



Wolf Recovery 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, found in the southeastern United States.

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

As the country was settled, native prey species declined and the number of domestic animals increased. As wolves increasingly turned to livestock for prey, government agencies and private citizens undertook large-scale predator control programs, with wolves hunted 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, along with an occasional Mexican wolf—and reports of a few red wolves.

Thanks to recovery programs and to the natural migration from Canada into Montana, more than 5000 gray wolves now live in the lower 48 States. Under the Endangered Species Act gray wolf populations in the northern Rocky Mountains are listed either as endangered or as “nonessential, experimental.” Mexican gray wolves are also “nonessential, experimental,” a designation that provides management flexibility.

Partners such as State wildlife agencies, universities, and conservation organizations have developed recovery plans in various parts of the country, with the goal of restoring the species to a secure status in the wild as a functioning member of its ecosystem. Recovery enables the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service to “delist” species so that they are no longer endangered or threatened—and to return their management to States and Tribes.



Photo by Gary Kramer/USFWS

Recovery plans identify the population levels and distribution necessary for a species to be considered recovered. When a species reaches recovery criteria, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reviews the population status to determine whether reclassification or delisting is appropriate. Recovery criteria differ among populations depending on the threats to the species, the connectivity of the populations, and local ecological circumstances.

At the time of its listing under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the gray wolf in the eastern part of the United States had been eliminated from the landscape, except in northern Minnesota and on Isle Royale, Michigan. Protection under the Act has allowed the Minnesota population to grow, and now about 3,000 wolves

live there. In addition, wolves returned to Michigan's Upper Peninsula and Wisconsin. About 900 animals live there.

Because these States achieved recovery goals outlined in the Eastern Timber Wolf Recovery Plan, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service has removed the western Great Lakes population of gray wolves from the protection of the Endangered Species Act. States and Tribes now manage wolves in the region.

Wolves in the Rocky Mountains

Probably the best-known wolf recovery effort was the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho in 1995 and 1996. After an absence of more than 50 years, the Service brought wild gray wolves from

Canada to the Park and to the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness Area in Idaho. The goal was to speed up recovery in the Rocky Mountain region and restore a species to the historic range from which it had been eliminated in the late 1920s.

Recovery partners released wolves as family groups in Yellowstone and individually in central Idaho. The program has been extremely successful. Wolves in both areas have formed packs and reproduced. Now Yellowstone is home to about 371 wolves. About 713 wolves live in central Idaho. Coupled with natural recovery in northwestern Montana—where there are now about 159 wolves—the reintroduction program has boosted recovery progress in the Rocky Mountain region.

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, growing numbers, of livestock in the region and fewer natural prey species resulted in increasing numbers of livestock losses. Intensive control efforts were largely responsible for eradicating Mexican wolves by the middle of this century. 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, recovery partners established a captive breeding population. These animals are the foundation of the recovery effort. Wolves that are candidates for reintroduction undergo a “pre-acclimation” period at Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico and other remote facilities. This practice helps foster behavior and characteristics that enhance their ability to survive in the wild.

In 1998, the Fish and Wildlife Service released 13 captive-reared Mexican wolves in eastern Arizona. Two years later, the first Mexican wolf pup was conceived and born in the wild! Additional releases from progeny of the 300 wolves in captivity are planned to reach the goal of a wild population of 100 animals.

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—about 6,000 to 7,000 animals. Similarly, provincial governments manage Canada’s 50,000-60,000 wolves. The species is not considered endangered or threatened.

Red Wolves

Red wolves once ranged throughout the southeastern United States up the eastern seaboard towards New England. As with gray wolves, concern about 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!

Captive breeding efforts are proving to be successful. Reintroduction is continuing at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in North Carolina. Red wolves have returned to the wild.

In northeastern North Carolina about 100 red wolves comprise 20 packs the wild. Captive breeding efforts at nearly 40 facilities throughout the United States have about 170 wolves. The captive rearing program is vital to maximizing the genetic diversity of the species and provides animals for occasional release into the wild. Recovery goals are 550 red wolves, including at least 220 in the wild.

Number of Gray Wolves in the Continental United States in 2006

Western Great Lakes States

| | |
|-----------|-------|
| Michigan | 434* |
| Minnesota | 3,020 |
| Wisconsin | 465 |

*not including Isle Royale’s 30 wolves

Western States

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|--------------------------------------|-----|
| Yellowstone | 371 |
| Northwest Montana | 159 |
| Central Idaho | 713 |
| Arizona/New Mexico (Mexican Wolf) | 59 |

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.

Midwestern Region
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1 Federal Drive
Ft. Snelling, Minnesota 55111

Rocky Mountain Region
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
585 Shepard Way,
Helena, Montana 59601

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

Red Wolf Recovery Program
c/o Alligator River National Wildlife
Refuge
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
708 North Highway 64
Manteo, North Carolina 27954

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