

Located at:

www.scottchurchdirect.com >> www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2009

Kill, Baby, Kill

Sarah Palin's war on wolves and bears has been a disaster not just for Alaska but for the moose and caribou it is supposed to benefit.

By Ted Williams

Audubon, July/August 2009

"Abraham knew exactly what the land was for:" observed ecologist-philosopher Aldo Leopold, "it was to drip milk and honey into Abraham's mouth." Alaska Governor Sarah Palin knows this, too. So does the state legislature, the governor-appointed Board of Game, and the Palin-stacked leadership of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Standing in for Abraham these days are the imagined beneficiaries of the state's war on predators—urban-based and out-of-state sport hunters.

Persecution of wolves has been going on in Alaska since the Gold Rush. Palin has escalated the war. And now, in addition to wolves, the state is facilitating the slaughter of large numbers of bears—blacks as well as grizzlies, both of which occasionally include a newborn moose or caribou in their omnivorous diets. Even cubs and lactating sows are being targeted. Palin's seven-person Board of Game—which hatches regulations and sets policy for the state Department of Fish and Game—has been more than happy to do her bidding. Six members belong to an anti-predator, trophy-hunter-funded outfit called the Alaska Outdoor Council, and the seventh is Palin's close friend.

In 1971 Congress passed the Airborne Hunting Act, which prohibits shooting or harassing wild animals from aircraft except by federal or state permit for the protection of livestock, humans, or wildlife. Claiming that moose and caribou need protection from their natural predators, Alaska has traditionally allowed pilots who haven't been busted for a wildlife violation and have some experience with a predator-control unit to shoot wolves from their fixed-wing aircraft. But in March, Palin's Board of Game authorized aerial gunning from helicopters. It also authorized managers to gas wolf pups in their dens.

For now wolves and bears are safe provided they stay on units managed by federal agencies other than the Bureau of Land Management. But on six state predator-control areas covering 70,000 square miles they're dying en masse. In virtually all of this area wolf populations are to be reduced by 80 percent and held there indefinitely. In the 11,105-square-mile Predator Control Unit 16, west of Anchorage across the Cook Inlet, black bears are to be reduced by 60 percent.

At its March 10, 2009, meeting the Board of Game legalized the long-banned practice of "same-day airborne hunting," in which hunters take the "fair" out of "fair chase" by locating bears from the air, then landing next to them and blazing away—this in the 8,513-square-mile McGrath predator-control unit near the Kuskokwim River in interior Alaska. Junk science, gross even by Alaska standards, has been under way here for a decade. In 2000, relying on anecdotal information from hunters, Fish and Game announced that there were only 869 moose left in the McGrath unit—an emergency threatening famine for local humans and calling for enough wolf removal to boost the moose population to 3,000 to 3,500, at which point there would be plenty of meat for everyone. Before predator cleansing got under way, however, then Governor Tony Knowles instructed the department to go back in and, for once, do a scientific survey. This time it found 3,660 moose. In 2003 Fish and Game, now under Governor Frank Murkowski, rejected its previous determination that 3,660 moose were more than enough to feed the declining human population, asserting that the necessary figure was actually 7,200. It therefore initiated draconian predator removal. Now, under Palin, wolf and bear cleansing is even more aggressive.

Located at:

www.scottchurchdirect.com >> www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2009

Also on March 10 the board granted permission to private hunters and trappers, including supervised children as young as 10, to use wire loops to snare Unit 16 black bears and grizzlies by the feet. The lucky bears get shot before they starve. For the first time ever hunters may transport themselves and their equipment by helicopter. And they may now shoot Unit 16 bears over bait, such as rotten hot dogs and rancid bacon fat ("garbaging for bears," as the practice has been called)—even in summer, when sows are nursing cubs. The lucky cubs get shot along with their mothers.

Directing the escalation are two recent Palin appointees to Fish and Game. One is deputy commissioner Patrick Valkenburg, fresh from the board of the Alaska Outdoor Council. The other is the governor's close friend Corey Rossi—previously a spokesman and state board member for an even more extreme anti-predator organization called Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife/Sportsmen for Habitat. His position, a new one created for him by Palin, is Assistant Deputy Commissioner. According to a Fish and Game press release, Valkenburg and Rossi will help "expand our abundance-based wildlife management programs." No sooner were these two men ensconced than they began forcing the governor's agenda down the throats of biologists and managers, many of whom oppose Palin's game-farm vision for Alaska.

