One Way to Save the Wolf? Hunt It.

Montana wildlife managers deem the first wolf season a success, for both hunters and hunted

By Hal Herring

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The hide from the wolf Carl Lewis shot stretches 7 feet, 9 inches long, the back and ruff as black as a Montana midnight, easing along the legs and flanks to a color that Lewis likens to that of a blue roan horse. Lewis shot the big radio-collared alpha male on his ranch, high on the east side of the Big Hole Valley, last fall. "I really wanted to get a wolf this year," he says, "because we have to live around them, and I wanted to see a few less around our place." Lewis and his family saw wolves 22 different times on their ranch during the past summer, so he knew where to start hunting. "I went out that morning on a fresh snow, and saw no tracks at all. Got up to the top of the ridge, though, and there he was." Lewis shot the wolf from 400 yards with his .338, the rifle he normally uses for elk hunting. Three days later, his son Tanner got a wolf of his own.

Montana's first-ever wolf season was viewed with horror by many environmental groups, and by many people who have celebrated the charismatic predator's return to the Northern Rockies. The hunt was simply too much, too soon, they said; it would kill off the alpha males and females that are the primary breeders and break the slowly building matrix of genetic diversity that is key to the long-term health of the returning populations. They predicted that leaderless wolf packs would go after even more livestock, leading to more wolf-killing by the federal Wildlife Services. The wolves' positive effects on the ecosystem -- keeping coyote numbers in check, scattering elk that were overgrazing their winter ranges -- could be reversed.

But even if those fears proved true, the sheer success of wolf reintroduction made a hunt inevitable, sooner or later. With more than 1,645 wolves in the region and at least 95 breeding pairs, the program had exceeded its original goals of at least 300 wolves, with 30 breeding pairs, every year for over seven years. The population was expanding faster than anyone, even the region's leading predator biologists, could have predicted. Many Montana big-game hunters thought that a tipping point had been reached. "We always knew there would have to be management of wolves," says Carolyn Sime, statewide wolf coordinator for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. "Or people would just start killing them. The question was whether that management would be through the tried-and-true method of hunting, or through government control only, paying the shooters with the helicopters. We wanted the same model that has given us some of our biggest conservation successes with other wildlife."

As Montana's wolf hunt closed in November, the human element -- the pro-wolf, anti-wolf anger that has been so much a part of wolf restoration in the West — shifted, almost imperceptibly. True, the hunt's critics remained outraged, while those who want wolves eliminated altogether were dismayed that so many were still alive. True, most successful wolf hunters shot their quarry while deer and elk hunting, and most of them, according to interviews, viewed the shooting more as predator control than as a true "hunting" experience. But the stage has been set for a change.

Foremost, the federal government is no longer making the rules. The state of Montana is. But more importantly, among the wolf hunters is a small but growing constituency that sees the animals neither as the sacred burning heart of nature, something to be worshipped from afar, nor as mangy and murderous vermin that deserve extermination. Instead, they view wolves as wild game animals, a quarry worthy of respect — maybe, someday, even protection. Judging from the past, it is this constituency that will ensure the survival of the gray wolf into the 21st century. "When it comes to big animals with big teeth that eat big things, you have a lot of things to balance out," says Sime. "If you can't develop a broad-based constituency of support for the species on the landscape where the people live with them, then the long-term viability of that species is not good."

Montana's wolf season opened in the backcountry on Sept. 15, and in the rest of the state's current wolf country -- roughly from the Canadian border west of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, south to the Idaho line and east to Yellowstone National Park -- on Oct. 25. According to state game officials, 15,603 hunters bought wolf tags, including 89 non-residents who paid $350 for the privilege (a resident tag was only $19), bringing in a total of over $325,000.

The first day of the hunt was hard on

wolves that had never been hunted before: Ten were killed. An average of 20 wolves per week were killed after that. The wolf season closed on Nov. 16, a few days ahead of schedule; hunters had killed 72 wolves out of the 75-wolf quota set by state wildlife biologists, and the quota was about to be surpassed.

even of the slain wolves wore radio collars, putting a dent in research efforts. Still, most people involved in wolf restoration saw the Montana hunt as a success. "We were on the right track with our quota system," says Sime. "Until recently, there's been only two points on the line -- from one side, we got 'kill them all,' from the other side, 'protect them all.' Well, only two points on the line won't work." Sime hopes that the hunting season will "mature the constituency for wolves," inspiring a new generation of hunters who admire and advocate for wolves as game animals. That model worked for mountain lions. Why shouldn't it work for wolves?

From 1872 to 1962, there was a bounty on lions, followed by open season until 1971, when they were finally reclassified as big game. Since then, lion hunters have matured greatly. Whenever deer hunters say more lions need to be killed, lion hunters demand in turn that lions be protected. Montana currently has anywhere from 1,800 to 2,200 mountain lions, and hunters killed 309 of them in 2008. The big cats still inhabit most of their original habitat -- success from a biodiversity standpoint.

