

[Mexican gray wolf population increased in 2020 survey \(azcentral.com\)](https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/science/2021/03/02/mexican-gray-wolf-population-increased-in-2020-survey/7045112002/)

## **Mexican gray wolf population continues to expand, growing by 14% in 2020 survey**

**Anton L. Delgado**



The population of Mexican gray wolves in the wild has increased for the fifth consecutive year.

The most recent annual population survey recorded a total of at least 186 wolves in the wild — 114 in New Mexico and 72 in Arizona — along with the most number of breeding pairs, wild packs and pups born in the wild, according to the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

The wolf numbers, based on counts conducted from November 2020 through January 2021, reflect a 14% growth in population since the 2019 survey, which saw a 24% jump in population from the 2018 survey.

"This year's result signals success in recovery of this element of the Southwest's biodiversity and offers hope of eventually meeting recovery goals," said Clay Crowder, the assistant director of the wildlife management division for the department, in a news release.

The Mexican gray wolf is the rarest subspecies of gray wolf in North America and is protected under the Endangered Species Act. After historic overhunting pushed the wolf close to extinction, a federal effort was launched in the late 1970s to save the subspecies.

What were believed to be the last seven Mexican wolves in existence were captured for the recovery program. These wolves become the subspecies' genetic base.

The recovery program has been cross-fostering wolf pups in the hopes of increasing the genetic diversity by releasing the pups into the wild through the Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Project.



Last June, 20 cross-fostered wolf pups were released into litters of wild wolf packs. Twelve of those pups were fostered into four different dens in eastern Arizona.

According to the game and fish department, there are approximately 350 captive Mexican gray wolves in 55 facilities across the U.S. and Mexico. One of those facilities is the Phoenix Zoo, which is home to three wolves.

The subspecies' limited genetic pool and high-potential for inbreeding in the wild is an issue that Michael Robinson with the Center for Biological Diversity, says will continue to plague the recovery effort.

"It's very worrisome because that will eventually drive a population down if inbreeding gets worse, that decreases the number of surviving animals," Robinson said. "That's a one-way ratchet to extinction."

## **'Illegal mortality'**

While genetic diversity is a threat to the subspecies' long-term survival, Robinson says illegal poaching poses another pressing issue.

Authorities are investigating the suspicious death of a Mexican gray wolf in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests, near the town of Eagar.

"These killings add to ongoing damage to the Mexican wolf genetic health," Robinson said. "This is still a very vulnerable population."

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, there is a combined reward of up to \$37,000 for information that leads to a conviction in connection to the death.

"Each endangered wolf deserves a chance to survive in the wild," said Amy Lueders, the Southwest regional director for the wildlife service, in a press release. "Our law enforcement officers are actively working with the Arizona Game and Fish Department to conduct a comprehensive investigation into this suspicious death."

From the start of the reintroduction project in 1998 to 2019, the deaths of 105 wolves have been classified as "illegal mortality," according to data from the federal agency.

"This is not something that can just be ignored," Robinson said. "It's like global warming, it doesn't go away or stop because you don't think it's happening."