

WOLF TRACKS

1,000-Mile Journey Carries Montana Wolf to Colorado

It's the first confirmed wolf sighting in Colorado since 2004.

By David Frey, 2-25-09

A gray wolf from a southwestern Montana pack has traveled to the Colorado high country on an incredible journey that carried her across 1,000 miles and five states into a place where native wolves had been wiped out some eighty years before.

A global positioning satellite collar attached to the 18-month-old female's neck pinpointed her in Eagle County, on Colorado's Western Slope, home to the Vail ski area. Montana wildlife officials received the information last weekend, but the data comes with a two-week time lag, meaning the wolf's whereabouts since then are unknown.

"Two weeks from now, who knows where she's going to be?" says Carolyn Sime, wolf program coordinator for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Known as 314F, the wolf was a member of the Mill Creek pack, which lives north of Yellowstone National Park between the towns of Gardiner and Livingston. She was collared by state wildlife officials as part of a research program with the University of Montana to improve wolf monitoring techniques. Biologists say she strayed from her pack in late September in search of a mate.

Satellite data from her collar documents a monumental journey across some of the West's wildest places: through Yellowstone National Park and across western Wyoming, crossing through the Bridger-Teton National Forest southeast of Pinedale. She traveled southwest into southeastern Idaho and northeastern Utah, then east into Colorado without a report of being spotted. The winding journey has brought her 450 miles from home. Researchers are waiting to see if she continues onward, stays put or heads back to her pack.

"Young wolves often cover remarkable distances looking for a mate and a new territory," says Colorado Division of Wildlife Director Tom Remington. "If this wolf doesn't find a pack, she'll likely keep moving."

The last confirmed wolf in Colorado came from a Yellowstone pack. The young female fitted with a radio collar was killed by a vehicle on Interstate 70 near Idaho Springs in June 2004. In 2007, video footage captured what appeared to be a wolf near Walden, in northern Colorado, but it was not wearing a radio collar. The DOW receives numerous more unconfirmed reports each year of sightings of what people believe are wolves.

"It raises the question of how many of the animals have been in Colorado," says Michael Robinson, conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity, which favors a

Colorado recovery plan to encourage wolves' return, including a possible reintroduction plan.

"I wouldn't be surprised to see wolf pups in the state within five years," Robinson says. "I think that's possible. A lot of it depends on if wolves are taken off the endangered species list in the Northern Rockies."

The Bush administration delisted the wolf in its waning days, a move immediately reversed by Obama administration. A 2004 Colorado wolf management plan allows wolves to roam freely in the state unless they come into conflict with people or livestock, but the state has no plans to reintroduce them.

Native wolf populations in Colorado were wiped out by the late 1930s. Before 2004, the last known record of a wolf killed in Colorado was in 1943.

The wolf that wandered into Colorado weighed 68 pounds when she was caught in July. Assuming she's still healthy, Sime says, she's probably gained weight, feeding on deer and elk. Adult wolves may weigh up to 80 pounds.

Wolves can travel 20 to 30 miles a day, and dispersing from a pack is common. It helps create new packs. But it's rare for them to stray more than 60 miles from their home packs, wildlife officials say. Since 1992, about 10 wolves have been documented traveling over 190 miles in search of a mate, including forays into Utah and South Dakota. The actual number may be higher, though, since fewer than 30 percent of Northern Rockies wolves are fitted with collars that allow biologists to track them. None of those far-wandering wolves succeeded in breeding or forming packs.

"There are a lot of hazards out there," says DOW spokesman Tyler Baskfield. "Those wolves were reintroduced in that area for a reason. That's because there's habitat there that they can make a living on, so to speak. You start crossing roads and highways and getting into developed areas and things quickly change."

The Montana wolf's GPS unit only offers a broad-brush of her journey. Much more detailed information remains locked in her collar. Like a James Bond gadget, it's fitted with an electrical charge set to blast the collar off her neck after two years, when wildlife officers can track it down and download the rest of the information.

"Wolves are pretty amazing travelers," Sime says. "It's pretty neat to see with some of this new technology what animals do and where they go. I wish they had a better explanation for why."

Additional information about this wolf will be reported in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's weekly reports. Potential wolf sightings may be reported to the DOW on its Web site.