

Who's afraid?

Wyoming's open hunting season on wolves could kill Colorado's chances of getting a pack of its own

Thursday, May 24, 2012

By Elizabeth Miller

Almost 40 years passed before anyone thought to miss the gray wolf. Wolves, along with grizzlies, had been deliberately eradicated in western states in the name of protecting people and their livestock. The last wolf in Colorado was killed in the 1930s. By the time they were added to the list of endangered species protected by the Endangered Species Act in 1974, they existed only in a small corner of northeastern Minnesota.

In the decades that followed, humans would undertake concentrated efforts to undo the damage of their ancestors, reintroducing gray wolves in Idaho and at Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming in 1995 and 1996. But the move has been met with polarized responses: for every conservation group that would have howled in celebration, there was a hunter or a rancher loading a round into the chamber.

Although Colorado residents have long expressed positive feelings toward having wolves returned to the state, Colorado's Wildlife Commission has come down on the opposite side, leaving Colorado out of deliberate reintroduction efforts. Were wolves to return to Colorado, they'd



have to arrive on their own, migrating from the reestablished packs in neighboring states. And as Wyoming once again puts forward a wolf management plan which, if approved, would deprive wolves in that state of the protections of the Endangered Species Act, that path becomes more harrowing, and the likelihood of wolves gaining a foothold in the southern Rocky Mountains decreases.

Wolves now occupy more than 110,000 square miles in the northern Rocky Mountains, most of it public land. By December 2009, there were at least 1,706 wolves and more than 100 breeding pairs in 242 packs, and in April 2010, an estimated 600 new pups were born. That number is five and a half times the target recovery goal from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of 300 wolves and 30 breeding pairs over the three states.

The return was so robust that the states of Idaho and Montana were able to successfully argue in 2009 that the gray wolf was established in the northern Rocky Mountains — Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, eastern Washington and Oregon and a small part of south central Utah. Federal pro-

tections for the species under the Endangered Species Act were removed — except in Wyoming, because the state did not have an adequate management plan for maintaining wolves. Wolf hunting was allowed for the first time since the 1930s in the fall of 2009 in Montana and Idaho — 206 wolves were killed, in addition to the 270 killed for attacking livestock that year.

But a year later, in August 2010, a Montana district court ruled that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had unlawfully delisted wolves from the Endangered Species Act and those protections were restored and hunting stopped. But last year, while Congress was repeatedly stumbling over passing an appropriations bill that would keep the United States from defaulting on its loans, Idaho Republican Rep. Mike Simpson tacked Sec. 1713 onto the Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act of 2011. Without ever mentioning the words “wolf ” or “endangered species,” the bill reinstated the 2009 decision on the part of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to delist gray wolves in Idaho and Montana.

So now Wyoming wants in on the action.

They’ve crafted a plan that calls for wolf protection — in a “Wolf Trophy Big Game Management Area,” a corner of the state encircling Yellowstone National Park, in which wolves can only be hunted down to 100 individuals and 10 breeding pairs. That area may have as many as 200 wolves now and the state some 350. In the rest of the state, wolves will be classified as predatory animals — along with coyotes, jackrabbits, porcupine, raccoons, red foxes, skunks and stray cats, according to Wyoming statutes. Any gray wolf caught doing damage to private property can be immediately killed by the property owner, and if a wolf is caught harassing, injuring, maiming or killing livestock or domesticated animals, or just “occupying a chronic wolf predation area,” the owner may notify the Wyoming Fish and Game Commission, which can issue a Lethal Take Permit.

Public comment has just closed on the latest draft of the plan. The first draft was rejected because it presented a “substantial risk to the population” of wolves in Wyoming. The new addendum argues that of course wolves will be managed to prevent a population drop below a certain level. If only to keep the federal government from reassessing the decision to delist wolves.

“In large part, it’s a plan to contain wolves and greatly contract their range and greatly reduce their numbers,” says Michael Robinson, conservation advocate at the Center for Biological Diversity, which has come out strongly opposed to the idea of delisting wolves. “It will, in effect, end the possibility of recovery in Colorado.”

Douglas Smith, team leader for the wolf project at Yellowstone National Park, has spent more than three decades studying wolves. About 100 wolves live in Yellowstone National Park. If a wolf leaves the park, it falls to the state officials to monitor the wolf, and its chances of survival decline.

