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# Trump Almost Doomed These Species. Can Biden Save Them?

ON THE BRINK

**Photo Illustration by The Daily Beast/Getty**

Gray wolves and monarch butterflies are both in danger of extinction. And both are victims of some truly egregious policy decisions by the Trump administration.

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President Joe Biden has a fleeting chance to help save two of America's most iconic species. But to protect gray wolves and monarch butterflies, he needs to move fast—and perhaps get a little lucky.

Wildlife populations are in decline all over the world, victims of pollution, deforestation, poaching, and the habitat-altering ravages of runaway climate change.

But in North America, wolves and monarchs stand out for their beauty and popularity and the role they play as “keystone” species—that is, symbols of entire landscapes and ecosystems that harbor other vulnerable flora and fauna.

The two species—one a delicate and short-lived insect and the other an intelligent close relative of our pet dogs—couldn't be more different. But they share a common plight.

Both are in danger of extinction. And both are victims of some truly egregious policy decisions by the administration of disgraced former president Donald Trump.

In late October, the Trump administration [“delisted”](#) wolves, stripping them of federal protection under the 1973 Endangered Species Act. The delisting leaves fragile populations vulnerable to trophy-hunters, vindictive ranchers and pro-industry state wildlife officials.

A few weeks later in late December, Trump officials rejected scientists’ effort to place rapidly dwindling monarch populations under federal protection. Not because the monarchs didn’t meet the legal and scientific requirements for endangered status, but because the feds didn’t think the iconic orange-and-black butterflies were worth the cost of protecting them.

Biden’s administration can reverse both of those decisions. And there are indications the administration is at least going to try.

Biden recently signed an executive order committing the federal government to combating climate change and other environmental crises. “It is... the policy of my administration to listen to the science; to improve public health and protect our environment,” Biden [stated](#).

The order includes a directive to federal agencies to review all of Trump’s environmental policies, with an eye to rolling back any that the Biden administration deems to be harmful.

The order itself doesn’t mention wolves or butterflies, but [a preview of the order](#) that the administration circulated before the signing specifically cited Trump’s wolf delisting and rejection of monarch protections as targets of Biden’s review.

New conservation rules could take months or even years to take effect. To avoid massive bloodshed and possible extinction in the meantime, the administration probably needs to get

lucky. Favorable court rulings could help conserve wolves, and good weather could boost butterflies—all while the feds scramble to set up new rules under the Endangered Species Act.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife, which administers the Endangered Species Act, didn't respond to an email seeking comment. The U.S. Department of the Interior, which oversees the wildlife service, declined to comment. The department is under acting leadership pending Senate confirmation of Biden's nominee for interior secretary, New Mexico congresswoman Deb Haaland.

Four years under Trump was devastating to America's wildlife. The former reality TV star oversaw the biggest-ever shrinking of federal lands, which provide vital habitats for rare plants and animals. Trump officials also rolled back anti-pollution rules for many of the country's rivers and streams.

When Trump and congressional Republicans worked together to cut taxes for the wealthy back in 2017, lawmakers shoehorned into the bill language that allowed oil companies to drill in a federal wildlife reserve in Alaska. In one of its final acts in early January, the administration removed penalties for companies that kill migratory birds.

So while wolves and monarchs weren't the only species to suffer under Trump, they might be the most visible. Gray wolves, once hunted to near-extinction in the United States, have long been symbols of the country's slowly changing attitudes toward wildlife.

The canids were among the first animals to receive protections under the Endangered Species Act. The feds began regulating hunters and overruling state policies that encouraged the killing of wolves they suspected of "depredation"—that is, preying on ranchers' cattle herds.

The protections worked. In the mid-20th century, just a few hundred wolves were left in the lower 48 states, mostly concentrated in Michigan and Minnesota. Today more than 6,000 wolves have returned to the species' former habitats in the Midwest, the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Northwest. Alaskan wolves were never seriously threatened and today could number as many as 10,000.

But wolf recovery is fragile. The species has reclaimed just 15 percent of its former range. Many wealthy ranchers in Western states consider wolves pests and lean on state wildlife agents to kill as many of the canids as possible. Trophy hunters with high-tech rifles can quickly slaughter entire packs.

Congress and Fish and Wildlife have eased wolf-protections several times in recent years. Each deregulation meant more dead wolves, but the overall number of animals in the United States continued to grow.

