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Wolves at the Door?

by Allen Best

COLORADO - If the sturdy pioneers of the West could return today, they'd find more than dramatically changed landscapes.

More surprising to the pioneers would be our changed attitudes, none more shocking than how we now view predators. Species they had so triumphantly eradicated are now protected and, in some cases, are being restocked on the landscape.

Front and center in this "re-wilding" movement is the wolf. After being wiped out in Colorado somewhere between 1935 and 1945, wolves are now returning, this time protected by the Endangered Species Act.

Anticipating this return, federal authorities last year decided that Interstate 70 would serve as the dividing line between wolf populations transplanted in Yellowstone and Arizona.

According to this mandate, any wolves found south of I-70 are to be treated as "endangered," the maximum protection possible under federal law. None are to be killed unless a person is being attacked.

North of I-70 wolves are accorded the lesser protection of "threatened."

What followed next sounds like a made-for-TV movie script. Meetings were held across Colorado, including one crowded meeting during March near downtown Denver. Several ranchers, big-game hunters, and sportsman stood up to gloomily warn of the perils of wolves. Wolf supporters easily outnumbered them, declaring their fidelity to wolf restoration.

Yet for all the passion, the rhetoric sounded academic - like theologians arguing about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

In early June, the wolf story became real. A wolf was thrown into a median guardrail on I-70 by a speeding car or truck west of Idaho Springs. A few feet more, and the wolf would have been on the literal legal divide between threatened and endangered.

As was, the young female was dead. Speculation ended. This was a smoking gun - wolves were back.

First, find a mate

The trail of this 2-year-old female wolf starts in Yellowstone National Park. She was seen in Yellowstone last January before loping into Colorado, possibly sniffing along the northern fringes of Eagle County on her way toward the bright lights of Denver. She was probably looking for a male wolf.

The 77 gray wolves transplanted by the federal government into Yellowstone beginning in 1995 have now multiplied to 800 there and in adjoining states. Because wolves are strongly territorial, young wolves must spread out to find unoccupied habitat. Perhaps a quarter of the homeless wolves are headed toward Colorado.

Despite the indisputable presence of the female wolf on I-70 last summer, it could take decades for gray wolves to recolonize Colorado, says Ed Bangs, the Montana-based Gray Wolf Recovery Team leader.

If wolves don't pick up the scent of other wolves within about 100 miles, most will turn back. Being young and unattached, he says, they have more than just a good meal on their minds.

"These lone wolves could show up for decades before you get a male and female that like each other, breed, and have pups," says Bangs. "We have had lone wolves even in Kansas and Missouri, as well as Utah, Oregon, and Washington.

"But it's a big difference talking about when we think a pack will show up in Colorado. It could be

decades - or it could be next year," he adds. "You never know, but I'm betting on the longer time frame."

But with the gray wolf firmly re-established in Yellowstone, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wants to remove full protection of the Endangered Species Act. Wyoming has frustrated this de-listing, wanting to allow wolves to be more broadly hunted than federal biologists think prudent if wolves are to avoid becoming endangered once again.

On the other hand, Defenders of Wildlife and other groups argue the federal government, in trying to dodge controversy, is prematurely de-listing the gray wolf. They contend the gray wolf has been restored to probably less than 5 percent of its historic range in the continental United States.

The Endangered Species Act species requires restoration to a "significant" portion of their former range.

People want wolves

Assuming the de-listing will occur, the federal government urged Utah and Colorado to begin planning for how to deal with wolves - keeping in mind the states could be more restrictive, but no less restrictive than the federal government.

To work out state policy, Colorado earlier this year appointed a task force composed of ranchers, environmentalists, sportsmen and biologists. By most accounts, there has been head-butting but no serious blows.

Livestock producers have grudgingly conceded the most ground.

"As strongly as we don't want wolves in this state, we have to acknowledge that times have changed, and there are a lot of people who do want wolves," says Bonnie Kline, executive director of the Colorado Woolgrowers Association, who is on the task force.

It's not that ranchers see wolves any differently, she adds. To them, wolves are a "really bad deal."

Agreement reached by the task force so far is limited. Populations of elk and deer are to be monitored more closely to gauge decimation by wolves. Ranchers are to be compensated 100 percent for confirmed wolf kills and 50 percent for probable wolf kills.

As well, wolves caught killing livestock can be killed. Ranchers had wanted more open-ended authority to kill wolves they believe will later kill livestock.

