



# LETHAL CONTROLS: *The Fate of Wolves of the Northern Rockies*

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## Alliance for the Wild Rockies

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By Renee Van Camp, Wolf Program Director

2002 and 2003 have proven to be difficult years to be a wolf in the Northern Rockies. Federal agents have targeted many wolves and even taken out entire packs and reduced others to a single wolf fighting to provide for pups. Wolves are gunned down from agents hanging out of helicopters, by close range shots while helplessly trapped in steel jaws of a trap, and even by private ranchers who are given special kill permits.

### **2002:**

Nearly 40 wolves were lethally controlled in the 3-state recovery area of Montana, Idaho and Yellowstone National Park, in 2002. This is compared to 19 wolves killed during the **ENTIRE YEAR** of 2001 and 84 wolves in the thirteen years from 1987 to the end of 2000.

In the Sawtooth Valley and surrounding Custer County in Idaho, 27 wolves have been lethally controlled by USFWS. This includes the elimination of the Whitehawk Pack throughout the first week of April, 2002. The Whitehawk Pack, including the alpha male and female (who was likely pregnant) and eight 11-month old pups, were successfully protected by Wildlife Guardians during the spring and summer of 2001, but 2002 proved to be far different. All ten members of this pack were destroyed. This area includes the Sawtooth National Recreation Area (SNRA) that is designated for wildlife, wilderness and recreation over and above livestock and grazing practices. However, a few landowners in the valley were dictating activities in the SNRA and federal agents listened and responded. Recently there have been crucial victories for wildlife in the SNRA thanks to litigation from Western Watersheds Group who has successfully convinced Judge Winmill to put a stop to any lethal control in the SNRA for two consecutive summers, regardless of livestock depredations. Pastoral setting could continue if other resources are not impacted by livestock grazing. Regardless of recent court victories and stays on lethal control, the SNRA has proven to be a sink for wolves. Dispersing individuals return to this area year after year and have been removed or eliminated. A few short months after the elimination of the Whitehawk pack there were already 3-4 lone wolves roaming the SNRA with high probability of forming yet another pack in this area. Wolves JUST outside the SNRA boundaries were also being targeted. Two wolves in a loose, unorganized group were shot near Fairfield, Idaho. More than likely this group would have turned into a pack in that area, however, with two members gone, likely have dispersed.

Yellowstone National Park (YNP) wolves are less likely to find themselves face-to-face with ranchers and their sprawling livestock productions, however nine wolves were killed in Yellowstone in 2002. The Paradise Valley, just north of Yellowstone, is proving to be far from paradise for wolves. Sprawling ranches and livestock operations are impacting wolf dispersal from YNP northwards through this ranchland creating many conflicts. In 2002, 4 wolves were killed for simply chasing horses and feeding on an aborted calf in the Paradise Valley. A male dispersed from the Chief Joseph Pack, (NW Yellowstone) and successfully made it across Interstate 90, hundreds of miles northwest from YNP. The wolf was found north of Helena, MT. Wildlife Services confirmed depredations of sheep in the area and shot the wolf while he was peacefully sleeping outside the pen. In late summer, wolves South and East of the park have been under the feds' gun with 3 of the Washakie Pack members being lethally controlled. The justification was to reduce pack size and therefore reduce the need for so much food. This pack had only killed a total of three calves over the last 2 years.

The USFWS and Wildlife Services continued targeting the Ninemile Pack, NW of Missoula, MT. This pack naturally migrated from Canada 13 years ago and is not part of the reintroduced population that carries the “experimental/non-essential” status. Ed Bangs, head of USFWS Wolf Recovery, had to apply for a special Section 10 permit to be allowed to kill a federally endangered and protected species. He successfully obtained the permit and seemed to be treating the fully protected wolves in Montana as if they were part of the experimental/non-essential population. Due to control actions, there are only 4 of the known 9 members still surviving, with plans underway to trap and kill the remainder of the pack if depredations continue. One male of the pack was shot from a helicopter while surrounded by his pack while feeding on a wild elk carcass so even wolves doing what they’re supposed to do are being targeted. Two more pack members were also gunned down by agents in a helicopter who randomly shot the first two wolves that seem to match the description from a Ninemile resident of “black or gray and big”. Another female was shot after she was caught in a trap baited with a sheep carcass that was left by USFWS. Wildlife Services simply walked up to her and shot and killed her. Two more wolves (a male and a female) were killed the first weekend of September after federal officials found sheep carcasses in the area. There are currently only 3-4 wolves left of the original Ninemile Pack.