Trump's delisting decision could reverse the gray wolf's slow recovery. In the absence of federal protections, some states are poised to all but wipe out their wolves. "Places that don't now have wolves or have tiny wolf populations will see an end to further wolf recovery," Collette Adkins, a wolf expert with the Center for Biological Diversity in Arizona, told The Daily Beast.

"For example, California has just a couple packs of wolves, and even though they are state-protected, fewer wolves will reach the state because of depredation-control in neighboring Oregon," Adkins said.

To stave off the bloodshed, six conservation groups banded together [to sue the federal government](#).

The lawsuit is pending and the outcome is far from clear. While Trump's rule is final and official, a judge could put a stay on it, essentially freezing the delisting until the court can make a final ruling, Jacob Carter, a conservation expert with the Massachusetts-based Union of Concerned Scientists, told The Daily Beast. A stay could buy the Biden administration time to reverse the delisting and restore federal protections to wolves.

There are two ways that could happen, experts said. The feds' lawyers could essentially switch sides in the lawsuit and offer the conservationists a settlement that would bring wolves back under the Endangered Species Act.

If a judge were to reject that settlement, the Biden administration would have to write new rules for wolf-protections. “That could take another year to two years,” Carter explained. Without a stay, wolf killings could resume while the feds write new regulations.

The fix for butterflies is clearer, but even more urgent. Monarch butterflies live in warm environments all over the world, but two distinct U.S. populations are special, because they migrate.

An eastern migratory population spends summers in the Midwest before winging its way south to Mexico for the winter.

That population is in decline, likely owing to destruction of key habitat, widespread use of insecticide and chaotic weather patterns resulting from accelerating climate-change. The number of eastern monarchs varies wildly from year to year, but the trend is clear. There are only around a fifth as many of the colorful bugs today as there were just 20 years ago.

A separate migratory population that travels up and down California every year is in even worse shape. There are still millions of eastern monarchs. But this year scientists counted just 2,000 western monarchs—down from millions in the 1990s and around 300,000 as recently as 2016.

“They are on the brink,” Bonnie Rice, a conservationist with the California-based Sierra Club, told *The Daily Beast*. “And they need protection.”

Terrified that they were witnessing extinction in real time, scientists sued the federal government back in 2016. They wanted the feds to consider giving monarchs endangered status. Listing the butterflies would give conservationists legal tools for saving habitats—and would also require Fish and Wildlife to launch a recovery effort aimed at growing butterfly numbers.

The Trump administration agreed to study the monarch problem and weigh a listing. After multiple delays, the administration finally announced its decision back in December. “Adding the monarch butterfly to the list of threatened and endangered species is warranted but precluded by work on higher-priority listing actions,” the agency [announced](#).

That’s bureaucrat-speak for “butterflies need help but we can’t afford it.”

The decision, coming just weeks before scientists finished their count of the disappearing western monarch population, was a devastating blow for butterfly-lovers. “Monarchs desperately need a comprehensive recovery plan,” Tierra Curry, a Center for Biological Diversity butterfly expert, told The Daily Beast.

But Fish and Wildlife offered conservationists a consolation prize. The agency agreed to revisit the monarch question once a year until the insects recover on their own... or go extinct.

That gives Biden an opening. “The Biden administration can now simply propose them for protection under the ESA, which we are urging them to do,” Curry said. With a few strokes of a pen, “warranted but precluded” could become “warranted and included”—and monarchs would have federal protection.

The question is how quickly the administration can move. Two thousand butterflies isn’t a lot of butterflies. A cold snap, a sudden wildfire or some farmer mowing a critical patch of caterpillar-nourishing milkweed might be all it takes to tip the western monarch into oblivion.

It’s not exaggerating to say that every month matters when it comes to saving California’s migrating butterflies. A year might be too long to wait.

Karen Oberhauser, a University of Wisconsin butterfly expert, told The Daily Beast she’s trying to be optimistic. “There’s always a glimmer of hope in conservation.”

If the Biden administration can bring monarchs under the umbrella of the Endangered Species Act, there might still be time to save the western population. Saving wolves, on the other hand, just means *keeping* them under the law.

“Once species has the attention the Endangered Species Act brings,” Oberhauser said, “we figure out what we need to do and we’re successful.”