

Answers to Your Questions about Living with Wolves



In the past year, much has changed for the wolves of the Northern Rockies, keystone members of our natural ecosystem that have now been removed from the list of Endangered Species. As management of wolves changes hands from the protection of the federal government to the states, wolves have become a hunted big game animal, and many new questions arise. Are we capable of sharing the land with wolves? Can honest answers overcome misinformation and fear?

We believe that education will lead to understanding that brings tolerance and coexistence with wolves. Living with Wolves provides factual information in order to dispel the myths that not only perpetuate many common misconceptions of wolves, but also drive policy decisions. But the future of wolves in the West will be decided in the hearts and minds of people like you.

Jim and Jamie Dutcher
Founders, Living with Wolves

Are the wolves killing all the elk?

Elk, the primary prey of wolves, are holding steady in numbers. In Montana, the statewide population of elk is above objectives set by the state game agency. In Wyoming, their numbers are 50% above state objectives. And in Idaho, the elk population grew by 2,000 animals in the last year, with 20 of the 29 elk hunting zones at or above management goals. However, the return of wolves has made elk much more alert to potential danger and, therefore, more challenging to hunt, causing resentment among some hunters. As elk readjust to the return of wolves, their behavior has changed notably. They spend less time lingering in meadows and riverbeds and more time maintaining vantage points where they can detect approaching threats earlier. As elk have modified their survival tactics, perhaps hunters may need to adjust their hunting tactics.

Are the reintroduced wolves bigger?

Tales about the invasion of super-sized, 180-pound Canadian wolves aren't true. The average wolf killed during the last hunting season weighed less than 95 pounds. Claims that we're now dealing with a larger and different wolf than originally lived here are often used to discredit the success of reintroduction. And neither wolves, nor any other animal, knows where the U.S./Canadian border might be. The ancient migration patterns of animals outdate human politics but, sadly, may not survive them.

What does hunting and trapping do to a wolf pack?

Packs that are reduced in numbers by hunting and trapping may consist of only two or three adults. If these smaller packs have pups to watch over and feed, finding food becomes even more difficult, because one wolf always remains with the youngsters. Therefore, diminished packs are often forced to find prey that's easier to kill, such as livestock.

Are wolves beneficial?

Scientific research has determined that wolves, a "keystone species," maintain stability in their environment, and function as ecosystem managers. Observations at Yellowstone Park since the reintroduction of wolves illustrate this point. Keeping elk on the move, wolves stop them from overgrazing, allowing new vegetation to thrive along streams. Healthy stands of cottonwood and aspen provide food for beavers, whose ponds benefit aquatic plants and animals, like willows and moose. Shade from these trees also cools the water, improving trout habitat. Wolves are opportunistic hunters, preying upon the weak and the sick, so stronger prey animals remain and reproduce, improving the health of both the elk herd and the land. Wolves are the only animals in North America that play this role. Now people travel to a revitalized Yellowstone Park just to see wolves, with tours fully booked.

Are Idaho's wolves causing a "Wolf Emergency"?

In April, Governor "Butch" Otter signed into law a "Wolf Emergency," stating that "public safety has been compromised, economic activity has been disrupted and private and public property continue to be imperiled" with wolves "dramatically inhibiting previously safe activities such as walking, picnicking, biking, berry picking, hunting and fishing." None of this political language has any basis in fact. Since wolves were reintroduced in 1995, not one violent encounter between wolves and human beings has taken place anywhere in the lower 48 states.

How can conflicts be reduced between predators and livestock?

Livestock face many life-threatening hazards on the range, the most deadly of which are weather, disease and birthing. In addition, predators such as coyotes, bears, wolves, mountain lions, and even eagles, kill livestock. Although the removal of chronic livestock predators is at times necessary, managing any group of predators through the barrel of a gun is not an effective long-term solution. Taking non-lethal measures to prevent wolves from attacking livestock in the first place can result in fewer dead livestock and wolves. A growing number of working ranchers are embracing innovative options, including the use of range riders who monitor free-ranging livestock while tracking the activities of large carnivores to keep stock and potential predators separated; increased guards; night penning of stock with electric fencing and deterrent flags; and, whenever possible, removal of carcasses that died of natural causes, instead of leaving them on the range where carnivores develop potentially fatal habits by feeding on them. Minimizing attacks on livestock by all predators is possible, but requires rethinking old methods of managing sheep and cattle.

Is my dog in danger during wolf hunting season?

The State of Idaho is prepared to sell unlimited wolf hunting tags for a season that will last for seven months of the year in much of the state, and ten months in some areas. If you are taking your dog into the back country during this time, take precautions so it won't be mistaken for a wolf. Keep your pet close to you at all times and under your control, preferably wearing an orange collar or vest. Traps and snares can cause unintended injury or death to pets, horses, and other untargeted wildlife in the back country. People can also be injured by these traps. Trapped animals can suffer for as long as 72 hours, the time interval between a trapper's required visits to check traps. Wolves may regard dogs in their territory as intruders and may attack them. While playful encounters between wolves and dogs have been reported, not every encounter can be so benign, and this isn't a risk to take with your pet.

Should wolves be hunted?

Biologically, all dogs, whether working on farms or family pets, are the direct descendants of wolves. Wolves are complex, highly intelligent social animals, caring, and, above all, devoted to family. It is for those same traits that the hunting of gorillas, elephants, whales and dolphins has become unacceptable. Why should wolves be different?

An Idaho nonprofit, Living with Wolves dispels myths about wolves through education of the public, wildlife managers, and government officials. Sign up for our e-newsletters, e-news blasts and join us on Facebook!

www.livingwithwolves.org

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