### **So far in 2003:**

This year is not proving to be any less hostile towards wolves. So far in 2003, 35 wolves have been lethally controlled in the Northern Rockies. This is compared to nearly 40 during the entire year of 2002, and this year is far from over. The focus has shifted from Idaho’s Sawtooth National Recreation Area to NW Montana where two packs have been completely eliminated.

On Feb. 3rd, Wildlife Services killed 3 members of the Halfway pack near Helena, MT. On the morning of the 6th, 3 members, including the suspected alpha male, of the Castle Rock pack, also near Helena, MT, were shot. That afternoon WS killed 2 more Halfway pack wolves. In addition, 2 members of the Castlerock Pack were killed earlier this year, one by Wildlife Services and one by a rancher that had been given lethal control rights. The killing continued on March 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> when Wildlife Services and USFWS killed the remaining 3 members of the Castle Rock Pack, The Halfway Pack and the Castle Rock Pack are gone. Control is finished, unless more depredations are confirmed. Now this area is void of wolves and overrun by cattle. The Great Divide Pack is just East of this area, will they soon move into this territory and take over and be faced with the same lethal management?

South of the Helena area, the entire Red Lodge pack was removed in February and 4 members of the Freezeout Pack, west of Yellowstone, were killed in April. The reason....a few confirmed depredations and an overly exaggerated amount of possible depredations.

### **Putting depredations into perspective:**

There has been a steady decline of livestock depredations by wolves in the last 2 years, although there has been an increase in the number of wolves on the ground and therefore, the number of wolves being killed. Wolves prefer natural prey to livestock; livestock depredations by wolves are rare. Where natural prey is available, problems with wolves have been minor. However, natural prey is often displaced by human development and by livestock productions. The following statistics of livestock depredations show that wolves do not account for significant livestock losses.

- In northwestern Montana, wolf predation accounts for less than .0004% of all predator-caused livestock deaths reported to Animal Damage Control.<sup>1</sup> In 2002, wolves were responsible for less than .5% of total death losses for cattle and sheep.<sup>4</sup>
- In Idaho, livestock losses have declined as follows: in 1999 sixteen cattle and 57 sheep were lost to wolves. In 2000, fifteen cattle and 39 sheep were lost to wolves. In 2001, ten cattle and sixteen sheep were lost to wolves.<sup>3</sup>
- In the Yellowstone area, estimated annual livestock losses from all causes *before wolf reintroduction* were 8,340 cattle and 12,993 sheep. During the first four years after wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone (1995-98), wolves killed a total of eight cattle and 84 sheep.<sup>1</sup>

- To add some perspective on depredations, in Montana alone in January 2002, there were 2,450,000 head of cattle and 335,000 sheep. There were only 9 cattle and 13 sheep killed by the 108 wolves within the state of Montana.<sup>4</sup>  
(Sources: <sup>1</sup>U.S. Fish and Wildlife Statistics, January 1999, <sup>2</sup>2001 Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery 2000 Annual Report, U.S. Department of Agriculture, <sup>3</sup>USFWS 2001 Report, <sup>4</sup>Montana Department of Livestock, <sup>5</sup>U.S. Department of Agriculture, <sup>4</sup>2002 Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Annual Report)

Despite these facts, lethal control of wolves continues to rise. Livestock owners can minimize conflicts between wolves and their stock by taking protective measures such as RAG boxes or other audio and visual deterrents, guard dogs, electric fencing, non-lethal munitions, human shepherds, and removing the carcasses of dead stock. Wild, non-habitualized wolves normally avoid humans, so human presence is proven to be an effective management tool. Wildlife Guardian volunteers have saved the fate of three different wolf packs in and around the SNRA by simply being a human presence between the wolves and livestock. When depredations do occur, livestock owners are compensated at 100% of fair market value when there is a confirmed wolf kill on their livestock, and at 50% of fair market value when it is a probable wolf kill.