Sime believes that those who oppose the wolf season are playing a dangerous game. "You can have wolves as game animals, and hunters who pay to hunt them, or you go with Wildlife Services, and have the taxpayers pay for the control," she says. Wildlife Services is the federal agency tasked with killing "nuisance" animals, including everything from feral dogs that attack people, to coyotes that threaten livestock, to birds that hang out around airports. Federal shooters killed about 145 wolves in Montana last year, out of an estimated population of 524.

George Killebrew, an electrician by trade, is a longtime Bitterroot resident. Born in Mississippi, Killebrew is proud of being part Cherokee. His ancestry, he says, makes him reluctant to hunt wolves or other predators: "My upbringing tells me that maybe these animals are my ancestors, coming back to help us out." But as wolf packs expanded, both around his home near Darby and in most of his hunting country, he bought a wolf tag. "We just really depend on an elk every year," he says, "and we just couldn't seem to find them anymore. Three years ago, we'd see a wolf track or two every once in a while, but this past year, there were tracks everywhere we went ... but no elk."

Wolf howls near their home made Killebrew and his wife uneasy about the safety of their Brittany dogs. On an early morning elk hunt to a favorite spot on the west side of the Bitterroots, Killebrew spotted a single set of wolf tracks along a ridge-top trail. Then he saw the wolf. "She was coming in at about 150 yards, and when she turned broadside, I shot her." Even though Killebrew was using a full-size elk cartridge -- a .300 Winchester Magnum -- the wounded wolf turned and ran. So he shot again, and that time she went down. "At that second shot, she let out a bloodcurdling howl," he says. He does not regret killing her. "There's just too many of them now. They need to have some fear of people, too."

Like Killebrew, many big-game hunters are convinced that rapidly growing wolf packs have devastated Montana's elk herds, preventing hunters from filling their freezers and outfitters from guiding clients to a decent bull. In the Bitterroot, this view is partly right, partly wrong, says state wildlife biologist Craig Jourdonnais, who frequently flies the Bitterroot country, counting elk and deer on their winter ranges. He says that elk numbers in the state remain healthy overall, but that the cow-to-calf ratio in some areas is low, partly because of wolves. "That's definitely a red flag for us," he says. Whenever the cow-to-calf ratio falls too low, the state has to put a halt to antlerless elk hunting. And that, of course, is bad for meat hunters, who tend to blame wolf predation for their empty freezers and higher food bills. Jourdonnais says wolves are not the only reason for the diminished herds, though. "We have so many changes in the Bitterroot," he explains. "A new predator on the ground. All those wildfires. Knapweed taking over, and the chopping up of prime winter range for subdivisions. You might say that we do have a lot of wolves in this valley, and not all of 'em are the four-legged kind. If you are hoping to hunt the same way you did 30 years ago, you are going to be disappointed."

And if you're hoping to hunt the way you did 10 years ago north and west of Yellowstone, you might not even recognize the place. The northern Yellowstone elk herd, once a mighty, and fantastically destructive, 22,000 strong, is down to around 6,600 animals. Cow-calf ratios in the region are at record lows. Hunters and outfitters are furious. But biologists, while concerned, take a different view. "It has taken us 10 years to get that herd down to our objective," says Sime. "There was nothing sustainable at all about 22,000 elk there." Sime adds, "We have some kick-butt Montana wildlife managers still saying, 'Wolves are impacting our wildlife.' Then they'll shift, and say, 'Well, they are impacting elk numbers.' I say 'Where is that happening?' They can never point to the place. It's time for us -- hunters, biologists, all of us -- to recognize that wolves aren't killing the wildlife. Wolves are wildlife."

Once a sustainable wolf hunt exists, more hunters, and more landowners who have to live with wolves, may begin viewing the animal as just another

member of the pantheon of wild animals that need protection and restoration in a world of burgeoning humanity. Wolf reintroduction was possible in large part because generations of hunters provided license money to restore deer and elk herds and preserve habitat. That same support, even at a much lower level (predator hunting has never been as popular as hunting animals valued as meat), could help give the wolf a place on the landscape forever.

What would a successful wolf hunt look like? Perhaps something like the hunt that Mike Ross, a wildlife biologist and wolf management specialist for the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, went on this fall in the backcountry of the Upper Gallatin River.