"We have lots of vocal folks who think if it's got long, shiny white teeth, it ought to be killed," Sean Farley, a wildlife research biologist with Fish and Game, told me. "As a biologist I don't agree with that. I think it's a throwback way of trying to do wildlife management. Unit 16 is very unusual in my experience because two high-level people [Valkenburg and Rossi] bypassed the command structure. When people at that high level reach directly down to someone in my position or the equivalent, it's hard to be too insubordinate. I will say that our regional staff and our director are protecting us as much as they can, recognizing that where it's not supported by sound science it's a political decision that's driving stuff."

Former Fish and Game biologist John Schoen, who worked on bears (not bear removal) during 10 of his 21 years with the agency and who now serves as senior scientist for Audubon Alaska, offers this: "Unit 16 is large, and I don't think there are good data on the number of bears there. Bear snaring doesn't make sense to me. I've written letters to the Board of Game on behalf of Audubon asking them not to be so aggressive. It's a sad state of affairs. Bears have low reproductive rates."

In 2007 the Palin administration proposed a \$150 bounty for every left foreleg hacked off a wolf, calling it an "incentive" because the bounty system has been anathema to the wildlife management profession since it was rejected half a century ago. The "incentive" was promptly nixed by a court ruling that such decisions must be made by the Board of Game (as this one doubtless will be).

Also in 2007 Palin introduced her Active Management/Airborne Shooting Bill, which, for the first time, would have legalized same-day airborne sport hunting of black and grizzly bears and the selling of tanned bear hides. It also would have granted the Board of Game official (instead of just tacit) permission to ignore scientific data. After passing the House, Palin's bill died in Senate committee, although from lack of time, not lack of enthusiasm.

"The department does not support the taking of any grizzly bear by trapping, snaring, or same-day-airborne, or the sale of tanned bear hides, even in brown bear predator-control areas," Fish and Game informed the board in the spring of 2008. But a year later the agency told the board that it endorsed all these things. Such flip-flops didn't happen before Valkenburg and Rossi showed up.

Located at:

www.scottchurchdirect.com >> www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2009

Palin isn't the first Alaska governor to seek a wider war, just the most successful. I was with Governor Walter Hickel in Fairbanks in January 1993 when he attempted to win the American public over to industrial-strength wolf cleansing via a three-day "Wolf Summit," at which he repeated his memorable line: "You can't let nature just run wild." Moose and caribou, he explained, were "Alaska's livestock." And as with all agribusiness operations, natural predator abundance could not be tolerated. The previous winter wolves had been tranquilized and fitted with radio collars so that "wolf managers" could home in on packs and hose them down with semi-automatic shotguns.

The summit had been designed, Hickel kept saying, to facilitate the "constructive exchange of ideas." But I quickly learned that in order to "exchange ideas" with wolf-removal advocates, one needed to have the right ideas, and in national publications I had repeatedly expressed the wrong ones. The politest response I got was from Richard Bishop, with whom I had frequently exchanged ideas when he was a regional supervisor for Fish and Game. He had since moved on to chief lobbyist for the Alaska Outdoor Council before becoming its president, a position he held until last February. Bishop scrutinized my name tag, spat the words "Ted Williams," turned on his heel, and stomped off.

Somehow Hickel failed to win over the American public. After receiving at least 100,000 nastygrams and facing a major tourist boycott, he tested the water by substituting snaring and shooting in the ears for shotgunning from the air. Somehow the public didn't go for that either, especially after it watched a video by wildlife scientist Gordon Haber that aired around the world (even in China) and showed snared wolves chewing off their frozen feet. The governor watched his game-farm vision for Alaska take wing as nature continued to run wild.

Smarting from the insult from "away," the Outdoor Council descended on the legislature, pushing through the Intensive Management Act of 1994, which imposes Abraham's land ethic on Fish and Game by stipulating that the "highest and best use of most big game populations is to provide for high levels of harvest for human use." The agency speaks the truth when it proclaims that it must, by law, manage for unnatural ungulate abundance.

Still, in 1995 newly elected Governor Tony Knowles halted most wolf removal. Again the Outdoor Council hissed into the ears of lawmakers, in due course convincing them to disappear the criterion of a biological emergency for predator cleansing. Knowles vetoed the bill, but the legislature overrode. In 2003, after a decade-long near cease fire, the Board of Game reinstated airborne wolf killing by private citizens.

Predator-removal advocates keep telling me that all the boot prints I've left in Alaska don't count, that no flatlander from "away" can ever understand "Alaskan reality." So I consulted Vic Van Ballenberghe of Anchorage, a moose and wolf biologist, formerly with the U.S. Forest Service and now a private consultant. He was twice appointed to the Board of Game by Governor Knowles (then removed by Murkowski), and he has hunted during each of the past 50 years. If anyone understands "Alaskan reality," it's Van Ballenberghe.