### **The Future of Wolf Recovery/De-Listing**

Although USFWS and Wildlife Services are disregarding several aspects of the federal wolf recovery plan in their management methods, the de-listing process is well on its way to being completed. Initially, FWS stated that each of the three states where wolves occur (Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming), must have 10 breeding pairs for three years, for a total of 30 breeding pairs, to meet wolf recovery. At the end of 2001, Ed Bangs, USFWS Wolf Recovery Coordinator, stated that 30 total breeding pairs, regardless of how many occur in each of the states, meets the requirement of the recovery goals. This policy switch likely came because Montana wolves had not reached the ten-breeding pair requirement, which would have kept wolves in all states from being de-listed. Under this altered provision of 30 breeding pairs throughout the ecosystem, 2002 was the last of the three-year period required to move forward for delisting. During the spring of 2003, wolves were downlisted to threatened in 27 states, many of which do not even contain wolves. This action brings complete delisting one step closer.

In order for wolves to be de-listed all three states must have approved Management Plans. Idaho's plan was passed by the Legislature in 2002, Wyoming's was passed in the summer of 2003 and Montana's revising with final comments and scheduled to be released late summer 2003. Wyoming's plan calls for dual-classification of wolves within the state. Trophy game status in Yellowstone and few surrounding wilderness areas and predator status in the remainder of the state. Where listed as a predator, wolves can be shot at any time, for any reason....no permit needed. All three states will allow regulated hunting under trophy game or furbearer status. Simply put, you will need a license to kill wolves in these areas. USFWS must accept each state plan before the states can obtain responsibility. The Idaho and Montana plans both contain provisions to limit the number of packs to around fifteen in each state, with varying management techniques being used on either side of that number. Basically, if there are more than fifteen packs in each state, lethal control can (and probably will) be used. Wyoming has also agreed to the 15-pack minimum, however has only promised for 7 of those packs to be living outside of Yellowstone and a few surrounding wilderness areas. Each plan prioritizes removal of wolves at any time when there is conflict with livestock. In order for future survival, wolves need much more protection than what states are offering in their management plans.

**What you can do:**

While it's too late to comment on the state plans, you can let the federal government and your state legislators know how you feel about lethal control of wolves being used as a management tool. Let them know that the time, effort, and money put into bringing the wolves back to their native lands should not be wasted to pacify a few angry ranchers who are controlling the management of our public lands. Humans must learn to adjust and live with wolves, and other wildlife, and respect their right to live wild and free. Without the "wild" in wilderness, it simply becomes a lonely wasteland.

**Who to contact:**

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<p><b>Carter Niemeyer</b> <i>(Responsible for removing the Whitehawk Pack removal in the SNRA)</i> U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Boise Field Office 1387 South Vinnell Way, 368 Boise, ID 83709 (208) 378-5639 email: Carter_Niemeyer@fws.gov</p>	<p><b>Mark Collinge</b> Wildlife Services Idaho State Office, Boise, Idaho 1387 South Vinnell Way, 368 Boise, ID 83709 (208) 378-5077 email: Mark.D.Collinge@usda.gov</p>
<p><b>Dave Allen</b>, Pacific Regional Director Dave Wesley, Deputy Regional Director USFWS Pacific Region (ID, WA, OR, CA, NV) 911 NE 11th Ave Portland, OR 97232 (503) 231-6828</p>	<p><b>Ralph Morgenweck</b>, Regional Director USFWS Mountain Prairie Region (MT, WY, UT, CO, ND, SD, NE, KS) PO Box 25486 Denver, Co 80225 (303) 236-7920</p>

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