Wolves lost endangered species protection this year. Idaho may offer a glimpse of what's ahead for them nationwide.

Packs are feared, revered in Idaho's 'new West'

- Emily Jones
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Editor's Note

This is the final installment of a multi-part series

It was the day after Christmas when Stanley resident Mikesell Clegg had what she considers a once-in-a-lifetime experience along state Highway 75, headed south to Ketchum. A stone's throw from her car, a pack of nine wolves bounded along the road before veering left and ducking under a fence to an open, snow-laden meadow.

"I could tell it was wildlife, so I started slowing down and that's when I realized it was a pack of wolves," Clegg, 26, told the Express in an interview. "I pretty quickly after that grabbed my phone to film."

Clegg, a lifelong Stanley resident who works at Redfish Lake Lodge in the summer, had heard the animals' haunting calls at night while camping over the years. On two occasions she'd seen lone wolves from a distance, running across the road to escape a wildfire. Seeing a pack's interactions up close was different.

"I recognized very early on how special, rare and unique what I was seeing was," she said.

Clegg shared the video to Facebook on Dec. 26. By Monday afternoon, it had garnered over 1,100 shares and attracted some 520 comments—many of them disparaging—and several location requests to Clegg from hunters.

"Shoot those f---ers," a man wrote.

"Only a dead wolf is a good wolf," said another.

"You're [sic] coolest moment isn't going to be very cool for the people with livestock," one woman wrote. "Should've shot them."

On Monday, gray wolves across the country were formally removed from the Endangered Species Act list following a ruling by the Trump Administration in October. That means that wolves have switched classifications as federally protected species to state-managed game

animals, and states with wolf populations—like Michigan and Wisconsin—can institute their own wolf hunting and trapping seasons.

When an animal or plant loses federal protections, companies no longer have to confirm whether projects they plan to undertake—be it logging or grazing livestock on BLM land—disrupt that species, according to Andrea Zaccardi, a senior attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity.

"The ESA doesn't just prevent killing an endangered species. It includes harassment and displacement," she said in a presentation on wolves last month. "Wisconsin has already proposed a wolf-hunting season that's supposed to start in the fall. There are about 6,000 wolves in the Lower 48 states right now that could all be negatively affected by this rule."

"When that message is sent—that our government doesn't believe that wolves deserve protection and that they play a vital role in our ecosystems—there is a cascading effect across the political landscape."

Erik Molvar, a wildlife biologist and director of Hailey-based Western Watersheds Project, believes that public opinion around a plant or animal can skew drastically when that species is delisted.

"When that message is sent—that our government doesn't believe that wolves deserve protection and that they play a vital role in our ecosystems—there is a cascading effect across the political landscape," he said in a virtual presentation last month.

Ever since gray wolves were officially turned over to the Idaho Department of Fish and Game for management in 2011, the state has served as an example of what state superintendence of wolves can look like.

The year 2020 marked two significant statewide expansions of wolf hunting and trapping. On Jan. 23, the Idaho Fish and Game Commission voted to raise Idaho's wolf hunting and trapping tag limit from five to 15 wolves per person, and the commission opened up year-round wolf hunting in most of Idaho's game units via conference call on Feb. 20.

"Wolf predation on livestock and other domestic animals remains chronic in certain areas and … continues to have a negative effect on elk populations," the commission stated in February.

Differing perceptions

For Salmon-area cattle rancher Chase Whittaker, Idaho's expansion of wolf hunting and trapping opportunities across the state last year came as good news for his family and friends.

"Maybe there is an ecological [benefit] to having wolves, but we're trying to raise a family here and there are economic impacts."

“[Wolf predation on livestock] is really a big problem still, and that’s the majority opinion from the Lemhi valley,” he said in an interview.

In summer 2015, as the Leadore family operation marked its 100th year, Whittaker said wolves killed 40 of their calves.

“Basically, that was $40,000 lost all in one bunch. It was unreal, like someone stole from us,” he said.

The Whittakers lost six calves and two mother cows to wolves in summer 2019. In an ensuing depredation investigation, the Idaho office of Wildlife Services—the federal agency tasked with removing predators to protect domestic livestock—found a den on their property and “killed some wolves, but I’m not sure how many, or if that actually deterred them,” Whittaker recalled.

