

The Creature of McCone County, Part I

A Montana Wolf Mystery & the Fury it Breeds

By Hal Herring, 3-29-06

The creature, whatever it is, came out of Montana's own McCone County, wandering from the rough breaks of Timber Creek, just south of the Big Dry Arm of Fort Peck Reservoir, and the CM Russell Wildlife Refuge. Where it had wandered before that, Canada or North Dakota, nobody knows.

Since December, it has struck six herds of sheep belonging to stockmen in McCone and Garfield Counties, killing 36 ewes, and injuring 71, many of which will succumb to their wounds.

It leaves a track like a small wolf, or a dog, or a wolf-hybrid, but its killing habits are inefficient, nothing like the surgical lethality of a wolf taking meat from a herd of domestic sheep.

Coyotes, those that survive here in the gauntlet of traps and aerial gunnery and cyanide "getters," kill a lot of sheep every year, but nothing like this.

This creature is a traveler, and it is not always alone, though its companion leaves a smaller track still, adding to the mystery. Where it has stopped to kill, over an area of more than a hundred square miles, it has created a fury, one that is not entirely directed at the creature itself (the stockmen here know full well how to handle that problem) but at the federal and state governments, at complex regulations imposed to protect an animal that they despise, and at a far-away society that seems to have lost all respect for them and their constant struggle to remain self-reliant, solvent, and on the land.

"I discovered the devastation on January 12th," said Jim Whitesides, who was keeping his flock of 720 sheep in a half-section holding pasture, right at the corner of McCone and Garfield counties, waiting for drier weather before he moved them onto a grazing allotment on BLM land. "It was terrible warm weather and mud, and when I got there, the sheep were all up milling around on a ridge. I called them

all down, and as they came close it just looked like they had all been attacked, blood everywhere, their hams bitten, plugs taken out, like a lemon, and of course then there was some laying around dead."

Whitesides would have 21 dead ewes in that bunch, and 39 injured. He has estimated that the attacks have cost him over \$19,000, an almost ruinous blow. "I've seen some terrible coyote damage, but nothing ever like this."

Whitesides has spent his life running cattle and sheep in the Missouri Breaks country. In his speech, there is a slight but distinct brogue, explained by the fact that his mother came to eastern Montana from Scotland in 1906. His father came to the area in 1912. His parents would have seen the last of the wolves in eastern Montana. "Everybody has relatives who claim to have been in on the last wolf killed around here," Whitesides said, "and it must have been around 1920 when they finally got them out of here. They had to, if they were going to raise stock." In his lifetime, he said, he has never had to think about wolf trouble, and he has paid little attention to the conflict over re-introducing wolves to Yellowstone. "That wasn't in my realm, and I couldn't imagine all the fuss over it. We always take a lot of losses -- normally under a hundred head a year, but it's always coyotes." The battle against the coyotes is conducted by stockmen with the help of two full-time trappers who work Garfield County for the federal Wildlife Services Agency.

"We have a very good program here," Whitesides said, "and we couldn't raise livestock without it."

The confusion over the identity of the animal that rampaged through Whitesides' sheep started at another kill site, back in late December, deeper in McCone County. Mike McKeever took a severe hit on his sheep herd sometime on the night after Christmas.

At first, it appeared that only two ewes had been killed, but closer inspection found 15 more ewes that had been attacked but not killed. Ten of them would die of their wounds. By December 28th, the McKeever's had found five more ewes killed. Mike McKeever called their local predator control contractor, a pilot named Jeff Skyberg to see what could be done. Now the plot thickens. McCone County is one of five eastern Montana counties that, about twelve years ago, became disgusted with the federal predator control agency and decided to take over the job themselves by hiring private contractors. But that was before there were any wolves in Montana, or any regulations to protect them. Faced with the carnage at McKeever's ranch, Skyberg called in Wildlife Services agents to help him decide what to do. The men looked at two sets of tracks, and agreed that they had been made by

medium sized dogs, or even wolf-hybrids, rather than true wolves. The messiness of the attacks suggested domestic dogs, too, a whole lot of killing instinct untempered by skill.

The agents reported the attacks to the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, (FWP) which has taken on the responsibility of managing wolves since an agreement was reached with the federal wildlife agency, and federal funding became available, in early 2005. Wolves are, for now, still listed as an Endangered Species, and the FWP makes its decisions "between the guardrails" of the federal policy, as Carolyn Sime, who directs the wolf program for FWP, describes it. The Wildlife Services agents called Sime, and told her that the problem in McCone County was domestic dogs on a rampage. Since dogs that kill stock are fair game for anybody with a weapon, it seemed as though the problem would soon be solved. Then on January 12th, Whitesides found his sheep attacked.