“In the past it was conflicts — illegal killing and livestock control, and now it’s illegal killing and livestock control and legal hunting,” Smith says. “So wolves survive less well outside of Yellowstone National Park, and I don’t think that’s a secret.”

Given their propensity to move to areas without wolves, the wolf-free Colorado landscape looks like pretty ripe wolf habitat.

“But it’s a long way,” Smith says.

“Wolves have gotten there from the Yellowstone area, so they can make it. It’s just that they don’t survive very well.”

It’s possible, but unlikely, that wolves could relocate here without gradually moving into areas south of Yellowstone and dispersing as younger generations set out to look for mates and territories to call their own.

“Wolves typically disperse and travel as loners, so to have a breeding pair in Colorado would take an individual male and an individual female both leaving where they came from and making it to Colorado and then meeting there,” Smith says. “If that happened, they’d probably pair and have pups. The likelihood of that happening is low.”

But, it’s even less likely that an already established breeding pair would relocate. Wolves tend to settle near where they meet.

“It’s the loners that travel a long way, and part of the reason they’re traveling a long way is they’re looking for an opposite-sex wolf to settle down with,” Smith says. “Part of the reason they go so far is they don’t find them, so they keep going, and they usually end up dead.”

When the plan for reintroducing wolves to the United States was crafted in the mid-’90s, Colorado wasn’t invited to the party. Whether Colorado wanted to be depends on who you ask — a 1994 mail survey conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Colorado showed strong support for reintroducing wolves with some 70 percent in favor.

But a 1989 resolution from the Colorado Wildlife Commission states that, because humans had moved into the habitat needed for grizzly bears and wolves, and the reintroduction of either could present conflicts with the livestock industry and humans as well as presenting a “management problem,” reintroduction of wolves and grizzly bears was opposed.

“There won’t be any reintroductions,” says Eric Odell, species conservation program manager for carnivores with Colorado Parks and Wildlife. “Our Wildlife Commission has given two resolutions that said that they’re opposed to a wolf reintroduction to the state for a variety of reasons — social and agricultural and all that kind of reasons.”

Wolves in Colorado are still managed by the federal government via the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as long as they are considered endangered in this state. Colorado drafted a plan in 2004 for managing wolves in the event they were ever delisted, but meeting that criteria, according to the Endangered Species Act, means having a substantial and self-sustaining population.

Though reports of wolves have come out of a ranch in the northwestern part of Colorado, the High Lonesome Ranch, DNA testing has either indicated that the scat collected was coyote or been inconclusive.

“In the whole state, there are no known wolves or wolf pack established,” Odell says. He receives reports, sometimes several a week, from people who

say they’ve seen wolves. “Everything that we’ve received and followed up on has shown that there are no known wolves at the moment.”

Two wolves have been killed here, one on I-70 and one in northwest Colorado, and another was videotaped near North Park, but those were several years ago.

“That was the last time we knew of any wolf for sure in the state, and those were individuals,” Odell says. “There’s no established population or anything like that in the state.”

Most of North America was once home to wolves, which are considered a keystone predator. Their presence shapes an entire ecosystem: Studies have shown wolves keep elk and deer on the move, which allows for healthier tree and shrub growth, providing habitat for other species, and wolves cull sick, weak adult deer and elk, possibly preventing the spread of communicable diseases, including the mad cow variant that ungulates carry. Rocky Mountain National Park has been allowing hunting to manage the overpopulation of elk there. But a hunter’s aim, while precise, doesn’t have an eye for the sick and weak — the kills are more arbitrary than those chosen by wolves.

In Colorado, people play the part of that keystone predator.

“We’ve been doing that for the last 100 years or so and we do manage our game populations, our deer and elk populations, through our hunting regulations pretty specifically,” Odell says. “We take that role of managing the game populations to benefit the ecosystem.”

The densely populated Front Range makes it tough to contemplate other options in this part of the state.

“When you’ve got that many people, where are you going to put the wolves?” Smith says. “They can’t live year round in the mountains, because the winter hits and the elk come down and the deer come down and the wolves follow them. And where they do, the deer and elk go in the backyards of people — that’s a problem, and people don’t like it, but it’s a much different problem when you’ve got a wolf in your backyard.”

