fear and loathing.

The governors have had plenty of help. For instance, the Idaho Values Alliance quotes the Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife of Idaho as follows: "The wolf population is clearly threatening the livelihoods—and lives—of any number of Idaho families." It then explains that wolf eradication is God's will, citing as proof His instructions to the Israelites as reported in Leviticus 26:3, 6, 14, 22: "If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands . . . I will remove savage beasts from the land. . . . But if you will not listen to me . . . and reject my decrees and abhor my laws . . . I will send wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children [and] destroy your cattle."

Apparently the passage didn't impress the U.S. attorney's office in Pocatello because in 2006 it successfully prosecuted one Tim Sundles for attempting to rid the Salmon-Challis National Forest of wolves by festooning it with poisoned meatballs, thereby killing at least one coyote, one fox, some magpies, and three pet dogs. He had been administering an anti-wolf website that provided detailed instructions on how to "successfully poison a wolf," and he had shot a wolf near his home in Salmon, Idaho, after it allegedly had looked at his wife, hungrily. At this writing Sundles awaits sentencing.

Lionizing Sundles as a martyr for its righteous cause is the Idaho Anti-Wolf Coalition, which distributes bumper stickers that read "Save Idaho's Wildlife: Kill Wolves." And it offers instruction on how to violate the Endangered Species Act: When you kill a wolf, just claim "self defense." The coalition is gathering signatures for a ballot initiative to eliminate wolves from the state. "There are three things that protect our liberties here in the West—the ballot box, the jury box, and the cartridge box," declares coalition director and former hunting outfitter Ron Gillett, who has done more than anyone to bring wolves to his hometown of Stanley (a place they had traditionally avoided) by feeding elk, which shunned Stanley before he put them on welfare. Gillett reports that the state population of "wuffs," as he calls them, may be as high as 3,000 (2,327 above Bangs's estimate).

In May 2006 one of Gillett's neighbors called the game warden after he had fetched a rifle, presumably to dispatch a wolf that had killed a runt yearling elk. "If that wuff had taken one step toward me, I would have shot it in a second," he told me. "Are you pro-wuff? 'Cause if you are, I don't want to waste my time with you." Luckily for the interview, he cut me off before I could answer. "Where you out of?" he asked.

"Massachusetts," I replied.

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"You guys have no idea what we're going through."

"That's why I'm talking to you."

After a lengthy dissertation on "kooks" and "eco-terrorists," delivered in a loud, sustained whine, Gillett got down to wolf biology as he perceives it: "The wuffs follow the elk herds around in the spring and kill the calves as fast as they're born. They kill all the prey first, then they kill all the other predators—mountain lions, bears, coyotes, bobcats. Anyone who likes wuffs doesn't like wildlife. The people in rural Idaho will not let these wuffs kill everything off; it may take civil disobedience. Wasn't there a thing called the Boston Tea Party in your state? I believe in private property. I believe that the U.S. Constitution is supreme, not the Endangered Species Act. We are small, rural Idaho communities that are trying to survive. And then you put out a land piranha like the Canadian wuff that kills everything. Local businesses that depend on tourism are going busted. Who wants to bring their family up here and camp out and worry about their kids being taken down by a wuff?"

Little such worry is evident in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, where the Fish and Wildlife Service delisted wolves of this population segment on January 29, 2007. This was the result of enlightened management plans by state biologists and a lack of meddling by state politicians.

But in Wyoming and Idaho, politicians have hamstrung biologists. The Idaho legislature, for example, responded to the first wolf releases by enacting a law forbidding any state employee to work on wolf recovery. So Bangs asked the Nez Perce Indians—for whom the wolf is sacred—to do the state's work for it. After a terrific job by the tribe and much good publicity for the state, the legislature rescinded its ban.

Then, on January 12, 2006—just a week after the service had granted Idaho most wolf management authority—the state Fish and Game Department bowed to political pressure from outfitters and hunters by proposing a 1920s-style predator-control project made possible by alteration of an Endangered Species Act rule by the Bush administration. Supposedly for the benefit of elk, the state would reduce wolves on land belonging to all Americans—the Clearwater National Forest—from about 60 to something like 15. The Fish and Wildlife Service was horrified. So were the Nez Perce, who accurately labeled the plan "junk science."

The state clearly recognized that the main reason elk had declined was that the woods had matured. "The second thing was probably black bear predation," Bangs told me. "The number three thing may have been wolf predation. Or it may have been lion predation. Wolves are part of the equation, but the driver—the old mantra of wildlife management—is, 'It's the habitat, stupid.' Our response was, 'Man, the rule says that wolves have to be the primary cause. You didn't meet that standard.' They withdrew that proposal and are gathering more data to see if they can meet the standard."