Ranchers who rely on BLM rangeland, like the Whittakers, generally experience more wolf depredations on cattle than those with only private pastures, he said. While switching from a spring to a fall calving season has reduced depredations for at least one other rancher in the area, Whittaker said it simply doesn’t pencil out for most ranchers. The same goes for hiring more range riders to supervise his family’s 600 head of cattle.

“More human presence would probably deter the wolves a little bit more, but it costs money,” he said. “Maybe there is an ecological [benefit] to having wolves, but we’re trying to raise a family here and there are economic impacts. Of course, I worry about the safety of my kids, too. We’ve seen [wolf] tracks come right up to the house.”

A ‘natural solution’

Wolves have changed life for more than ranchers and their stock. In places like Lemhi County, wolves’ natural prey—namely, ungulates like deer and elk—are adapting to the predators.

Whittaker said his friends who hunt elk have noticed a difference in behavior. They’re being “taught by wolves that they are not safe,” making hunting more difficult, he said.

“One friend went scouting for elk and he couldn’t find any,” he said. “That’s something that hasn’t been talked about a whole lot.”

Scientists, though, are studying the impacts.

Idaho’s year-round hunt on wolves and their federal delisting together ignore a cascade of beneficial effects that they have on the ecosystem, Molvar said. By re-creating a natural landscape of fear, wolves have forced elk and deer to move to lower elevations or to steeper timber country, thus taking the pressure off deciduous shrubbery and small trees, he said.

Since wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone in the mid-1990s, Molvar said, they've had positive ripple effects on vegetation.

"You've got increases in streamside riparian bird species, berry-producing shrubs, an increased forage crop for grizzly bears and the displacement of coyotes, which were holding down pronghorn fawn survival," he said. "The result in Yellowstone has been a flourishing native ecosystem."

Another benefit of wolves is that the pack animals make their living by waiting for prey to tire or show weakness, often targeting elk and deer with chronic wasting disease, he said.

"Wolves are believed to be perhaps our best hope for cleaning out chronic wasting disease from the herds," he said. "Hunting by humans obviously is the opposite—no hunter is going to want to shoot an animal that is drooling and groggy, since it's potentially transmissible to humans."

Last fall, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game stated that elk numbers are meeting or exceeding its population goals for bull elk in 17 of 22 elk zones and for cow elk in 16 of 22 zones. According to the department's fall 2020 elk hunting outlook, the state is in its "second golden age of Idaho elk hunting."

Carter Niemeyer is a former wolf recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In a presentation last month, he said that certain, more conservative hunting groups, including the state-funded Foundation for Wildlife Management, claim that that wolves are decimating elk herds—and the only solution is extermination. (The Ponderay-based Foundation for Wildlife Management continues to offer hunters and trappers $1,000 in reimbursement costs per wolf in an effort to boost elk populations.)

But Niemeyer believes that more elk hunters, including himself, are "pro-wolf" than some might assume.

"I want to put that out there on record," he said, noting that the "vast majority" of Americans have actually supported federally protecting the gray wolf. In the most recent round of Fish and Wildlife comment periods, "90-plus percent" of the public supported granting them Endangered Species Act protections, he said.

Despite concerns about wolves and less-than-flattering remarks expressed on social media—like those on Clegg's post—Niemeyer said the animals "have a lot of friends in America and in the West."

"What's happened is that certain groups have used their political influence or social privilege to dominate the conversation for many years, to try and silence supporters of wolves and other people with environmental values," Niemeyer said. "But it's a whole new West out there, and we have a new generation of humans. The 'good old boys' are a tiny fraction of the population now."

https://www.mtexpress.com/news/wolves-lost-endangered-species-protection-this-year-idaho-may-offer-a-glimpse-of-what-s/article_3179d210-5364-11eb-a06b-d3bcd42434d2.html?fbclid=IwAR1T59MvxEih3lPakxCV4JE-12mWKueSZCkLaMRDpQ1DL_g6gUKhNrba2BE