

Environment

USDA Wildlife Service Killed More Than 4 Million Wild Animals in 2013



4 Million Killed

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture killed 4.3 million wild animals in fiscal year 2013, 2 million of which were native species, according to data posted to the agency's web site. The animals included three eagles, one bald and two golden, which are protected under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act.

A program called Wildlife Services, which falls under the USDA agency Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), is tasked

with managing invasive species and handling wildlife when it interferes with human activities like agriculture and property threats. The number of animals killed varies widely from year to year, according to The Washington Post, hitting a peak of 5 million in 2008 after remaining at a relatively low 1.5 million in the early 2000s.

Last year, Wildlife Services killed 75,326 coyotes, plus destroying 366 coyote dens; 345 mountain lions; 321 wolves, including one extremely rare Mexican gray wolf; 603 monkeys;

6,498 vultures; 10,486 mynas, a type of starling; and 37 frogs, among many others. Birds are among the most highly targeted, according to the Post, in part due to the problems they cause at airports.

The state-by-state data, contained in a 665-page document, detail the method of an animal's capture, along with how many were killed, destroyed, released or relocated, but don't give any reason for the capture. Some captures are listed as "unintentional," including the three eagle kills, one of which was captured by "M-44 Cyanide Capsule."

Other methods include paint balls, vehicles, traps, neck snares, bombs and "pyrotechnics" — "like shooting firecrackers at a bunch of birds to get them to move," Amy Atwood, a senior attorney at the environmental nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity, told weather.com.

In December, the Center filed a petition with the USDA, asking for new rules that would make the agency more transparent and operate in a way that better reflects ecological science. Wildlife Services spokesperson Lyndsay Cole, for example, told the Post that the program kills wolves to "lessen the negative impacts of expanding wolf populations," though research shows that the reintroduction of wolves to the wild has had positive ecological repercussions.

Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Oregon) once called Wildlife Services "one of the most opaque and obstinate departments I've dealt with," according to the Post, saying, "We're not really sure what they're doing."

Another spokesperson, Carol Bannerman, told the Post that, "As wildlife damage increases, requests for assistance also increase."

Wildlife Services used to be part of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Atwood said, but was moved to the USDA in the 1980s after lobbying pressure from the agricultural industry. A 2002 USDA report showed that wildlife caused \$944 million in agricultural damage in 2001 through crop and livestock losses, largely from deer and coyotes.