Vern Albertson, president of the Eagle Valley Cattlemen's Association, expects "nothing but trouble for us. We're not likely to be compensated for anything they kill, because you must have some definite proof - just about a picture of the wolf doing the killing," in order to be compensated.

He recalls his father, Joe Albertson, talking about wolves in Burns Hole in northern Eagle County.

"'The wolf is nothing but a killing machine,' is what he said. They don't kill just for what they need, but rather just for the experience of it," Albertson says. "They kill a lot more than what they eat."

Albertson portrays the return of wolves as one of several threats to the remaining ranchers in Eagle County. "It's just another way some of the environmental extremists and animal lovers are trying to force the livestock industry out of business," he says.

However, based on what they have seen in the Yellowstone region, biologists do not expect wolves to kill a large amount of livestock.

"Confirmed livestock predation has been about half of what we thought it would be, and even so we had thought it would be low," says Bangs, of the situation in Yellowstone. "Each year we kill about 6 percent of the wolf population, because of problems with livestock."

Wolf-tinted glasses

Another thorny issue is where the wolves will be deliberately set lose in the state. A task force working on the Mexico gray wolf is considering that very possibility.

Mexican wolves, a subspecies of gray wolf, were reintroduced in 1999 to Arizona, but only 55 are now known to exist.

The recovery team has talked about reintroducing them to Colorado. Mention has been made of the West Elks-Grand Mesa area as well as the San Juan Mountains and Ted Turner's ranch in northern New Mexico.

A recent report in a Denver newspaper estimated such a reintroduction could occur in two or three years. Recovery team member Michael Robinson, described the report as premature.

"Yeah, it could happen in the next few years, but again, it could take quite a long time. It is entirely conceivable there will be no

reintroduction," said Robinson, who is also a spokesman for the Center for Biological Diversity.

Among those groups lobbying for reintroduction is Boulder-based Sinapu. Why is restoring wolves important?

"Just as the suppression of fire from Western landscapes has broad and often catastrophic implications, wolves are unbelievably important to the health and diversity of wild America, and we cannot afford to delay the process of weaving them back into the landscape," says Rob Edwards, the group's carnivore restoration program director.

But wildlife biologists have cautioned about reading too many benefits into wolf reintroduction.

"I am wary of looking at the world through wolf-tinted glasses," Bangs says.

Just as wolf opponents heap too much blame on wolves, proponents have a tendency to find unblemished good, and those perceptions really reflect human values more than they accurately describe wolves, Bangs says.

"Wolves are boring; humans are fascinating," he says.

What is clearly known about the impact of wolves to the Yellowstone region? Bangs says coyote density may be down slightly - or not.

Willow and aspen are growing in places where they haven't grown in years. Bangs says that is because elk hunted by wolves act more like wild animals, spending more time concealed in the timber and less time hanging around the streambeds.

The result is that willows and aspen are now growing in Yellowstone in places where they haven't grow in 70 years.

This, in turn, gives more material for beavers to work with, which slows runoff of rain and snowmelt. Beyond that, it's hard to judge the impact of wolves, says Bangs, because of so many other changes such as weather and new roads.

Rural attitudes

Wolves returning to Colorado will change little, Bangs says. They won't stay in designated wilderness areas, but will instead follow deer and elk to lower elevations.

Even so, Colorado's habitat is just too fragmented by development to accommodate many wolves.

How about attacks on humans? Even in India today there are reliable reports of children killed by wolves, and records from past ages clearly indicate wolves have killed people in Russia and Scandinavia.

In North America, however, while wolves have bitten people, no killings have been verified. In contrast, Bangs points out, deer kill about 20 people a year.

"There are 25 million Canadians living with 60,000 wolves," he adds. "Maybe the Canadians just taste bad. I don't know. But nobody who lives around wolves is afraid of wolves."

What we do know for absolute sure is wolves are not a topic easily ignored. While some are ambivalent, many run hot and cold. In 1996, following a debate in Eagle about wolves, divergent opinions emerged.

Sinapu representative Edwards was one of the wolf advocates.

Although by then living in Boulder, Edwards had grown up in semi-rural Idaho and, he says, herded sheep on the Navajo Nation.

"I can put a saddle on and ride a horse without any instruction," he says. "I am very comfortable with rural attitudes."

Also at the meeting that night was a rancher from Burns Hole. After the speech, the two went at it nose to nose.

"I can't believe that you would want to bring back those animals when my grandfather worked so hard to get rid of them," the rancher said, shaking his head in disbelief.

Edwards didn't back down. "Because they belong here," he said.