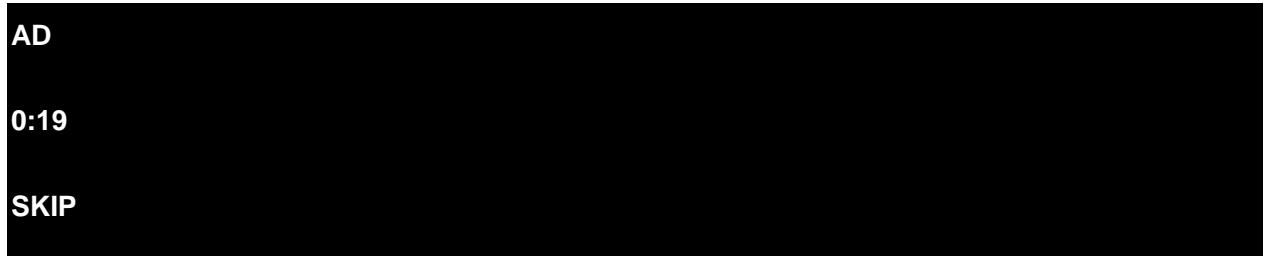


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Wolves in California: Siskiyou is home to a new pair

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Mount Shasta Herald



California is home to two new gray wolves, and it appears they're settling down together in Siskiyou County.

After making his way to Siskiyou in November of 2020, the Oregon wolf known as OR-85 has connected with a wolf friend that biologists believe is most likely a female.

To determine the mystery wolf's sex and possibly which pack she descended from, biologists are hard at work collecting samples of the wolf's feces, urine and fur to be genetically tested.

This unglamorous job lands in the lap of Kent Laudon, California Department of Fish and Wildlife's wolf specialist. He's an expert in the state's small population of wolves, which are making a slow comeback to a state they once called home. He works to bridge the concerns of wildlife conservationists with those of ranchers who worry wolves will endanger their livelihoods.

Also keeping an eye on the wolves' whereabouts is Siskiyou County Wolf Liaison Patrick Griffin, who works with Laudon, CDFW, the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife, local ranchers and the county to mitigate any issues that may arise with Siskiyou's new shaggy residents.

Keeping ranchers informed with accurate information is of paramount importance, said Griffin, who worked as Siskiyou County's Agricultural Commissioner for 10 years before retiring in 2015. A local rancher himself, Griffin understands the conflicts that may arise between wolves and ranchers who want to protect their way of life.

A new pack?

If OR-85's wolf friend is, indeed, a female, the two have the potential to breed, thereby establishing a new pack.

In its simplest form, Laudon explained, a pack is a pair of wolves, plus their offspring. Strange wolves can sometimes join a pack, but most often a pack is a family which becomes more complex as years go by.

Wolves are “highly social critters,” Laudon said, and at some point, they’ll leave their pack to find a mate and start a pack of their own.

Oregon has a healthy population of wolves, Laudon said, and OR-85 is from Oregon’s Mt. Emily Pack. He was collared in February of 2020 and struck out on his own in June. The wolf, with shaggy black fur, took a short trip to Nevada and then returned to Oregon before crossing the border into California’s Modoc County in early November.

Two days after entering the state, OR-85 made his way to Siskiyou County and has been here ever since, Laudon said.

Laudon, Griffin and a local rancher began to suspect a second wolf had joined OR-85 a few months ago. Their theory was confirmed when two wolves, one black and one gray, were seen on trail cam footage.

Genes tell the story

To learn more about the unknown wolf, and where she may have come from, Laudon spends time searching for its feces, taking samples, and sending them off for genetic sampling.

A geneticist will look at the genes and compare them to those in their extensive library to determine if she is from the Lassen Pack, a pack in Oregon or elsewhere.

It’s not the poop itself that tells an animal’s genetic story, Laudon explained, but instead the epithelial cells from inside the wolf that are sloughed off when it defecates. These bits of genetic material can then be studied to determine sex and enough genetics to tell where the wolf may have originated.

Urine, Laudon said, can be collected from snow. He currently has what he hopes to be wolf urine in his freezer, which will be sent to the lab, concentrated and filtered before being processed.

Fur is another way of learning more about an animal. Laudon said samples can be collected from fences that wolves may sneak under.

The other method to determine a wolf's sex? Catch them rolling in front of a trail cam and simply examine the genitalia, Laudon said.

Reintroduction

Laudon said it is important for people to know that biologists did not reintroduce wolves to California; rather, wolves are naturally making their way to the state after being reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park and Idaho in 1995 and 1996.

“Wolves are very good at bringing themselves to new areas,” Laudon said, and are able to disperse over hundreds and even thousands of miles in search of a mate. This is how OR-85 and his friend made it to Siskiyou County, Laudon said.

According to information recorded by his satellite collar, after OR-85 entered California, he “pingponged” around a large area, settling in and carving out a territory that can meet his needs in terms of food and other resources.

Wolf ranges are large, Laudon said. For example, the Lassen Pack's range is 500 square miles. Over the past three months, OR-85 has carved out a home range that's about 345 square miles, stretching from Little Shasta Valley in northern Siskiyou County south to Highway 89.

So far, there have been two reports of people seeing OR-85 and he's been caught on trail cam footage six separate times, Laudon said.