Despite an elk population so abundant the park has needed to issue permits to hunt some of them down and has fenced in aspen groves to protect them from lingering elk, Rocky Mountain National Park doesn't provide a good location because it's so high in elevation. The elk may be able to winter over near the ice cream and t-shirt shops and mini golf courses in Estes Park, but the wolves can't.

"You would have people, elk and wolves all thrown together and we know that doesn't work," Smith says. "It's not that the wolves don't tolerate the people, it's that the people don't really tolerate them."

Southern Colorado's stretches of public land near the San Juans might provide a better habitat for wolves, but the act of getting there is still tough.

"Assuming wolves could make it through a lot of Wyoming — I mean those are a lot of ifs," Smith says. "Right now all the wolves are in northwest Wyoming, and they won't be allowed in a huge area just south of Jackson, so connectivity between that area and Colorado is going to be your first problem."

But the connectivity is precisely what the Endangered Species Act was meant to provide. Its purpose, as defined by the Act itself, is "to provide a means whereby the ecosystems upon which endangered species and threatened species depend may be conserved."

And preserving the ecosystem, according to conservation organizations like the Center for Biodiversity and the American Society of Mammologists, which have both come out opposed to Wyoming delisting wolves, requires allowing species to successfully maintain themselves.

"Connectivity between the wolf subpopulations ... not only is that vital for long-term genetic maintenance, but allowing that connectivity to exist is one way of measuring whether that ecosystem exists," Robinson says. To do otherwise thwarts the purpose of the Act and the definition of an endangered species. A recovered animal is one that can maintain itself, according to the Endangered Species Act. An animal that needs to be carted around in order to find a mate — as Wyoming's plan proposes doing if necessary to maintain genetic diversity in its wolf population — is not maintaining itself.

"One would hope that the Fish and Wildlife Service would say, 'We're moving way too fast, this doesn't make sense. It's not consistent with the law and it's not consistent with the public sentiment,'" Robinson says. Robinson's book, Predatory Bureaucracy: The Extermination of Wolves and the Transformation of the West, charts the history of the eradication of wolves from North America, a move that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's predecessor organization was pressured to make.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service still carefully monitors the impact wolves have on livestock and compensates ranchers who lose animals to wolves. The organization reported that between 1987, when Canadian wolves first denned in upper Montana, and 2009, more than 1,301 cattle, 2,584 sheep, 142 dogs, 31 goats, 25 llamas and 10 horses had been killed by wolves and nearly \$2 million had been paid in damages by private and state wolf damage compensation funds. Wolves were relocated 117 times and killed more than 1,259 times to reduce conflicts.

"The Fish and Wildlife Service has a history as an agricultural service. In large part what we're seeing is a reversion to form," Robinson says. "They're allowing the proposal of the destruction of most of the wolves in Wyoming and they are likely to close the door on reintroduction in Colorado altogether."

From ranchers to conservationists to casual observers, the response to wolves is rarely a moderate one.

"Some people think it's the coolest thing in the world, and other people think it's the end of their life, my life just got ruined," Smith says. "There's very little in the middle. ... And that's part of the problem. You go from one private holding to the next and the welcome mat changes from 'Welcome' to 'Don't step on this place.'"

The hackles raise to the point of either side sending death threats. A photo of a trapped wolf from Idaho that shows the wolf still limping through a circle of pink snow behind the smiling Nez Perce Forest Service employee who trapped, and would later shoot, the wolf, earned the hunter death threats. The anti-wolf trapping nonprofit that reposted his photo and complained of his cruel practices also received death threats in response.

“I think wolves are a symptom of bigger things in our society,” Smith says. “In the last 10-15 years, we’ve become more polarized about the environment, what’s the purpose of the environment. Is it here for us, or is it here for us to coexist in, or is it here for us to use, and the wolf symbolizes that conflict. It’s really a lightning rod for the disagreement surrounding how we coexist with nature. They’re very symbolic with wildness, and some people think we don’t need wildness, we don’t want it because it’s inconvenient and it gets in our way, whereas other people think how dare we remove every shred of the earth that has nothing to do with us. So they’re very symbolic about a larger debate about just economics, do we use the land, do we conserve it, how do we live on it, versus how do we deal with life separate from human life.”