"I'm 48 years old, and I've been hunting since I was 9, and I've never had a more exciting day of hunting in my life," Ross says. Ross had a coveted permit, one of only five issued, drawn by lottery to hunt bull elk in what may be the world's best elk country. "My girlfriend, Colleen, and I saw some pretty good bulls, but I was looking for at least a 340 (Boone and Crockett). We heard wolves howling in the morning, and after lunch ... 10 wolves came out on an open ridge, flopped down in the sun, kind of belly-up. Colleen said, 'Let's go after them.' "

The two hunters crossed the river and climbed up to where they could see across to the ridge. "But they were gone," Ross says. The wolf pack was hidden in a patch of timber above them when Ross "howled them up." "The woods just opened up," Ross says, "howls everywhere, coming down on us, just wild, and I thought for a second, 'How many bullets do we have?' Then there were wolves below us, too." Ross howled again, and a big male wolf stepped from the timber above them. "He moved around us, and when he came out in the open, I shot him." The 6-year-old male wolf was black and weighed 117 pounds. Ross remains awed by the experience. "If you went out there a hundred times and tried to do something like this, you couldn't do it. It was hunting, you know, where everything comes together all of a sudden. I think those wolves were in a competitive situation with another pack, and they came in like coming into a gang fight. I'll never forget it." Ross says that he "got quite a bit of flak for shooting a wolf, people saying I exploited my job. I don't want anybody to think that. I was out hunting, I had a wolf tag, and we got into them. That's all."

On the map showing legal wolf kills from the 2009 season, there's a dense cluster of dots on the northern border of Yellowstone National Park. It marks the spot where nine wolves died at the hands of hunters on the high, windswept Buffalo Plateau, a world away from the wolf-livestock conflicts of the Madison Valley or the Bitterroot's frenetic urban interfaces. Some of the slain wolves had starred in documentaries made in the park, intimate records of their wild and dangerous lives set to soaring music. The collared alpha male of the much-chronicled Cottonwood Pack was killed, along with his collared mate, known to researchers as Number 527, and her daughter, Number 716, known to park wolf-watchers as Dark Female.

That broke the hearts of many wolf lovers -- the Los Angeles Times wrote a sort of eulogy to 527, as did Laurie Lyman, a blogger for the Natural Resources Defense Council. Lyman called for a buffer zone around the park to protect wolves that spend most of their lives inside park boundaries. Defenders of Wildlife and a host of other environmental groups had already taken their anger at the hunt to the courts, suing to get the wolf back on the endangered species list. Mike Leahy of Defenders points out that between them, hunters and federal shooters wiped out more than half of Montana's wolves in 2009. His organization would like to see 450 wolves in each of the three states before delisting occurs. "I know that asking for more wolves on the land is controversial," says Leahy. "They are a polarizing animal. But what we'd really like to see is for them to be managed as native wildlife, and we don't manage any other native wildlife down to the edge of extinction every year." The lawsuit is pending.

Biologists who study wolves on the ground seem to have a more nuanced view. State game officials shut down the hunt on the northern border of Yellowstone on Oct. 26, just as hunters exceeded by one the area's quota of 12 animals. For Doug Smith, the park's chief wolf biologist, the loss of the collared alphas and four out of 10 members of the Cottonwood Pack was a tremendous blow. "It put a big hole in our research," Smith says. He'd like to see Montana's wolf hunt "tweaked," given how quickly the quota was filled from near the park boundaries. Many other biologists agree. "You basically fill up your quota with wolves in the backcountry, and then no one can hunt the wolves that you really might want to remove, out on private lands, the ones that may be involved in livestock conflicts," Smith says. Hunters, too, complained that quotas were filled too early, preventing them from hunting wolves during the general big-game season in some places. Montana plans to hold another wolf hunt next year, and some of the suggested "tweaks" might be applied. Ken McDonald, a wildlife division administrator for the state, told a reporter, "Again, keep in mind that this was only Montana's first year of wolf hunting. It's still a learning experience for everyone involved."

No one knows how the hunt will affect the survivors' behavior and prospects. "You shoot four out of 10 in a pack, what will they do? Nobody knows," says Smith. "We know that disperser wolves (those that pioneer new territory and start new packs) usually come from large, stable packs, and dispers-

ers are the ones that provide genetic connectivity and eventually keep the animals off the endangered species list. The Cottonwood Pack probably won't be pumping out any dispersers. They are going to stay home, regroup somehow."

But even after the loss of 527 and Dark Female, and faced with the task of capturing and re-collaring new wolves in the Cottonwood Pack, Smith still supports the way Montana wildlife managers structured the first wolf season. "I thought they did a good job with it. It was very controlled. I respectfully disagree with those people who feel that the long-term survival of the wolf is enhanced by protecting them from hunting."

For Carolyn Sime, the questions posed by wolf restoration have been as much about human values and perception as they have been about the wolves themselves. "We have hunters, who have been the greatest advocates for restoring basic stuff like deer and elk, but then it comes to wolves, and they want to get rid of them. We have the animal rights people, some of whom seem to feel that no wolves should die -- ever. Or that if a wolf had killed 527, it would have been OK, but a man with a gun? Unacceptable. I'm hoping that eventually, those who occupy the two extremes will discredit themselves." She cautions that the anti-wolf-hunting groups may unintentionally prove to be the roadblock to restoring the wolf, or even any other endangered species, to more states in the West. "If they want to set the bar so high -- more wolves on the landscape than the people who live there can stand, then no other state will take on what Montana has taken on. Never. Why would they?"

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