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A lonely wolf gets a new mate, powerful friends and a little protection

By Darryl Fears

This is a story about a lonesome male that went to extraordinary lengths for love.

Literally, a gray wolf called OR-7 walked 205 miles, from its birthplace in Oregon's northern wilderness to the southern Cascade Mountains, clear across the state, near the California border, far away from its pack, in search of a new mate and its own territory.

OR-7, so named because he's the seventh of his species fitted with an electronic tracking collar in Oregon, made headlines last week when the California Fish and Game Commission, anticipating the establishment of its first wolf more than seven decades after they were wiped out by hunting, voted to move forward with listing gray wolves as endangered.

"It's exciting," said John Stephenson, biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's office in La Grande, Ore., a few miles from the Wallowa Mountains where

This is the first evidence that OR-7 has found another wolf in the Oregon Cascades (USFWS). The gray wolf, dubbed OR-7 became well known when he traipsed into California in December 2011, making him the first known wild wolf in the state since 1924. (Reuters/Oregon Fish and Wildlife)

OR-7 was born. "It's basically the reappearance of wolves into the Oregon Cascade Mountains. We expected it would happen over time, but it's happening before we thought it would."

Gray wolves — also known as Canis lupus, timber wolves, prairie wolves and lobo — are the largest of the 41 species of wild canids, including red wolves, foxes, coyotes and short-eared dogs. Their dominant color is gray, but they also come in shades of black, auburn and brown. They are well established in Western lore.

State wildlife officials in California were so giddy that they voted to protect an animal that barely exists there. When OR-7 stuck a paw in California after crossing the border in 2012, it was the first time a wolf had been spotted there since the last one was killed during a

government extermination program in the 1940s. As far as anyone knows, the wolf has rarely been back since. But state biologists were planning ahead.

The husky 100-pound lone wolf, after three years of searching, especially during the January-to-April mating season, met a fetching black female and had a litter.

It was the first time wolf pups were seen in Oregon's southern Cascades in more than 70 years. If the pups turn out to be anything like their father, they could wander hundreds of miles south. The California border is about 60 miles south of the new wolf den.

The commission's vote came after a 2012 petition from the Center for Biological Diversity and other groups. It was an extra layer of protection. Gray wolves were already listed as endangered by the federal government.

"I'm just so thrilled that we have a new wolf family in southern Oregon and that these beautiful animals are finally getting protection in California," said Amaroq Weiss, the Center's West Coast wolf organizer. "This is the first chapter in a longer story of wolves returning to California and living here in the wild."

Not everyone was pleased. The California Cattlemen's Association strongly opposed the vote, hoping the state would opt instead for a wolf management plan. Wolves sometimes prey on livestock.

"It worries us," said Kirk Wilbur, director of government relations for the association. "We don't have a problem with the wolf per se … but in the event a wolf threatens the livestock of our members, we want them to have mechanisms in place to protect them."

The association is an influential group, representing 3,400 people, about half of them ranchers with cattle. "In Northern California, coyotes have been a massive problem," Wilbur said. "Ranchers who run sheep had a major problem with depredation, and turned to cattle that are too big for coyotes. Wolves are a more threatening species than coyotes."

Stephenson said there's enough concern for the safety of OR-7 and his new family that care is being taken not to disclose their location. The wolves are monitored around the clock. OR-7's collar tracks his whereabouts via satellite four times daily and uploads that information into a computer program once a day.

OR-7 was specifically named in California's announcement about its vote. It said the regulatory language still needs several months to work out and approve, but when that happens it will be unlawful to "take" a wolf, which means "to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, collect or attempt to engage in any such conduct."

"No land animal is more iconic in the American West than the gray wolf," said Michael Sutton, president of the commission. "Wolves deserve our protection as they begin to disperse from Oregon to their historic range in California."

California and Oregon can thank Idaho for OR-7. Wolves were also decimated in Idaho after Congress voted in 1915 to remove wolves throughout the West. The last Idaho wolf was killed in the 1930s, but the state reintroduced them in 1995.

Four gray wolves captured in Canada were released at Corn Creek on the edge of the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness that year, and an additional 20 were released the next year. The reintroduction followed litigation filed by conservation groups, a federal endangered listing and fights over how to manage it.

Three years later the state had 115 wolves. Eleven years after that, when OR-7 was born, there were 220. Wolves were also released in Yellowstone National Park. Some spread to nearby states, including Montana and Wyoming, where they

thrive but are not close to historic populations. A few spread to Oregon.

Wolves mostly travel in packs, unlike OR-7 whose behavior is “unusual but not unprecedented,” Stephenson said.

He was an average-size adult but apparently quite crafty and powerful. Wolves hunt in packs, but OR-7 was thought to be gnawing on elk he took down himself. There were chewed-up leg bones near the Oregon den.

“You’ve got to survive. I’m sure he spent a lot of his time finding food and eating enough to stay alive,” Stephenson said. “For him to survive for over three years on his own is extraordinary. I guess he just figured it out.”

Darryl Fears has worked at The Washington Post for more than a decade, mostly as a reporter on the National staff. He currently covers the environment, focusing on the Chesapeake Bay and issues affecting wildlife.