Wolf pack causing problems for family
By MARY ALICE MURPHY

A horse belonging to an 8-year-old girl was killed by the Aspen Pack of Mexican gray wolves, according to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Mexican Gray Wolf Recovery Program spokeswoman Elizabeth Slown.

The Mark Miller family was away from their 40-acre homestead on Diamond Creek, southwest of Wall Lake. When they returned Jan. 7, they found the remains of their horse. From the tracks, it was determined that the wolves chased the horse out of the pasture into the corral and killed it. The wolves ate the horse and spent time around the house, even defecating on the porch.

The Millers’ daughter, to whom the horse belonged, had, just a month before, witnessed an attack by the same pack on the family’s dog near the house.

"He can’t breathe very well," Miller said. "His windpipe was partially crushed."

Miller said wolves are "constantly" in the yard. The USFWS suggested putting electric fencing around the yard, but Miller said: "I don’t want to live in a used car lot."

Radio-activated guard boxes, known as "rag' boxes, have been installed around the perimeter of the house and corral. The boxes are activated by a wolf collar. When a pack is in the vicinity, the box becomes a noise-maker to try to haze the wolves away.

However, the problematic wolf, the alpha male, remains uncollared.

“We call him ‘Fearless,'” Mary Miller said. She has tried yelling and throwing rocks at the animal and he just stares at her, she said. Wolves are opportunistic, according to Slown.

“They go for the easy stuff," she said. “And they have different personalities. This one is definitely an alpha. It’s safe to say that, in this case, it’s the wolf itself that’s the problem. We have a lot of sympathy for (the Millers). It’s a tough situation."

Although Mark Miller said personnel from the Wolf Recovery Program responded quickly to the report of the horse kill, he said he thinks they may be just giving the family "lip service, because it’s close to breeding season and this pack has been successful in breeding and raising pups in the wild."

Slown said attempts to haze the wolf away from the Millers’ land have not been successful.

"He has eluded us, but it hasn’t been for lack of trying," Slown said. "We did get two of the pups collared in the last two weeks.'

Helicopters have been used to search for the wolf three times to try to dart it.

“It hasn’t worked," Slown said. “We would like to try trapping it, but we are waiting for the weather to clear up a bit. We know the wolf is a problem, because hazing hasn’t modi fied its behavior."

The Interagency Field Team recommendation is more aggressive than called for in the Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan’s Standard Operation Procedures 13.0, but is considered warranted based on the continuing pattern of nuisance behavior by the Aspen male, according to Slown.

Mark Miller said he was disappointed by the officials’ lack of concern about their daughter’s safety.

“We bought the place to retire and to build a kids’ camp," he said. “We want to put the main lodge on the upper Mimbres River and a satellite camp at this site. It’s for kids who are interested in learning about hunting, trailing and reading sign.'

Miller was an outfitter for years and said a lot of hunters have asked him to teach their children what he knows about the outdoors.

Mary Miller said they were getting out of outfitting, because the numbers of game are going down.

“My husband has so much knowledge," she said. “We’re not against predators, but this pack is literally on our doorstep. I can’t send our daughter out to the corral without a dog to run interference, but I’m scared to send her with a dog, because this male seems attracted to dogs."

Slown confirmed that wolves consider dogs as competitors and will attack them.

“We want kids to learn about wildlife — birds, game and predators alike," Mary Miller said. “We don’t have cattle, so we don’t worry about that. We’re just frustrated that although Fish and Wildlife has been responsive, they’ve not been effective."

She said she’d like to see the wild-born pups remain in the wild and reported the female is wary of humans, but the male seems accustomed to humans.