None of the rhetoric or management proposals issuing from Idaho and Wyoming inspire much confidence in wolf advocates. Peggy Struhsacker, wolf team leader for the eminently rational and restrained National Wildlife Federation, got right to the point when I asked her if wolves should be delisted in the northern Rockies now that the population is three times the recovery goal: "No!"

The Fish and Wildlife Service has performed well but not perfectly. In 2003 it tried to cut a corner by delisting what it proclaimed was the "eastern population segment" in 21 states, from the Dakotas to New England. This despite the fact that wolves hadn't been seen for years in most of the area. The National Wildlife Federation, Maine Audubon, and others sued and won on grounds that the service had violated federal laws, including the

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Endangered Species Act, which provides that distinct populations must be defined by biological, not political, boundaries.

That case law makes the service's recent proposal to delist wolves just in Idaho and Montana extremely vulnerable to litigation. But Bangs is convinced that by the time you read this, Wyoming will have come around and submitted a management plan he can live with. Struhsacker is convinced it won't. "The service is trying to pressure Wyoming," she says, "but the politics there are just not going to allow decent management. It's hard for some of us working on this issue to believe how long people can hold grudges. After all these years it's still, 'The feds brought these wolves in, and we didn't want them.' "

If Wyoming is granted management authority and pursues its current whim of knocking wolves down to the bare minimum, it's going to have to spend millions on close monitoring to prove to litigants that it hasn't placed wolves in jeopardy. "They're managing themselves into a very costly operation, and then holding that up as a reason we shouldn't have wolves at all," says Franz Camenzind, director of the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance. "We have a process that's being driven by maintaining minimum numbers, unlike every other species. It's very frustrating. It's not science-based. I don't believe it's sustainable in the long term."

It's hard to figure why Wyoming and Idaho are so hell-bent to kill off wolves. In the best wolf range, the opportunity for livestock depredation has significantly decreased thanks to the National Wildlife Federation, which has purchased and retired 474,627 acres of federal grazing allotments in the greater Yellowstone ecosystem. Wolf depredation, which amounts to less than one percent of all livestock losses, is compensated by Defenders of Wildlife if a rancher can produce evidence that wolves were responsible. And in Idaho the U.S. Congress has arranged for a \$100,000-per-year slush fund that compensates ranchers even if they *can't* produce evidence. Finally, under a special provision of the Endangered Species Act, wolves that prey on livestock are swiftly and legally killed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services division.

In most of the northern Rockies, elk are too numerous for their own good and for the good of other wildlife and even livestock. Hunters can't have it both ways—they can't brag about performing the ecological function of natural predators and simultaneously demand that those predators be eliminated. Hunters are seeing fewer elk, not because wolves are reducing the population but because they've made elk skittish—that is, predators are causing prey to behave *naturally*. No longer do elk stand around in the open gawking at pickup trucks. Road hunting doesn't work anymore. The smart, successful hunters have figured this out and have changed their strategy.

"The management objective for the Jackson Hole elk herd is 12,000," Camenzind says. "We're about 1,000 animals over that. And elk hunting success in Wyoming is still highest of any of the three states by far—close to 40 percent." In an effort to prevent overabundant elk from spreading brucellosis to cattle (a disease cattle originally spread to wildlife) the state proposed an experiment in which it would vaccinate elk in the Jackson National Elk Refuge. When the Fish and Wildlife Service denied permission, the state sued. Camenzind's group intervened on behalf of the federal government, which prevailed. Then the service flip-flopped and allowed the state to vaccinate elk anyway. "We're just afraid this pattern is going to repeat itself with wolves," says Camenzind. "I met with the [service's] regional director Mitch King, and my impression is that he was put in for political purposes to resolve some of these issues. I see that as a description, not a criticism. We have an ecosystem that's 22 million to 28 million acres, depending on where you draw the lines. If we can't have wolves here, where can we have them? This is land that everyone owns, not just Wyoming. And everyone should have a say in what happens on it."

