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Wandering wolf arrives in pastoral San Benito County

Detected south of the Bay Area, the gray wolf continues its extraordinary journey



Wolf OR-93 was born south of Mount Hood, in Oregon, in 2019, and wandered over the California border in January 2021 into Modoc County. Its tracking collar revealed it was in San Benito County on March 27, 2021. (Photo courtesy of Austin James, Jr., Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs.)

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PUBLISHED: March 29, 2021 at 8:43 a.m. | UPDATED: March 29, 2021 at 9:19 a.m.

This week, the extraordinary journey of A gray wolf from western Oregon took a startling twist: the animal crossed the Central Valley's busy Interstate 5 and arrived in pastoral San Benito County over the weekend, just south of the crowded San Francisco Bay Area.

The 2-year old male wolf, dubbed OR-93, has traveled farther in the state than any known wolf in a century, highlighting the dispersal ability of this endangered species.

Fitted with a collar and satellite transmitter, his journey has been closely tracked by wildlife biologists since January. Born near Mt. Hood in the Cascades of northern Oregon, three months ago he set off on a lonesome journey south across at least 15 counties — traveling hundreds of miles from Modoc, through the mountainous Sierra Nevada and to the flat San Joaquin Valley.

Now, as of the last collar reading on Friday or Saturday, he's reached the agricultural county of San Benito, according to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. The region, home to the towns of Hollister and San Juan Bautista, is known for its destination wineries, quaint inns and organic farms like Earthbound Farms — hardly wolf country.

San Benito County is 40 miles from the Monterey Peninsula, and about an hours' drive south from the San Francisco Bay and Silicon Valley"]. An estimated 80% of land in this small county is devoted to farming or ranching.

"OR-93's travels have been fascinating, since he's traversed the agricultural fields of the San Joaquin Valley — not where we would expect a wolf to typically roam and certainly not where we'd expect him to settle down to make a home," said Pamela Flick, California Program Director of the environmental group Defenders of Wildlife.

What route might he have taken to get to arrive at coastal pasturelands?

He likely crossed Interstate 5 at night, when there is less traffic, said Amaroq Weiss, senior West Coast wolf advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group.

There are many culverts and freeway underpasses in San Benito County, she added. Biologists speculate that other wolves in California have also crossed major freeways. Between 2011 and 2014, an animal dubbed OR-7 crossed 1-5 in the state's far north. Two years ago, a wolf called OR-54, crossed I-80, dipped into Nevada for a night and then returned to California.

Wolves roamed broadly across North America for thousands of years. Their numbers collapsed after they were hunted widely over concerns by ranchers and settlers in the

1800s that they can eat calves and sheep. Many Western states, including California, paid bounties to people who killed wolves in the 1800s. Some bounty programs in Washington and Oregon continued until the 1930s and 1940s.

In recent years, the animals have been making a comeback. More than 7,000 gray wolves are estimated to be living in Alaska, 3,700 in the Great Lakes region, about 1,675 in the Northern Rockies and 275 in the Pacific Northwest.

Wolves almost never attack people. There are only two documented cases, one in Canada and one in Alaska, of a wolf killing a person. They do roam in packs of about eight animals, eating deer, rabbits and other animals, including occasionally calves and sheep.

They are legally protected under California's Endangered Species Act. Killing or injuring one can bring steep fines or jail time.

Biologists will continue to monitor the peripatetic animal.

By now, "he could have doubled back into Fresno County, may still be in San Benito County, or he could have continued west," said Weiss, "and be loping along the beach in Monterey County by now."

Paul Rogers contributed to this article.