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A pack of wolves thrived near Minneapolis; how it died offers lessons for the future

From 2014 to 2017, they formed the first known pack so close to the Twin Cities in more than a century, growing to as many as 19 wolves.

By [Greg Stanley](#) Star Tribune

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Two wolves, a male and a female, broke away from their northern Minnesota packs and wandered alone for dozens of miles past highways, farms and suburbs. They found each other in a small nature reserve just 20 miles north of Minneapolis.

There, surrounded by traffic and homes, the wolves somehow thrived for three years. From 2014 to 2017, they formed the first known pack so close to the Twin Cities in more than a century. It grew to as many as 19 wolves, all within range of about 3.5 million people.

How they died was predictable and seemingly inevitable to researchers and biologists who have studied the species' remarkable recovery over the past several decades. The early success and ultimate demise of the urban pack could be a lesson as the state decides how it will manage wolves into the future. It underscores how near to humans wolves can live when not harassed, and why that relationship may be doomed to fail.

"What happened here is happening all along the fringe of the current wolf range," said David Mech, a wolf researcher with the University of Minnesota.

Wolves have steadily expanded their territory over the past 50 years after being purposefully hunted to near extinction. By the mid-1900s, they were eradicated from every state except Alaska and Minnesota. Just a few hundred survived in Minnesota, deep in the northern woods. Nearly every wolf now living in the Upper Midwest sprang from that small group.

Wolf numbers have exceeded every goal and expectation set in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan, as the wolves expanded their range after being given endangered species protections in the 1970s. Those protections were [recently taken away](#).

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) believes thousands of wolves have repopulated every area in Minnesota that can hold them — that there is no place left in the state for them to safely return.

The pack that survived so close to Minneapolis for three years proves that's true in one sense, and false in another, Mech said.

"It depends on the conditions," he said.

Wolves expand into new territories almost by chance.

Loners, both male and female, leave their packs for reasons that aren't entirely clear. Sometimes a wolf will beeline in a straight direction, almost as if it's trying to get as far away as quickly as possible. Sometimes they meander or even circle back to their old territory. Some travel with partners, others alone. Eventually, a male and female find each other in a new place and start a pack of their own.

'They get into trouble'

In 2014, the two wolves met at Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve, a patch of restored oak savanna on a former farm in Anoka County. They dened less than a mile from a house bordering the reserve.

There were plenty of deer near the reserve for the wolves, Mech said. While Cedar Creek is only about 9 square miles, wolves cover 15 to 20 miles a day searching for prey.

They had one pup in 2014 and eight more by the spring of 2015.

The whole pack was spotted on trail cams and by neighbors and visitors to the reserve. Their fur was found in fence posts they had squeezed past.

The first dog died that summer. Then a cow was killed. They killed another dog a few months later.

Wolves typically start targeting cattle and pets once the first or second litter of pups become full grown, Mech said.

"When they're tiny, they don't eat that much," he said. "But after they're adult sized, all of a sudden this one pair has to feed eight mouths."

There were more than enough deer in the area for the wolves, but cattle and dogs are easier prey, especially for yearlings, or parents who need a lot of meat quickly, Mech said.

"That's the problem when they're anywhere near bigger settlements," he said. "If wolves are close enough, and there are enough of them, they get into trouble."

In 2016, the wolves had eight more pups, bringing the pack to 19. By April of that year, they attacked and injured one cow, killed two others and killed a third dog.

Fish and Wildlife rangers stepped in to stop the depredations. They killed three of the wolves that month.

A few months later, after the wolves killed and ate another calf at a farm, rangers killed three more wolves. One pup died in a snare.

Fish and Wildlife killed two more wolves the next spring after they killed another calf.

The rest of the pack at Cedar Creek hasn't been seen since, either dying off or moving on.

The reason wolves need vast wild spaces to survive isn't because they'd be unable to find enough food or shelter near a city. It's because they need space away from people to avoid the attacks on domestic animals that will get them killed, Mech said.

"They have the potential to reach other areas," he said. "But this pack shows us that they've pretty much reached the kinds of areas where they can live without being killed off."

States take over

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service delisted wolves in October, turning over management to each state and opening the door for wolf hunting to return.

The Minnesota DNR has long divided the state into halves, giving wolves more leeway to roam in the less populated north and giving ranchers and pet owners more leeway to kill or harass wolves near more populated areas in the south.

The DNR hasn't decided whether to bring back a hunting season. Its updated management plan is expected to be ready this spring, said Dan Stark, large-carnivore specialist for the DNR.

There are nonlethal ways to keep wolves from attacking livestock or pets, said Collette Adkins, lawyer for the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group that [has sued](#) to keep federal protections for wolves.

"There are guard dogs, fencing, fox lights, alarms or even just human presence will scare wolves off," Adkins said. "There are absolutely measures we can take to try to prevent those conflicts."

As long as wolves are around, they'll test the limits of their range, Mech said. Some will be successful in establishing new packs, at least for a few years.

"They learn," Mech said. "They learn pretty quickly that cars are bad and to watch the street. They learn that some of these places like Cedar Creek tend to have less people, less noise, less smells and that they can hang around those places."