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In Montana, where wolves are much more difficult to manage because there's more ranchland interspersed with wolf habitat, everyone *did* have a say. Good wildlife management cuts across party lines. In 2000 Governor Mark Racicot, a conservative Republican and ardent Bush supporter, appointed a Wolf Advisory Council, comprised of 12 citizens who represented everyone from hunters to stockmen to Indians to animal-rights activists to general wildlife advocates. The council heard from 49 states and collected 10,000 comments, then submitted everything to Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks. The agency's plan lets the wolf population grow wherever it doesn't conflict with human activities. "Montana has basically hired all the good people who worked for the federal government," says the National Wildlife Federation's Struhsacker. "They're great negotiators, great proponents for wolves. They know how to talk to ranchers."

I asked Carolyn Sime, Montana's gray wolf program coordinator, what makes her state so different. "Wolves recolonized Montana on their own 25 years ago," she said. "So we began our planning with a different question than the other two states. It wasn't: Should we have wolves? It was: Wolves are here to stay; we're the appropriate entity to manage them after delisting. How should we do that?"

Where wolves and livestock mix there will *always* be dead wolves and dead livestock. There is no such thing as nonlethal "control." But there are nonlethal methods of postponing and limiting control, and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks is committed to them. It teaches ranchers how to harass wolves with noisemakers, rubber bullets, and cracker shells (gun-launched firecrackers). It is experimenting with electric fencing and "fladry" (an ancient method devised in Europe in which red flags are hung from ropes). Because wolves fear things they haven't seen before, they'll avoid fladry for as long as 45 days. The Bozeman-based Predator Conservation Alliance—in partnership with Sime's agency, the Madison Valley Ranchlands Group, the Turner Endangered Species Fund, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Forest Service—trains and hires horse riders to stay with livestock 24 hours a day and run off approaching wolves.

Still, the USDA's Wildlife Services—which takes its orders from the Fish and Wildlife Service in Wyoming and from state managers in Idaho and Montana—is killing more and more Rocky Mountain wolves. "If you go back 10 years," says Bangs, "we were annually removing about 7 percent of the population in all three states. Three years ago we removed 8 percent. Last year it was 12 percent. That's the price of success. It means that all the available habitat is being filled up and young wolves are trying to establish home ranges in heavy livestock areas, where they're probably not going to make it."

Cattle killing is highly aberrant wolf behavior. It has to be learned, and when it's learned it's passed on. Wolf advocates don't want stock-killing wolves in the population any more than ranchers do. "Wolves are afraid of new things," says Bangs, "but yearling wolves aren't very successful hunters. We see packs in which yearlings are helping to feed new pups, and they're trying everything they can. They stumble on killing livestock. And all of a sudden, it's like, 'Oh, my God, I can't believe I've been walking by these things.' That's why we try to break that pattern. Sometimes when you remove a couple of wolves from that pack, the problem just stops."

Exaggerated as it is, the threat to livestock is real. But what of the alleged threat to humans? That's real, too, though we face far graver danger from, say, poodles. It is possible that somewhere a wild, healthy wolf has killed or will kill a human; and there have been several reliable reports of bites, as Ron Gillett tirelessly observes. But anyone who avoids the northern Rockies for fear the kids might be "taken down by a wuff" needs to find a concrete bunker for meteor protection. Having been educated by the governors of Idaho and Wyoming, other state politicians, the Idaho Anti-Wolf Coalition, the Idaho Values Alliance, and the Brothers Grimm, perhaps a few tourists really are staying away. But there are hundreds of thousands who come to the northern Rockies each year specifically to see wolves.

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A two-year study, completed in 2006 by University of Montana economist John Duffield, reveals that wolf watching in the greater Yellowstone area provides local communities with \$70 million annually.

Duffield found that about 151,000 tourists see wolves each year in his study area. Alas, I'm not one of them. While I've seen wolves in Minnesota, I'm still looking in the northern Rockies. I've come close. Seven miles into de facto wilderness in the Clearwater National Forest—where the state wanted to reduce the wolf population by about 75 percent and still might if wolves are delisted—I found wolf tracks and scat. And one afternoon when I was alone in camp I tried to initiate a conversation with the wolves that were all around me. Instantly my howling was answered and from only a few hundred yards away.

An hour later two Nez Perce biologists showed up all excited because they'd heard howling only a few hundred yards away. Soon it became clear that we'd been conversing in wolf. That was information my companions who were far up the valley and who'd heard the "wolves," too, didn't need to know right away.

I expect to see a Rocky Mountain wolf soon. But if I never do, just knowing they're out there again, coursing over frozen lakes, silhouetted on ridgetops, singing under stars unblemished by ambient light, making the wild, beautiful land I own with all Americans even wilder and more beautiful—well, that's almost enough.

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WHAT YOU CAN DO

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