Montana's Governor Killed a Yellowstone Wolf

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The governor of Montana killed a gray wolf in violation of state hunting laws, according to documents obtained by the Mountain West News Bureau. Dude just got into office in January, and now he's got a warning from state wildlife officials. Incredible start to a new term!

Here's what happened: On February 15, Republican Gov. Greg Gianforte confined an adult black wolf—a variant of the gray wolf—on a ranch near Yellowstone National Park belonging to his buddy, Robert E. Smith. You may know that name, because Smith is the co-owner of Sinclair Broadcasting, which is the biggest owner of television stations in the country, including affiliates of ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox. The broadcasting group is known as a major platform for right-wing propaganda. He also donated thousands of dollars to Gianforte's 2017 gubernatorial campaign. But I digress.

Once Gianforte had the wolf trapped on the ranch 10 miles north of Yellowstone, he shot and killed it. But the animal was being tracked by wildlife biologists through a radio collar marked "1155," so he got caught.

Still, Gianforte got off with a slap on the wrist and was even allowed to keep the wolf's skull and hide. Outside the boundaries of Yellowstone, it's legal to

hunt wolves in the state of Montana, and he had a license to do so. But he hadn't completed a mandatory wolf-trapping certification course that lays out how to do so "ethically, humanely and lawfully," as the student manual describes it.

"It's difficult to fathom accidentally not taking that class," John Sullivan, Montana chapter chair for the sportsmen's group Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, told Mountain West News Bureau. "When you go to buy your wolf trapping license online it clearly states that trapper education is required."

A spokesperson for Gianforte told the Associated Press that her boss had never killed a wolf before this and that he'd "immediately rectified the mistake" by signing up to take the course, and will do so on March 24.

This isn't Gianforte's first run-in with state officials over his hunting habits. Last year, he illegally shot a bull elk and was fined for it. In 2017, he and Donald Trump Jr. also went out hunting prairie dogs, which was legal but still sucks. And in 2000, he received a fine for killing elks, too.

Many gray wolves once lived freely throughout Montana and other states, but in the 1930s, settlers poisoned and killed them off to make way for hunting. But since officials recognized that the majestic creatures play vital roles in ecosystems—without them, elk over-grazed some plants, which also threw songbird and beaver habitats out of whack—they reintroduced them into the park in the mid-1990s.

But clearly, wolves still face threats from hunters. Despite this, last year gray wolves lost their federal protections. Montana's state-level protections for the animals are also notoriously weak. In 2008, the state removed gray wolves from their endangered species list. Today there are only around 900 wolves in Montana, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

"It's surprising to learn that it's even possible to violate Montana's lax rules for killing wolves," said Michael Robinson, senior conservation advocate at the Center for Biological Diversity, wrote in an emailed statement. "The mandatory wolf-trapping class that the governor skipped before setting a trap warns how to avoid public controversy in the course of committing extraordinary cruelty."

Under Gianforte, who ran his campaign on a pro-hunting platform, Montana's protections for wolves are expected to get even weaker. He's expected to pass a bill allowing hunters to use cruel neck snare traps and another letting trappers get reimbursed for some of their costs by private groups.

"Gov. Gianforte's flouting of the whitewashing regulations encapsulates perfectly his government's brazenly shameless treatment of these ecologically vital animals," said Robinson.