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As Minnesota considers wolf hunt, Wisconsin hunters blow past quotas

Wisconsin hunters killed nearly double their wolf quota in a three-day season.

By [Greg Stanley](#) Star Tribune

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In just three days this week, Wisconsin hunters killed nearly twice the number of wolves that wildlife managers had intended to be harvested in a brief, court-ordered hunting and trapping season.

Hunters killed 216 wolves between Monday and Wednesday, well past the 119 quota set by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. The Wisconsin season comes as Minnesota lawmakers and wildlife managers wrestle over whether to allow wolf hunting this fall.

Gray wolves were taken off the endangered species list in January, removing federal protections and leaving management up to each state.

The ease and speed with which Wisconsin hunters blew past limits may be hard to replicate in other parts of the country. The vast majority of wolves taken in Wisconsin — 86% — were hunted using dogs, a practice banned in every other state. Dogs were rarely used in prior Wisconsin hunting seasons, accounting for just six wolves taken in the state's most recent season in 2014.

Fresh snowfall on Monday and Tuesday made wolf tracks easy to spot and captured their scent for trailing hounds to follow, said Randy Johnson, large carnivore specialist for the Wisconsin DNR.

"This season was fairly unprecedented," Johnson said. "The use of dogs is a very efficient method of harvest."

The Wisconsin DNR, which originally fought opening a season so soon after the animals were delisted, issued twice as many hunting permits than it had before for wolf hunts. It gave out 20 permits for every wolf it wanted harvested, rather than the more typical 10 per wolf.

That's a decision that will be revisited, said Eric Lobner, director of the Wisconsin DNR's wildlife management program.

"It's important for us to get more in line with what we normally issue for permits per quota," he said.

The Wisconsin DNR planned for the hunt to last a week, but started shutting it down Tuesday afternoon when hunters had reported enough kills to nearly fill the entire quota.

Lobner and Johnson reiterated that the Upper Midwest's wolf population is robust and resilient. Before the hunt, the population was estimated to be around 1,200 wolves. The quota was set with the goal of keeping the population stable, Lobner said.

"When we set our quota we tried to make sure that we were conservative in our approach, to make sure we weren't going to have a negative impact," he said.

The Wisconsin DNR had planned to hold the wolf season in November 2021, to meet the state law requiring a hunting season between November and February. But a Kansas-based hunting advocacy group, Hunter Nation, sued the agency and won a court order forcing the DNR to conduct a hunt immediately.

By nearly all accounts, wolves have recovered in Minnesota and seem to have repopulated every area of the state suitable for them. After the animals were hunted and poisoned to near extinction, they have since rebounded and stabilized at 2,700 wolves, the most in the Lower 48 states.

The gray wolf was first put on the Endangered Species Act list in the 1970s. It was briefly taken off the list, allowing for hunting seasons in 2012, 2013 and 2014 before a court order restored federal protections.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources is rewriting its wolf management plan but hasn't made a decision yet on whether to bring back a hunt. The plan is expected to be ready sometime this spring. There are now dueling bills before lawmakers, one that would require the DNR to start a hunting season this year and another that would ban it.

Minnesota's recovery goal was to build up a population of 1,600 wolves, a number surpassed years ago. The DNR has proved it's capable of keeping wolf populations healthy, said Rep. Spencer Igo, R-Grand Rapids, who introduced the proposal to hold a 2021 hunting season.

"A healthy ecosystem needs wolves, but the population is just too high," he said. "We need to be allowed to manage it properly and responsibly."

But the Wisconsin hunting season shows just how quickly wolf populations can be dented once federal protections are removed, said Collette Adkins, a lawyer for the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group fighting to get the animals relisted as endangered.

"In just a couple of days, nearly 20% of Wisconsin's wolf population has been wiped out," she said. "That's years and years of intensive recovery efforts, gone."