The next day, reports came in of sheep killings at the McKerlick Ranch in northeastern Garfield County. In a pasture within sight of his house, John McKerlick found, according to an account in the Jordan Tribune, "...lambs with meat, hide and wool dragging on the ground; their insides torn out and a front leg on one torn away. Ten were dead and eight still going ... He found two more dead and a 100-110 pound lamb (sic: it was actually a wether) had been eaten and dragged in a 20' diameter circle." Whatever killed the sheep had stayed in the area for a long time, leaving a lot of tracks. "We had an overflow from a watertank that was frozen and held the snow, and he sauntered around all over on that ice," McKerlick said. "I don't know what he was doing all that time."

Like Whitesides, McKerlick has no experience with predation at the level he witnessed that morning. "The tracks are bigger than anything I've seen before. We've never had anything like this. My parents lived just south of here, and in 1923, my dad had a little horse, and the wolves followed him and hamstrung him, killed him, but that was about the last wolf in this part of the country." The Wildlife Services agents that investigated still figured that the mess at McKerlick's was the work of domestic dogs, so nobody called Carolyn Sime at FWP to tell her about the incident.

On February 6th, Jeff Skyberg and his "gunner" Les Thomas, were flying in Skyberg's plane, gunning coyotes as part of their contract for predator control in McCone County, and trying to find the stock killing dogs that were lost somewhere in the immense roll of prairie and the jagged coulee country below them. On a ridge below them, they saw what they were pretty sure was a wolf.

"We got a call from Wildlife Services, saying that Jeff Skyberg had a wolf in his sights in McCone County and could he go ahead and kill it," said Carolyn Sime. "I could not just issue them a kill permit to go out

and kill whatever wolves were there. It would have been illegal. We had no reports of wolf kills from there, and the attacks did not fit the pattern of wolf kills. I said no." But Sime and others in the FWP office knew that the denial would infuriate Skyberg and the ranchers in the two county area. "The anger is easy to understand," Sime said, "A government agent has just kept you from doing your job. Jeff exercised tremendous restraint, and I know he's mad ... but I could not legally do it. There is no such thing as a no-wolf zone in Montana, no matter what people might think." The FWP went into "a huddle," Sime said. First, with the possible federal delisting of the wolf from the federal Endangered Species Act looming, it was imperative that they remain within the law. So far, Montana's painstakingly achieved wolf management plans are a kind of blueprint for what seems like a balanced management approach for wolves. The plan has been approved by the federal wildlife agency, while Wyoming's plan, which calls for treating the wolves as vermin away from National Parks, cannot be approved, and has so far been the leading obstacle to taking the animal off of the Endangered Species list. Sime and her office were in an odd spotlight that would shine far ahead into derailing the delisting process if they just went ahead and did what the ranchers wanted them to do.

"We stuck our neck out and we authorized Wildlife Services to take the wolf, even though it was technically illegal."

During the huddle and the subsequent back and forth, though, the creature disappeared back into the maze of coulees and the scrub pine of the breaks. Attacks that killed one sheep and injured another in Garfield County over the weekend of February 18th are believed to be the work of the animal that escaped that day. Then, the animal, or one very like it, appeared on March 11, about fifty miles away, on a ranch northwest of Jordan. According to the Jordan Tribune, rancher Clifford Highland and his grandson, Ryan Murnion, saw the animal as it was eating the carcass of a ewe. "We saw a wolf for approximately 20-30 seconds at 350 yards," Highland said, Murnion shot at the animal, but it escaped into the breaks.

Carolyn Sime and her team authorized permits for the ranchers who had suffered losses and for Wildlife Services in Garfield County to kill the wolf, or wolf-hybrid, if it was seen again in the act of attacking livestock. But the level of frustration among the ranchers and the communities remained high. There seemed to be no legal way, for instance, for the freelance predator control contractors in McCone County to kill the wolf if they encountered it. And the animal ranged so widely, the permits issued to the ranchers who had suffered losses seemed to be of little use. Other ranches, where there were no permits, would surely be hit soon. Again, people asked, why could anybody who saw the thing not just kill it?

Editor's note: This is the first in a two-part series on the wolf of McCone County. [Click here](#) for the second installment.

Reporter's note: Thanks to Janet Guptill, editor and publisher of the Jordan Tribune, for source material and for understanding of the larger issues in this story.

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