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Editorials

Our view: Could we really reintroduce wolves?

That could be the sound of gray wolves coming to your mailbox in 2020

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We were hiking once just outside Anchorage, Alaska, skirting the Chugach Mountains as we circled a valley in the early afternoon. From the woods on our far side, we heard one, and then two and froze: Wolves. They sounded like 10 now in their ragged harmony – and very close. We crept out.

We could hear the howls but we could not see a wolf. Wittingly or not, they were using the valley's acoustics to send a message. We walked cautiously up the trail when we saw one wolf, then two more, come out and sit on the hillside a quarter-mile away. They howled again: It had been just three making that sound, but they had the trick of making themselves sound like a mighty host. Since we were going on our way, they revealed themselves. Wolves are canny.

We heard a story once related by a gunner for the state of Alaska. He and a pilot had flushed a pack of wolves. As the wolves broke into the clear, he took them one by one. When they landed, they discovered the lead wolf, likely the alpha, was so old she scarcely had teeth. How could she lead the hunt? Could her pack have kept her fed because she had the wisdom of other hunts? Wolves can be socially sophisticated.

When gray wolves were reintroduced in Yellowstone, in 1995, brought down 1,000 miles from Alberta, they were put in oval chain-link enclosures about an acre in diameter. When the gates were opened, to 18 million acres of wild lands and elk, the wolves did not stir for some time. They thought it was a human trick. Wolves are farseeing.

On Dec. 10, the Rocky Mountain Wolf Action Fund announced it submitted more than 211,000 signatures to the Colorado Secretary of State to place the reintroduction of wolves on the 2020 state ballot, vastly exceeding the 124,000-signature threshold.

If enough signatures are verified and the measure goes on the ballot, as seems likely, and voters pass it, it would mark the first time Coloradans voted to reintroduce any animal.

For Front Range voters, who could carry the day almost alone, it will have something of the appeal of a Jurassic Park on the Western Slope. For the wolves, it could re-establish a Rocky Mountain corridor from Canada to Mexico, one they crossed until their last pups were poisoned more than 70 years ago. For some ranchers in their paths, it is one more bad idea backed by California money – the Rocky Mountain Wolf Action Fund raised nearly \$614,000 as of Oct. 15, of which about \$264,000 came from one California charity, [Tides](#).

If this is done, there will be some cattle predation; not a lot, necessarily, but at least some. For landowners, it could seem like one more stroke against them by governments more interested in the views of people who live in cities and suburbs and cannot tell nature from Disney, and they will not be wrong. But there is more to the story just as there is more to wolves.

The anxiety and delirium around returning wolves are misplaced. Wolves are good for a restored ecosystem and even essential but their reintroduction is not by itself going to work miracles. And when we talk about putting apex predators back in an ecosystem, back to when? Before wild lands were replaced with pasture, where a wolf today will find its enemy as well as an easy meal? That is what it means to do this over the objections of people with livestock. If you want to return wolves, get them on board.

There are people who work to minimize human-predator conflicts, like the group People and Carnivores. They can help.

It will be tricky – but humans are good with stuff like that.