"None of these [predator-removal] units have anything but crude carrying capacity estimates," he declared. "At best, Fish and Game does a few superficial browse studies, and invariably they tell the board that an area can support more moose. That's a dangerous approach. You don't want the maximum number of moose out there, because that could cause a crash with the next severe winter."

At the request of Governor Knowles the National Academy of Sciences studied predator removal and, in 1997, issued an excellent report that outlined rigorous biological and economic standards and guidelines. Knowles embraced them. Murkowski and Palin tossed them out.

Located at:

www.scottchurchdirect.com >> www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2009

Two years ago 173 wildlife scientists signed a letter to Palin imploring her to apply science to predator management and complaining about the danger of not determining ungulate carrying capacities. One of the signers, and the person who drafted the letter, was Van Ballenberghe. He says the scientists never received a response. The American Society of Mammalogists sent two letters and a resolution to Murkowski and a letter to Palin expressing similar concerns. Both governors ignored the advice.

But what does the lay Alaskan public think about the war on predators? About 75 percent of Alaskans don't hunt, and many of those who do, believe in fair chase—that is, using their own feet to pursue game in its natural habitat, making clean kills at reasonable range, and appreciating predators as vital parts of a beautiful, complicated machine. In 1996 Alaska voters passed a ballot initiative that banned airborne predator removal save in "biological emergency." The legislature overrode it. In 2000 Alaska voters passed a ballot initiative to restrict airborne predator removal to Fish and Game personnel. The legislature overrode it.

But then, in 2008, Alaskans voted *down* a ballot initiative that would have restricted airborne predator removal to Fish and Game personnel and only in the event of an otherwise irreversible ungulate decline. What caused the change of heart?

Maybe there wasn't a change of heart. For one thing, the measure was confusingly worded—"cleverly and deviously worded by attorneys associated with the lieutenant governor's office," charges John Toppenberg, director of the Alaska Wildlife Alliance. Many people who thought they were voting against Palin's war actually voted against the initiative. Included in the state's \$400,000 campaign to "educate" the public about predator cleansing was a slick brochure tucked into Alaskan newspapers just before the vote. The *Anchorage Daily News* rebuked state pamphleteers for using public funds to disseminate 11th-hour "propaganda."

Mark Richards co-chairs the Alaska chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, a group unopposed to what it calls "prudent predator management." He understands "Alaskan reality." He subsists in roadless wilderness on game he takes by fair chase and on money he makes trapping. His complaints about game-management excesses can hardly be dismissed as the rantings of an out-of-state "anti."

What he writes me from his cabin 80 miles northeast of Circle, via satellite email because he has no phone, strikes me as worthy of attention, as if Mick Jagger had called the police about loud guitars: "Never has political meddling been so blatant and detrimental to the future of our system of wildlife management as it is under the Palin administration. I have a letter from Palin shortly after she took office, claiming she wanted to manage wildlife based on sound science. It's complete bullshit. What she is doing is not even close to science or sound management."

No offensive against Alaska's predators has been more outrageous than Palin's surprise air strikes in the Upper Yukon-Tanana Wolf Control Area, about 100 miles southeast of Fairbanks, which surrounds the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve. At the end of the workday on March 12, 2009, Fish and Game informed the National Park Service that it would be gunning down wolves from helicopters as early as March 14.

The Park Service, which manages for healthy ecosystems, was furious. Yukon-Charley superintendent Greg Dudgeon fired off a briefing statement, informing his staff and others that the state's plan to reduce the unit's wolf population by 80 percent threatened 7 of 10 preserve packs. The state's goal was to artificially inflate the Fortymile caribou herd from about 40,000 head to as many as 100,000, a population not seen since the early 1900s, when few were killed by hunters and when wolves had been knocked way down by poison bait. "If successful," wrote Dudgeon, "this would leave one to two wolves per 1,000 square kilometers in the UY-T Wolf Control Area, approximating the lowest known wolf population densities in Alaska."

Located at:

www.scottchurchdirect.com >> www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2009

Dudgeon hustled over to Fish and Game's Fairbanks office for a hoedown. He requested a thin buffer zone to protect resident wolves, all of which routinely hunt outside the preserve; the state refused. Because Fish and Game had overestimated the number of wolves, he requested that it kill fewer than its goal of 300; the state refused. He requested that managers use frequencies of Park Service radio collars to perhaps avoid killing some of the preserve's wolves. The state expressed extreme reluctance, but pushed by Fish and Game's regional supervisor, David James, it complied.

