Wolves in North America

Before the arrival of European settlers, wolves ranged widely across the continent, from coast to coast and from Canada to Mexico. Two species are found in North America, the gray wolf, with its various subspecies, and the red wolf. Historically, gray wolves were found throughout most of the United States, Canada, and Mexico, with red wolves primarily inhabiting the southeastern United States.

Wolves play an important role as predator in the ecosystems they inhabit. They feed primarily on large mammals, such as deer and elk, removing sick and injured animals from the populations. They are highly social, living in packs and hunting and raising young cooperatively.

As the country was settled, native prey species dropped and numbers of domestic animals increased. The belief by settlers that wolves endangered livestock prompted efforts to eradicate wolves throughout their range. In the United States, large-scale predator control programs were carried out, with wolves hunted and killed nearly to extinction.

By the middle of the 20th century, few wolves existed in the Lower 48 States. Only several hundred gray wolves in Minnesota and an isolated population on Michigan's Isle Royale remained, with a few red wolves and an occasional Mexican gray wolf reported. Both the Mexican gray wolf and the red wolf were eventually completely eliminated in the wild, and prior to recent reintroduction efforts, existed only in captivity.

Gray wolves in the Lower 48 States now number about 3,000, with more than 2,400 of them estimated in Minnesota. Currently all wolves in the Lower 48 States, with the exception of gray wolves in Minnesota, are listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Minnesota wolves are listed as threatened.

Recovery plans have been developed for wolves in various parts of the country, with the goal of ultimately removing the wolf from the list of endangered and threatened species. The recovery plans identify the population levels and distribution that would be necessary for the species to be considered recovered. When recovery criteria are reached, the Service then reviews the population status to determine if reclassification or delisting is appropriate. Recovery criteria differ from population to population depending on the threats to the species, the connectivity of the population to other wolf populations, and local ecological circumstances.

Gray wolves in the eastern United States

Gray wolves in the eastern part of the United States were virtually eliminated from the landscape, with the exception of animals in northern Minnesota and those on Isle Royale. Protection under the Endangered Species Act has allowed this population to grow, and it is now estimated at 2,445 animals. In addition, wolves have returned to Michigan's Upper Peninsula and Wisconsin, and these populations total about 450 animals.

Because wolf populations are nearing recovery goals for the area around the Great Lakes, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed changing the status of wolves in that region.

Wolves in the Rocky Mountains

Probably the most well-known wolf recovery effort was the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho in 1995 and 1996. After an absence of more than 50 years, wolves returned when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service brought wild-trapped Canadian gray wolves to the park and to the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness Area in Idaho. The goal was to speed up the recovery progress of wolves in the Rocky Mountain region, where wolves had been eliminated in the late 1920s.

Wolves were released as family groups in Yellowstone and individually in central Idaho. The program has been extremely successful, with wolves in both areas forming packs and reproducing. There are now an estimated 118 wolves in Yellowstone, and about 141 wolves in central Idaho. Coupled with natural recovery occurring in northwestern Montana (where there are approximately 63 wolves), the reintroduction program has boosted wolf recovery progress in the Rocky Mountain region.

Naturally occurring wolves in the Rocky Mountain region are listed as endangered, but in the Yellowstone and central Idaho reintroduction areas, wolves are designated as "non-essential, experimental" populations. This gives managers and local residents greater flexibility in dealing with wolf issues than would be possible if the animals remained fully endangered.

Mexican gray wolves

Mexican gray wolves, called Mexican wolves or lobos, were once common through western Texas, southern New Mexico, central Arizona, and northern Mexico. By the early 1900s, however, growing numbers of livestock in the region and fewer and fewer natural prey species resulted in increasing numbers of livestock losses to wolves. Intensive control efforts were largely successful in eradicating Mexican wolves by the middle of this century. Since then a few wolves were caught and killed; the last confirmed wild Mexican wolf was reported in the United States in 1970 and in Mexico in 1980.

Mexican wolves were listed as endangered in 1976, and a joint recovery effort with Mexico began. Using animals captured in Mexico in 1977, a captive breeding population was established. These animals are the foundation of the recovery effort for Mexican wolves. A total of 40 captive breeding facilities in the United States and Mexico are contributing to recovery efforts. Wolves that are candidates for reintroduction undergo a "pre-acclimation" period at Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico and other remote facilities. This helps foster behavior and characteristics that enhance their ability to survive in the wild.

In 1998, 13 captive-reared Mexican gray wolves were released in eastern Arizona. The Service plans to release a total of 13 more during 1999. Twenty-two Mexican wolves were free-ranging in the wild as of April, 2000. Nine wolves have been translocated into New Mexico. Additional releases are planned over the next two to four years to reach the goal of a wild population of 100 animals. As with wolves reintroduced in Yellowstone and central Idaho, these Mexican wolves are designated "non-essential, experimental" to allow more flexibility in management.

The recovery goal for Mexican wolves is to maintain the captive breeding program while establishing a self-sustaining wild population of at least 100 animals in the species' historic range.

For more information about the status of wolves, contact one of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service offices listed below or the Service's homepage at www.fws.gov.

Eastern United States
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Bishop Henry Whipple Building
1 Federal Drive
Ft. Snelling, MN 55111-4056

Rocky Mountain region
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
100 North Park, Room 320
Helena, Montana 59601

Mexican Wolves
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
P.O. Box 1306
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87103

Red Wolves
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
160 Zillicoa Street
Asheville, North Carolina 87103

Wolves in Alaska and Canada

Gray wolves in Alaska and Canada have never reached the point that protection under the Endangered Species Act is necessary. In Alaska, the state manages wolves, which number 6,000 to 8,000 animals. Similarly, Canada's 50,000 gray wolves are managed by provincial governments and are not considered endangered or threatened.

Red Wolves

Red wolves once ranged throughout the southeastern United States. As with gray wolves, fear of conflict between red wolves and human activities resulted in eradication efforts. As red wolf numbers declined, the remaining animals in the wild were removed to zoos and other facilities to save the species. By 1980, the red wolf existed only in captivity, with a founder population of 14 animals.

Number of Gray Wolves In the Continental U.S.

Western Great Lakes States	
Michigan	216*
Minnesota	2,445
Wisconsin	243
*does not include 29 wolves on Isle Royale	
Western States	
Yellowstone	118
Northwest Montana	63
Central Idaho	141
Arizona/New Mexico	
(Mexican Wolf)	22 (4/00)

Captive breeding efforts were successful, and red wolves have returned to the wild. The first reintroduction was made in 1987 at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in North Carolina. In 1991 and 1992, initial efforts were made to reestablish red wolves in the Southern Appalachians in Great Smoky Mountain National Park.

There are now approximately 300 red wolves in existence, about 80 of these animals in the wild. The remainder are part of captive breeding efforts at 36 facilities and three island propagation projects. Recovery goals for the red wolf call for a total 550 animals, including at least 220 in the wild.

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