
The Oregonian

Steve Duin: So much for wolf recovery

Unlike those of us who simply root for OR-7 from afar, Noah Greenwald chances upon wolves now and then. At the northeastern edge of Yellowstone National Park last week, he watched three gray wolves spar with nervous coyotes, unsuccessfully stalk a bison calf, then swim across the Lamar River.

“They really put on a show,” Greenwald says.

As the endangered species director for the Center for Biological Diversity, Greenwald is a serious wolves’ fan. He has spent 10 years working to give those predators a fighting chance.

Not surprisingly, then, Greenwald is an unsettled critic of the Obama administration’s insistence that wolves no longer need federal protection to ensure their survival.

“This is like kicking a patient out of the hospital when they’re still attached to life-support,” Greenwald says. “We’ve had a lot of success. Wolf numbers are up. But the job of recovery isn’t done yet. Livestock and hunting interests have successfully lobbied to have wolf recovery shut down.”

The Fish and Wildlife Service has concluded that the survival of the nation’s 6,000 gray wolves is best consigned to the states.

And the states -- which pull in a great deal more money from hunting licenses than species protection -- are cool with that. As Dave Ware,

the Washington state game division manager told the Associated Press last September, “We don’t see a real need for continued federal protections when the state protections are there.”

In at least five states, those “protections” include a hunting season. Idaho licensed hunters and trappers to kill 375 wolves in the winter of 2012. And last winter, similarly gleeful “sportsmen” in the state of Minnesota dispatched another 410, according to the St. Paul Pioneer-Press.

The wolf slaughters, as you can see, are not limited to “Game of Thrones.”

As the OR-7 diehards know, Oregon has enjoined those hunting sprees in recent years, but that may soon change.

The Legislature is all hot and bothered about the occasional carnage when one of Oregon’s 46 wolves bumps into one of the state’s 1.28 MILLION cows. The House has already passed a bill which provides conditions for ranchers to obliterate the wolf that preys on livestock.

The Center for Biological Diversity, understandably, objects. As Greenwald notes, fatal wolf attacks on livestock are still rare -- less than 10 each year -- and the Department of Agriculture compensates the rancher for the spoiled beef.

What’s more, Amaroq Weiss, the center’s wolf expert, argues that fatal wolf attacks have decreased in Wallowa County, where ranchers

and state agencies have employed nonlethal prevention tactics, even as those attacks have increased in the hunter's paradise that is Idaho.

When orphaned pups aren't taught to kill the pack's natural prey, elk and deer, Weiss says, they are left no choice but to take down a sluggish cow.

Greenwald doesn't view wolves as just another ranching nuisance but as an apex predator that shapes its ecosystem. When a wolf pack is keeping the elk and coyotes in check, it's great news for streamside vegetation -- and, thus, for songbirds, beaver and fish -- and pronghorn fawns.

All the more reason, then, that we have a national recovery plan for wolves, similar to the one for bald eagles, and reasonable target populations in each region.

In the absence of that, Oregon has a grand statewide "goal" of eight wolf packs. Says Greenwald, "I don't think you can find a scientist who would say eight wolf packs across the state is sustainable or anywhere near a recovered population."

Not that Fish and Wildlife is looking for a scientist somewhere behind the locked-and-loaded line of ranchers and elk hunters. At a pivotal moment in wolf recovery, the feds have abandoned it, and the Legislature is re-arming the rural militia.

Let's hope the news reaches OR-7 before our ultimate lone wolf skirts the edge of cattle country.