‘All the better to eat you with’

Wolves typically survive on big game like deer and elk, but they are also “opportunistic eaters” and will dine on roadkill, “so they don't always have to kill to eat,” Laudon said.

Griffin said he doubts that Siskiyou County will be home to large populations of wolves at any time in the near future, mainly due to low populations of deer and elk. The deer population, he noted, has been plummeting for the past 20 years in Siskiyou County due to relatively robust populations of bear and mountain lions, and the expansion of human habitat.

Since OR-85 has been in Siskiyou County, there have been no confirmed wolf kills at local ranches, Laudon said.

When livestock is found dead and if a wolf or other predator is suspected of being responsible, Laudon performs an investigation into the suspicious death. He observes injuries and collects samples to find out how it died.

Laudon has investigated five carcasses in Siskiyou County since November of 2020, when OR-85 arrived, all young calves. Two were determined to have died of other causes, two were killed by coyotes and one remains unknown.

Protecting livestock

Griffin said it is his job to share information about wolf activity with local ranchers, who are then able to take extra steps to protect their livestock.

He recommends increased human presence and advises ranchers to be extra vigilant about any vulnerabilities in their livestock, whether it's pink eye or a sore foot.

Wolves are instinctively drawn to weak members in a herd. Separating those animals out and treating them makes wolf attacks less likely, he said.

Bone piles are another potential problem, Griffin said. When a large animal like a cow dies, getting rid of the carcass can be a challenge, especially because there are no longer any local rendering companies willing to pick up dead animals. This forces ranchers to either put carcasses in an out-of-the-way spot on their property to decompose over time, or to bury them.

Either way, these remains often attract predators, and although some ranchers believe that if animals like bears, mountain lions and coyotes eat dead animals, they won't eat the live ones, Griffin said such bone piles attract scavengers like wolves and can cause unnecessary interactions with livestock.

Griffin noted there is an economic impact when wolves kill and eat animals, but also in the steps ranchers must take to keep their animals safe. The extra time it takes to check on their herds and tend to the weaker ones can be a monetary burden.

Then there's the emotional toll of added worry. "If a rancher hears there's a wolf on his (property) and he has heifers out there ready to calve, he's not going to be sleeping well that night," Griffin said.

There are some simple methods to deter wolves, such as "fladry" equipment, which are colorful red flags attached to wires. Other options include electrified fences that give predators a shock if they touch it, "fox lights" that omit flashes at random times during the night, and radio-activated guard boxes, or RAGs, that make noises to scare wolves away in the dark. Some of these methods can be set to go off when a collared wolf is in the vicinity, Griffin said.

However, because the threat is currently relatively low in Siskiyou County, Griffin said he knows of just one rancher who is implementing fladry as a wolf deterrent.

If a rancher sees a wolf in their cattle, they can chase it off and give it a good scare to deter it from returning, Griffin said.

However, any wolf that enters the state is protected, according to the CDFW website. Shooting at or injuring a wolf, even if is attacking livestock or a dog, is illegal and penalties include fines of at least \$100,000 and time in prison.

If ranchers find an animal dead, it is important to report it as soon as possible so there is more evidence for Laudon to investigate, said Griffin. If too much time passes and the carcass is too decomposed or if too much is missing, it will be difficult to determine how the animal died.

Laudon said incidents will inevitably occur when wolves share the same spaces as livestock. “We will have some losses,” Laudon said, “but we hope they’re small.”

He acknowledged that for some people, no amount of loss is acceptable if wolves are involved. But he works for the people of California to understand wolves and mitigate the impact their presence might have on residents.

A history of wolves

Wolves once called California home, until they were rooted out in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The last wild documented wolf was killed in Lassen County in 1924, according to the CDFW.

California remained wolfless until the Oregon wolf OR-7 wandered to the state in December of 2011. OR-7 later returned to Oregon to form the Rogue pack.

Biologists aren’t sure where OR-7 is today, but he left his legacy. At least three of his offspring have lived in California at one time or another.

California has been home to at least two packs, said Laudon. The Shasta Pack, which occupied a portion of eastern Siskiyou County in 2015, has gone undetected since then, according to the CDFW.

The Lassen Pack is the only currently known wolf pack in the state. Their territory is in western Lassen and northernmost Plumas counties, the CDFW reported.



An expert's job

Laudon said it's his responsibility to know "everything there is to know about California's wolf population." He tracks the animals to discover facts like their mortality, natality and their other day-to-day habits.

There are currently seven known wolves in California, five of which are in the Lassen Pack, although there are "certainly" a few other uncollared wolves dispersing throughout Northern California, Laudon said.

There probably aren't any undiscovered packs, since when wolves band together, their presences generally shows up on the landscape in the form of footprints, sightings and other evidence "and tend to be pretty obvious."

Wolves are protected under the California Endangered Species Acts but were recently removed from the federal endangered list after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

determined found the species to be recovered. Wolves pose little human safety risk, CDFW affirms.

Griffin acknowledged that while many people welcome wolves to California, it is not surprising that ranchers feel trepidation.

“The species is coming back, whether we like it or not,” Laudon said.

Report a wolf sighting

If you think you’ve seen a gray wolf in Siskiyou County, you can report it at the CDFW’s website at www.wildlife.ca.gov.

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