

Gray wolf makes rare visit to Tuolumne County, areas farther south

- Guy McCarthy

Mar 1, 2021 Updated 2 hrs ago

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A young male gray wolf seen in Tuolumne County last week, called OR-93 based on its tracking collar number, is related to the White River Pack of gray wolves that was discovered in Oregon in 2017. Since then, the wolves have bred and some have migrated south. The above photo is not of OR-93, but a member of the Shasta Pack spotted on a trail came in 2015.

A yearling male gray wolf named OR-93 from an Oregon pack has been tracked in recent days moving south into the area of Calaveras and Tuolumne counties between highways 4 and 108, an agriculture and natural resources advisor with the University of California Cooperative Extension based in Jackson said Thursday.

“This is the first recorded observance of a collared gray wolf this far south in the Sierra Nevada,” Scott Oneto with UC Cooperative Extension for El Dorado, Amador, Calaveras and Tuolumne counties said in a phone interview. “We don’t have an exact location. He’s been moving quickly from the Oregon border since the first of this month, doing a lot of zig zagging back and forth at a pretty good rate.”

Oneto estimated Thursday the young male wolf was somewhere in Alpine, Calaveras or Tuolumne counties, based on information he received from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

“Fish and Wildlife got a ping off his collar somewhere between Alpine and Tuolumne counties,” Oneto said.

Oneto shared information about state Fish and Wildlife tracking of the wolf on Wednesday that eventually reached Kelle Schroeder, the Tuolumne County agricultural commissioner/sealer and animal control director.

Asked about Oneto’s account of the wolf OR-93 on Thursday, Schroeder issued a statement Thursday afternoon headlined “Gray Wolf Confirmed in Tuolumne County.”

The state Department of Fish and Wildlife confirmed a gray wolf visited Tuolumne County on Wednesday in the area between highways 4 and 108, Schroeder’s statement said.

“This is the first known visit of a gray wolf to Tuolumne County,” Schroeder said.

Amaroq Weiss, a designated West Coast Wolf Advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity, said Thursday she is aware of historical sightings of gray wolves in Tuolumne County in 1854, 1863, and 1939.

When Europeans arrived in North America, there were 2 million wolves, including about 380,000 wolves in what became the western United States, scientists say.

Pioneers, settlers and cattlemen feared the predators. Gray wolves were nearly wiped out in California by the mid-1920s and all but exterminated in 48 states by the 1930s.

The first gray wolves in California in 80 years were spotted and tracked coming from Oregon into California in 2011, according to advocates with the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity. In 2014, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife added gray wolves to the state's endangered species list. Gray wolves currently remain on a state endangered species list. They were removed from federal endangered species lists in January.

Schroeder confirmed the gray wolf that visited Tuolumne County on Wednesday is called OR-93. Gray wolves pose very little safety risk to humans, she said. Anyone who encounters a gray wolf should not run. Maintain eye contact and make noise while retreating slowly.

“The public is reminded that gray wolves are covered under the Endangered Species Act in California,” Schroeder said. “It is unlawful to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, or capture gray wolves.”

Oneto said Thursday he has never heard of a wolf being observed in El Dorado, Amador, Calaveras or Tuolumne counties, and he said he has never personally seen a wolf in California.

In an email he shared on Wednesday, Oneto said, “Just wanted to make sure you all were notified that CA Dept of Fish and Wildlife has been tracking a single yearling grey wolf through our counties for the past couple of days.”

Oneto said he spoke to Kent Laudon, a state wolf biologist, “and it sounds like this male has been moving pretty fast,” about 18 miles a day, Oneto said. “He is collared so they are getting daily updates on his movement.”

Laudon could not be reached for comment Thursday. Mark Abraham, a state Fish and Wildlife biologist who covers eastern Stanislaus, northern Mariposa and Tuolumne counties, said Thursday he had not heard of the wolf OR-93 being tracked into Alpine, Calaveras or Tuolumne counties.

Oneto said the wolf known as OR-93 crossed Interstate 80 near Floriston in Nevada County, north of Lake Tahoe, on Friday last week, and since that time has been travelling south down through Alpine County and as of Wednesday it sounded like he was in the Calaveras-Tuolumne area between Highway 4 and Highway 108.

“He is certainly looking for a mate,” Oneto said in his Wednesday email. “He is identified as OR-93 as he is from the Oregon pack. He initially entered Modoc County on Jan. 30, after briefly returning to Oregon, OR-93 reentered Modoc County on Feb. 4. He entered Lassen County on Feb. 10. OR-93 was collared in June 2020 and is believed to have been born in 2019. He dispersed from Oregon’s White River pack.”

Oneto ended his email saying he wanted to make sure everyone was on the same page, and thinking about if and how to share the information with UC Cooperative Extension clients. Oneto indicated he would share the information with livestock clients, as they seem to be very aware of this topic and have been watching closely throughout the state.

Information about the wolf OR-93 is new and it’s subject to rapid change given how quickly the wolf has been moving, Oneto said Thursday. This is a new discovery this week and later this week it could be in Lassen County, and we might not see a wolf again for a very, very long time.

“It is fantastic news to learn that there may be a gray wolf or wolves ranging in Tuolumne County,” Weiss said Thursday. “Historical records show that wolves were once seen there and

we know from habitat modeling studies that there is good wolf habitat this far south in the Sierra Nevada.”

Since many imperiled species recovery efforts often require active reintroduction of a species, the fact that wolves are getting into the Central Sierra on their own is something to celebrate, Weiss said. Oneto underscored the fact that gray wolves have been reintroducing themselves into California since 2011 without human efforts.

Wildlife advocates may be thrilled to have gray wolves returning to California, but the California Cattlemen’s Association takes a dimmer view of returning wolves. The association is a nonprofit trade organization that represents the state’s ranchers and beef producers in legislative and regulatory affairs, with 38 county cattlemen’s association affiliates.

“While CCA supports the protection of threatened and endangered species, we are opposed to abuses of the state and federal endangered species acts such as the continued listing of recovered species and efforts to preclude livestock grazing throughout vast swaths of land deemed ‘critical habitat’ for listed species,” the association states on a web page headlined “Protecting Wildlife.”

In recent years, the association has worked to delist the gray wolf from both the California and federal endangered species acts, the association states on its wildlife web page.

California ranchers provide habitat for many of the state’s native species, and they and their livestock have to deal with numerous predators, including mountain lions, coyotes, bears, ravens, and gray wolves.

“CCA and its members work with various agencies to support non-lethal management of predators,” the association states on its wildlife web page, “but works to ensure the proper management of problem predators when non-lethal deterrents fail.”

The fact gray wolves remain fully protected under the state endangered species act is critical to the survival of each wolf that enters the state or is born here, Weiss said. Human-caused mortality has always been the greatest threat to wolf survival.

“There is no reason to fear wolves,” Weiss said. “Wolves are very shy and generally want to have nothing to do with humans. If you happen to see a wolf, consider yourself very lucky. Don’t feed it and leave it alone, but also do not have unreasonable fear of the animal. Wolves also cause little problems with livestock and are responsible for a fraction of a percent of livestock losses where they live.”

Gray wolf sightings can be reported to state Fish and Wildlife at www.wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Mammals/Gray-Wolf/Sighting-Report or by calling CDFW at (530) 225-2300.

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