



IDAHO WOLF FACT SHEET

THE WOLF'S ECOLOGICAL ROLE IN NATURE

MYTH: Wolves are “vicious killing machines” with no purpose.

REALITY: Like any top predator, wolves play an enormously important role in their ecosystems.

DETAILS: Wolves play a key role in their ecosystem by culling weak and old elk and deer (Smith, Peterson and Houston 2003) and reducing the long-term concentration of elk herds on sensitive meadows and wetlands (Ripple and Beschta 2004). In what is known as the cascade effect, the presence of wolves affects a multitude of species within the ecosystem. Elk, wary of the new top predator, have altered their grazing behaviour. With less grazing pressure from elk, streambed vegetation such as willow and aspen are regenerating after decades of over-browsing. As the trees are restored, they create better habitat for native birds and fish, beaver and other species. In addition, wolves have reduced the Park's coyote population by as much as 50 percent in some areas, which led to increased populations of pronghorn antelope and red fox (Crabtree and Sheldon 1999). In short, wolves play an important role in nature and their presence enhances native biodiversity and healthy ecosystems. *Source: Smith, D.W., R.O. Petersen, and D.B. Houston. 2003. Yellowstone after Wolves. Bioscience 53 (4): 330 – 340. Ripple, W.J., and R.L. Beschta. 2004. Wolves, elk, willows, and trophic cascades in the upper Gallatin range of southwestern Montana, USA. Forest Ecology and Management 200: 161–181. Crabtree R.L., and J.W. Sheldon. 1999. Coyotes and canid coexistence. Pp 127–163 in Clark TW, Curlee AP, Minta SC, Kareiva PM, eds. Carnivores in Ecosystems: The Yellowstone Experience. New Haven (CT): Yale University Press.*

WOLVES AND ELK

MYTH: Wolves devastate elk herds leaving hunters with fewer elk to kill.

REALITY: Elk and deer populations have been relatively unaffected by wolves.

DETAILS: Wolves prey upon deer and elk as do other predators, but what has been the impact to our game herds? Despite rumors that wolves are depleting elk and deer for game hunting, data from Idaho Department of Fish and Game shows that as the wolf population has steadily increased since 2003, so has the hunter harvest success rate. According to IDFG statistics, hunter harvest numbers for elk go up and down from year to year, but the overall success rate has remained relatively consistent since before wolves were reintroduced. For example, data shows that in 2005, the most recent year we have statistics for, hunter harvest numbers are higher than they were in 1993, two years before the wolves were ever reintroduced. Most importantly, IDFG statistics verify that elk and deer populations are at ecologically sustainable numbers, and wolves account for less than 10 percent of all elk and deer deaths in Idaho. *Source:*

https://research.idfg.idaho.gov/wildlife/Wildlife_Technical_Reports/Forms/Show_All_Reports.aspx

“At the time wolves were released into Idaho, the elk herd in the Salmon Region numbered approximately 28,000 animals. The current estimate gained by aerial surveys and hunter harvest information is approximately 25,000. While this estimate is lower, it is important to note several facts: the estimate still exceeds the Elk Plan objective by about 1,000 animals; all elk zones in the Region have generally been meeting plan objectives; and some high population units have deliberately been reduced through cow harvest to reach objectives. In addition, data gathered from a new radio collaring study initiated in 2005 shows 85 percent deer survival and 82 percent elk survival in the Salmon Region and Units 50 and 60A in the Upper Snake Region. Biologists consider 80 percent doe survival and 85 percent cow elk survival normal and sustainable. Elk mortality factors included hunter harvest (52 percent), mountain lions (30 percent), wolves (7 percent), malnutrition (7percent), and unknown predation (4percent). Deer mortality resulted from lions (32 percent), hunter harvest (18 percent), accidents (14 percent), unknown causes (14 percent), wolves (9 percent), roadkill (9 percent), and malnutrition (4 percent). In addition, deer numbers are limited in the region by habitat condition and weather both of which can significantly impact deer populations.” *Source:* Lukens, Jim. “Idaho, eleven years with wolves – what we’ve learned.” News release, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, April 25, 2006.

Researchers have documented that wolves tend to prey on the most vulnerable elk and deer, which includes weak, diseased, injured, very young calves (that appears to be largely compensatory as overall elk calf survival has remained steady), and older adult cow elk that are beyond their reproductive prime. Hunters, on the other hand, tend to kill prime reproductive age elk when harvest includes adult cow elk. *Source:* Wright, Peterson, Smith and Lemke. August 2006. *The Journal of Wildlife Management* 70 (4).