"The state dropped its bombshell on us Thursday night," Dudgeon told me. "Thirty-six hours later they started shooting wolves from helicopters. The state believed from surveys last fall that there were more than 400 wolves in the area. Our information, based on very rigid science, was that there were far fewer. I wanted to see if the state would slow down so we could find out through data sharing where the discrepancies were coming from. They were not willing to wait. My long-term concerns are these: How can we work together in a strategic manner so it's not this late-notice, 'Sorry, but this is what we're about to go do'? How do we work to make sure that we've got populations with healthy genetics and free flow of animals for feeding and breeding—21st century wildlife management?"

Dudgeon and his staff are confident that there are no more than 3.1 wolves per 1,000 square kilometers. Fish and Game had claimed there were no fewer than 8 and perhaps 8.9. How were these wildly disparate numbers divined? Well, the Park Service estimate issues from intense, peer-reviewed wolf studies with the aid of radio collars since 1993. Fish and Game's issues from eyeballing small sample plots from the air and "anecdotal information"—that is, asking Gus the Gunner and Pete the Pilot, both of whom derive money from killing wolves and thus don't want to see wolf removal shut down, how many wolves and wolf tracks they've seen.

Here's how Van Ballenberghe assesses Fish and Game's wolf-survey methodology: "Fish and Game makes it sound as if they have precise numbers when they don't. The only way to derive reasonably accurate estimates without radio collars is to fly an aerial survey with good snow, wind, and light conditions, and with experienced pilots. They did not do this in this area and seldom do it elsewhere. So they pony up an unreliable estimate from pilot reports. They can hammer the wolves as hard as they can, and immigrants will eventually fill the void, form new packs, and reproduce at high rates. That begs several questions relating to disrupting the genetics and social structure of a wolf population and possibly *increasing* predation on ungulates."

Between March 14 and March 19 helicopter gunners killed 84 wolves in the Upper Yukon-Tanana Wolf Control Area. On March 20 David James informed me that the operation had been suspended "until we get new snowfall for tracking."

The Alaska Wildlife Alliance's Toppenberg has a different explanation: "We have evidence that one of the reasons they suspended the program was that they couldn't find any more wolves. Basically, they've killed them all."

Can Alaska bootstrap itself from futile, counterproductive, 19th century-style predator persecution to genuine wildlife management based on what Leopold called a "land ethic"? Not with governors like Sarah Palin and the type of managers and Board of Game members they appoint. But as Audubon's Schoen observes, that doesn't mean that Palin is the root cause of the catastrophe under way in our wildest state. "The primary devil," he submits, "is the Intensive Management Act of 1994"—the statute that stipulates that the "highest and best use" of moose and caribou is passing through human digestive tracts.

The law was pushed through by old politicians with old ideas who longed for pre-statehood days when moose and caribou populations were at unnatural and dangerous highs because predators had been poisoned, trapped, and shot off. Back then there was so little hunting pressure from humans that most anytime and anywhere you

Located at:

www.scottchurchdirect.com >> www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2009

wished there were roads you could drive up to “Alaska’s livestock,” crank down your truck window, and slaughter more than you needed.

There’s nothing wrong with predator control if it’s done for legitimate purposes, such as saving endangered birds from human-caused overpopulations of gulls, skunks, raccoons, and feral cats. Audubon does it all the time. But killing off predators in a vain attempt to convert America’s best and wildest land to an ever-expanding Stop-and-Shop for an ever-expanding human population is as brainless as it is counterproductive.

“I now suspect that just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer,” wrote Aldo Leopold. Moose and caribou are deer, yet it has apparently never occurred to Palin, her Board of Game, the Outdoor Council, the majority of the legislature, or the political hacks calling the shots at Fish and Game that an unnatural plethora of ungulates isn’t good and that an unnatural paucity of wolves and bears can cause them to die, as Leopold put it, of their “own too much.”

On March 26, 2009, Palin picked the state’s new attorney general—Wayne Anthony Ross, who helped run her 2006 gubernatorial campaign and who serves on the NRA’s national board (having stepped down as NRA vice president). According to the governor, he’s going to achieve the impossible: managing game “for abundance through science.”

WHAT YOU CAN DO

To learn more, go to [Alaska Wildlife Alliance](#) and [Defenders of Wildlife](#). If you’d like to express your opinion about spending money in a state that makes war on bears and wolves, contact the Alaska State Chamber of Commerce, 217 Second Street, Suite 201, Juneau, AK 99801; the [Alaska Travel Industry Association](#), [Cruise Alaska](#), and [Cruise Vacation Center](#).