“We want to share our place and our respect for the forest and wildlife, but we’ve seen the male with two of the pups and we’re concerned he’s teaching them bad habits," Mary Miller said. “I understand they are
acting like wolves, but they know they will only get yelled at.’
Another of Mark Miller’s concerns is the depredation of game animals.
“There are lots of elk around here,’ Mark Miller said. “I’m afraid the elk will be diminished. We have found
five elk kills within a mile of the house.’
He worries that if the wolves run out of food, they will move nearer to more populated areas.
“Another thing I’d like to get across is that unless you live where the wolves are terrorizing you, you have
no idea how it is living with worrying about your kids and not be able to take care of it,’ he said. “I’m not
going to jail over a wolf, but it changes your whole life. People will realize it once the game is decimated
and hunters have no deer or elk to hunt. (Wolf recovery) is a sacrifice to the public.’
Slawn said there has never been a confirmed wolf attack on a human in the United States.
Statistics from the Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Program show that the
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numbers of wolves in Yellowstone Park and the surrounding area rise and fall depending on conditions.
Their prey can also change.
On the park’s Northern Range, where more than half the park’s wolves live, about 75 percent of the wolf
kills were elk calves this season, while 15 percent were bulls and 10 percent were elk cows, according to
an Associated Press story Friday.
“Prime age” elk were the least frequently killed, Doug Smith, Yellowstone’s lead wolf biologist, said.
Last year, a layer of hardened snow and ice kept food out of reach for many elk and bison. With limited
food, they weakened and were easier prey for wolves that also fed on bull elk in 2004. Wolves fed
primarily on calves over the previous nine winters.
Wolf biologists survey the population every December and March to get a feel for what they’re eating and
how the overall population is faring.
There were a record 174 wolves in the park in 2003. Disease trimmed those numbers to 118 in 2005.
“They bounced back this year,’ Smith said.
Of the 75 pups born in 2006, 60 survived to December. There are now an estimated 136 wolves in 13
packs in the park.
Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity said the Northern Rocky Mountain program has
been successful with more than 1,200 wolves in the area, as estimated by the USFWS.
“Part of the problem in the Southwest is the recovery area is much smaller,’ Robinson said.
The wolves are required to stay within the boundaries in the Southwest, which they are not limited by in
the northern program, he said.
“Nobody said it would be easy,’ Robinson said. “Everyone knew there would be conflicts, but the program
is not following the regulations of the Federal Register Rule signed Jan. 12, 1998.’
He said the policy allows for removal of wolves after three confirmed depredations of livestock, but they
are planning to remove the Aspen Pack alpha male after only one confirmed attack — the one on the
Millers’ horse.
“It’s not how a science-based recovery program works,’ Robinson said. “This is a political-based recovery.
It’s worth looking at how (wolf recovery personnel) are mitigating the impact on people. They’re not doing
it according to their rules.’
The goal at the inception of the program was to have 18 breeding pairs, described as a male and female that have had at least two pups that have survived to Dec. 31 of their year of birth, by the end of 2006. “Their record is abysmal,” Robinson said. “They’ve reported that there are seven breeding pairs, but they don’t (have that many). They have only six, because the male of the Bluestem Pack died and although another male has ‘hooked up’ with the female, there’s no guarantee they will breed, because she is 10 years old, which is getting old for having pups. If they trap and remove the Aspen Pack male, another breeding pair will be gone.’

He accused the program of “lying about the numbers, so they can issue permits.’ Slown refuted Robinson’s comment by saying: “Their charge is false. We logged many hours in aircraft and on the ground to attain an honest assessment of the wolf population in the mountains of Arizona and New Mexico. Fifty-nine wolves with seven breeding pairs is an all-time high for the Mexican wolf reintroduction and recovery program. The number of breeding pairs is established at the end of the year as are the population estimates.

“The Meridian Pack alpha male (806) was with the Bluestem alpha female, No. 521, on Dec. 16. During December, while other members of the Bluestem Pack made wide-ranging movements, the two alphas remained together. The breeding season has a strong start with seven pairs of breeding wolves. A female wolf gives birth to generally four to six pups.’ The Southwest recovery rule states that once a minimum of six breeding pairs is established, permits will be issued to ranchers and hunters.

“Were not going to let them issue permits to hunt,’ Robinson said. “We will scrutinize that very carefully.’ He also cited another significant difference between the successful northern Rocky Mountain program and the Southwest program.

“In the northern program, ranchers are required to clear up dead livestock, so the wolves don’t prey on them,’ Robinson said. “That’s not required in this area. The livestock industry has succeeded in getting everything done to kill and trap wolves.’ The Aspen Pack was removed from the Blue River area of Arizona because of continuous problems with the wolves attacking dogs and frequenting the schoolyard and post office, as well as numerous residences. The wolf pack was moved to the Gila Wilderness in 2005 and established a territory. Until October, it seemed to be doing well and had not had human contact, but since then has been a problem, warranting the more aggressive hazing monitoring and possible relocation, Slown said.

Establishment in the Southwest of the Mexican gray wolf, a distinct subspecies, has been more problematic than the successful reintroduction of gray wolves in the northern United States, close to where wild populations remained in the wild in Canada. Only a few wild Mexican gray wolves still lived in Mexico and none in the historic Arizona, New Mexico and Texas habitat. Several of the wolves were captured and a captive breeding program began to reintroduce the wolves into the Southwest.

An environmental impact statement by the USFWS was finalized in 1996, in which the Apache and Gila national forests in eastern Arizona and western New Mexico were identified as appropriate areas for reintroduction. A final rule, creating a nonessential experimental population of the Mexican gray wolf, was published in 1998. The nonessential experimental population designation allows for greater management flexibility to address conflict situations, such as livestock depredations or nuisance behavior, than if wolves had retained the fully endangered designation.

On March 29, 1998, captive-reared Mexican wolves were released for the first time in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area, according to the USFWS Web site.

To report wolf sightings or suspected livestock depredations, call toll-free 1-888-459-9653. To report incidents of ‘take or harassment’ of wolves, call 1-800-352 0700

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