WOLVES AND LIVESTOCK

MYTH: Wolves are devastating Idaho's sheep industry.

REALITY: Wolves are responsible for less than 1 percent of all sheep losses in Idaho.

DETAILS: According to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, in 2005 wolves killed 244 sheep in the state of Idaho. Source: US Fish and Wildlife Service (<http://www.fws.gov/mountain%2Dprairie/species/mammals/wolf/annualrpt05/table5b.pdf>). How does that compare with other causes of losses? In 2004 (the most recent year data is offered by NASS), not including sheep that were slaughtered at market, 22,000 sheep died from all causes in Idaho but only 270 sheep (less than 0.2 percent) were confirmed killed by wolves. Overall sheep deaths were reportedly due to:

- Digestive problems (1,600);
- Respiratory disease (1,300);
- Birthing problems (1,100);
- Misc. health problems (3,200);
- *Predators (all combined) (12,100)
- Harsh weather (600); and
- Poisoning (800).

Sheep deaths due to predators represented 55% of overall losses. These predation deaths included coyotes (7,100 sheep), dogs (1,400 sheep), bears (1000 sheep), mountain lions (400 sheep) and wolves (270). Source: <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/current/sgdl/sgdl-05-06-2005.pdf>

In 2006, wolves killed 173 sheep in Idaho. Source: Steve Nadeau, *Statewide Large Carnivore Manager, Idaho Fish and Game, 600 S. Walnut, Boise, ID 83707.*

MYTH: Wolves are devastating Idaho's cattle industry.

REALITY: Wolves are responsible for less than 1 percent of all cattle losses in Idaho.

DETAILS: According to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, in 2005 wolves killed 20 cattle in the state of Idaho. Source: *US Fish and Wildlife Service* (<http://www.fws.gov/mountain%2Dprairie/species/mammals/wolf/annualrpt05/table5b.pdf>). How does that compare with other causes of losses? In 2005, not including cattle that were slaughtered at market, 105,000 cows and calves died from all causes in Idaho. These deaths were reportedly due to:

- Digestive problems (23,200);
- Respiratory disease (16,500);
- Birthing problems (9,200);
- Misc. health problems (7,900);
- Lameness and injuries (3,100);
- Predators (all combined) (2,500)
- Harsh weather (1,300);
- Poisoning (800); and
- Theft (100).

Cattle deaths due to predators represented less than 3% of overall losses. These predation deaths included coyotes (600 calves), mountain lions (200 calves), and dogs (100 calves). *Source:*

<http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/current/CattDeath/CattDeath-05-05-2006.txt>

In 2006, wolves killed 24 cattle in Idaho in 2006. *Source:* Steve Nadeau, Statewide Large Carnivore Manager, Idaho Fish and Game, 600 S. Walnut, Boise, ID 83707.

WOLVES AND RANCHING

MYTH: Ranchers are not reimbursed for their losses to wolves.

REALITY: Most livestock owners who experience verified depredation losses to wolves do seek and receive compensation for their losses.

DETAILS: In 1987, Defenders of Wildlife (Defenders) initiated the first privately funded, livestock compensation program of its kind to reimburse livestock owners for wolf caused losses while wolves are under federal protection. To date, [The] Bailey Wildlife Foundation Wolf Compensation Fund, named in honor of its largest contributor, has reimbursed ranchers almost \$700,000 in the Northern Rockies for their livestock losses to wolves and celebrates its 20 year anniversary in 2007. Since the program's inception in 1987 (shortly after the first pack was established in Montana) through 2005, Defenders has paid for more than 90% of all verified livestock losses. In addition to Defenders' compensation program, the Idaho Office of Species Conservation administers a secondary compensation program that reimburses Idaho livestock owners for the remaining losses and also compensates for missing and unverified livestock losses. *Sources:*

<http://www.fws.gov/mountain%2Dprairie/species/mammals/wolf/annualrpt05/table5b.pdf>

<http://species.idaho.gov/list/wolves.html> and <http://www.defenders.org/wolfcomp.html>

MYTH: Most livestock losses to wolves are undetected.

REALITY: Some losses are undetected, but even under the "worst-case" scenario, these still represent a small percentage of overall cattle losses.

DETAILS: Wolf-related livestock deaths are documented by federal and state agencies but what about losses that weren't found? By adding a factor for undetected losses under a worst case scenario (e.g. heavy vegetation, remote location, infrequent human supervision of livestock), researchers determined that from one to eight wolf depredation losses remain undetected per depredation incident (Oakleaf et al 2003). If that number is accurate and all undetected losses occurred under these worst-case scenarios, wolves may have actually killed between 40 and 160 cattle in Idaho in 2005. However, this estimate still represents less than one percent (0.15 %) of total cattle losses.

