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Lone Gray Wolf Spotted Near Yosemite for First time in 100 Years

1 MARCH 2021/[SF NEWS](#)/[MATT CHARNOCK](#)

For the first time in a century, a gray wolf — a species once listed as "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act — has been documented traveling near Yosemite National Park, the farthest south a wolf has been tracked in California since the early 1920s.

Gray wolves were once found throughout much of the lower 48 states, but poaching and the booming animal skin trade of the 1930s decimated endemic populations. Even after decades-long conservation efforts, wolves still only occupy roughly 20% of their previous historic range. However, some new hope for the future of the species has recently been ginned up after researchers tracked a young male gray wolf that had traveled down from Oregon and into Mono County, just east of Yosemite National Park.

The wild canine, named by researchers as “OR-93,” is the only documented wolf of its kind to travel that far south in the state in well

over 100 years; he also represents just one of sixteen documented gray wolves to travel into California.

“Given the time of year, we assume OR-93 has traveled such a long way in search of a mate,” Center for Biological Diversity wolf advocate Amaroq Weiss said in a statement to the Chronicle. Weiss and others, too, are hopeful the addition of a new breeding male into already established packs will help diversify the population’s gene pool — a big win for conservation. (A healthy amount of genetic diversity is essential for any species' survival and is a hallmark of biodiversity.)

“I hope he can find one,” Weiss added.

Previously, the newspaper states that the farthest south a gray wolf was spotted in recent decades was near the Lake Tahoe Basin. OR-54, the wolf who had conducted the trek, eventually traveled back up north.

Wolves are still protected under California’s Endangered Species Act. However, the Trump administration last year stripped wolves of federal protection by removing them from the Endangered Species Act that protected gray wolves in most of the United States. Now, the responsibility to safeguard wolf populations for future generations is solely in the hands of state governments and leadership on tribal lands.

“We’re thrilled to learn this wolf is exploring deep into the Sierra Nevada since scientists have said all along this is great wolf habitat,” Weiss added of OR-93. “He’s another beacon of hope, showing that wolves can return here and flourish as long as they remain legally protected.”

The LA Times notes that California's two remaining wolf packs — one having disappeared in 2015 — remain small, despite a promising uptick in pups born annually. The appearance of OR-93 is opening possibilities that populations in the state can, indeed, return to their historic levels and ranges.