WOLVES AND HUMAN SAFETY

MYTH: Wolves are very dangerous and commonly attack people.

REALITY: Wolf attacks are among the rarest of all large mammal attacks on humans.

DETAILS: All wild animals can be dangerous to humans, especially those that frequently come into contact with humans and become “habituated,” losing their natural fear. This often occurs when an animal associates people with food causing the animal to become aggressive toward humans. Habituation is thought to be the cause of the only probable human fatality attributed to non-rabid wolves in North America since 1900. This fatality occurred in November, 2005 in northern Saskatchewan. Subsequent investigation by Paul Paquet, a University of Calgary wolf biologist and provincial authorities has determined that some wolves in the area had been attracted to a garbage dump; had possibly been fed and regularly photographed at a nearby mining camp, causing the animals to become habituated. Like dogs, wolves are curious animals, readily investigating something new in their environment. And the vast majority of wolf-human encounters are simple curiosity on the part of the wolf. Wolves are, however, very territorial and intolerant of the presence of other canines. Hikers with dogs have occasionally been followed, barked at, and growled at by resident wolves protecting their territory from a trespassing canine. Wolves have also been documented exhibiting these same behaviors when pups are present. A person in wolf country has a greater chance of being hit by lightning, dying of a bee sting or being killed in a vehicle collision with a deer than being injured by a wolf. *Source: Lukens, Jim. “Idaho, eleven years with wolves – what we’ve learned.” News release, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, April 25, 2006. <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/cms/wildlife/wolves/dogs.pdf>*

WOLVES AND TOURISM

MYTH: Wolves are causing serious economic harm to local communities.

REALITY: Wolves in Yellowstone have attracted more than 35 million dollars annually to local economies.

DETAILS: Wolves play an increasingly important role in the Northern Rocky Mountain region’s economy. According to a recent study, the roughly 151,000 people who visit Yellowstone National Park each year to see wolves bring in \$35 million annually to Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, which is multiplied several times within the local economies. And nearly four percent of Yellowstone National Park’s 2.8 million annual visitors say they would not have visited the nation’s oldest national park if wolves weren’t there. *Source: John Duffield, Department of Economics, University of Montana. <http://www.billingsgazette.net/articles/2006/04/07/news/state/25-wolves.txt>*

BUT AREN'T THEY “CANADIAN” WOLVES?

MYTH: Wolves from Canada were used for reintroduction to central Idaho and Yellowstone so they aren't native.

REALITY: The wolves that currently inhabit Canada once historically inhabited the central and western United States, live in similar habitat and rely on the same food source. Since wolves were exterminated in the western region of the lower 48, capturing animals from Canada as a source population was actually the ideal match.

DETAILS: Reintroduced wolves are often incorrectly called “Canadian” wolves. However, biological and genetic research provides evidence of only two subspecies of wolves inhabiting the central and western portions of the United States, both of which moved freely across the Canadian border. Other taxonomists reject the subspecies theory, believing that the same wolf species lived in both the western U.S. and Canada. When selecting wolves for release into central Idaho and Yellowstone, biologists chose wolves in Canada that were already preying on elk and living in habitat similar to that of Idaho and Wyoming. A few wolves have even made the trip on their own. In 1991, a GPS collared wolf traveled from Banff National Park, Alberta to British Columbia, down to Browning, Montana then southwest past Coeur d'Alene, Idaho into Washington state and back to her home territory traveling an area of about 40,000 square miles in less than three years. While this is an extreme example, several wolves have dispersed hundreds of miles in just a few weeks. *Source: Lukens, Jim. Idaho, eleven years with wolves – what we've learned. News release, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, April 25, 2006. Mech, L.D. and L. Boitani, editors. 2003. Wolves: behavior, ecology and conservation. University of Chicago Press. Wandering Wolf Inspires Project, 5/23/2006 New York Times.*

WOLVES AND IDAHOANS

MYTH: Idahoans don't want wolves in the state.

REALITY: According to a statewide poll conducted by Boise State University in 2003, slightly more Idahoans support having wolves in the backcountry than are opposed to them.

DETAILS: 42% of Idaho residents said that we should have wolves in the wilderness and roadless areas in the state while 39% disagreed.

Source: <http://sspa.boisestate.edu/ssrc/archive/2003-annualsurvey14.pdf>

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