

# Wolf Numbers Increasing in Oregon

by Gail Kimberling

of the Hells Canyon Journal

Pine Valley ranchers Shella and Barry DelCurto lost a calf to wolves in the spring of 2018.

Rather than wringing their hands in frustration and leaving young calves vulnerable to more predation this coming spring, the DelCurtos actively sought information on how to deal with this new threat. Their search led them to Defenders of Wildlife and attendance at a multi-day workshop on a Montana ranch owned and operated by Andrew and Hilary Anderson.

Impressed with the Andersons' success in an area fraught with grizzly bears and wolves, the DelCurtos arranged for Hilary Anderson to discuss her range management methods in a workshop titled "Strategies for Ranching on a Landscape with Wolves" held January 10 and 11 at the Halfway Lions Hall.

As part of the presentation, Roblyn Brown, wolf coordinator in Northeast Oregon for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), updated the 56 workshop attendees on the wolf situation in this state.

Brown said her job entails "helping district biologists throughout Oregon learn about this new species."

Listed as endangered by the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1974, wolves were grandfathered onto Oregon's own ESA in 1987.

According to ODFW, wolves are native to Oregon and the wolves currently in the state migrated naturally from Idaho or were born here. No wolves were captured elsewhere and released in Oregon.

Brown said the Oregon Wolf Conservation and Management Plan "has been in place since 2005 to ensure conservation of gray wolves as required by law."

Developed by ODFW with a diverse stakeholder group, the plan was updated in 2010 and was due for a second update in 2015, the same year wolves were delisted as an endangered species in Oregon.

But the update was postponed indefinitely to give stakeholders – members of farming, ranching, environmental and hunting organizations – more time to reach consensus. (Earlier this month, four environmental groups withdrew from the stakeholder process, citing their opposition to ODFW's oversight and proposed revisions.)

Brown explained the Wolf Plan divides the state into two management zones with Highways 97/30/395 as the boundary. Wolves in each zone are managed in three phases as determined by their numbers, their reproductive success and their distribution. The plan is more protective when wolf populations are low and less restrictive as the population increases.

The zone west of Highways 97/20/395 (the West Wolf Management Zone, or West WMZ) is considered to be in Phase I, as there was only one breeding pair counted in 2017. To move out of Phase I, there must be at least four breeding pairs (defined as an adult male and an adult female with at least two pups that survive to December 31 of the year of their birth) for three consecutive years.

The zone east of Highways 97/20/395 (the East Wolf Management Zone, or East WMZ) was moved to Phase III after a minimum of seven breeding pairs was documented for the third consecutive year.

Brown added wolves remain under federal endangered status mid-state, basically in a vertical swath from the Columbia River to the California border between Bend and Burns.

## Wolf Movement

Wildlife officials release a "minimum count" of wolves each year based on hard evidence such as visual observations, remote camera photographs and tracks. Since it's nearly impossible to document every wolf, especially lone wolves or new pairs, the actual number is likely higher than the minimum count, Brown noted.

She said at the end of 2017 Oregon's minimum count was 124 wolves, including 12 packs and 11 breeding pairs.

"We think the numbers will be bigger in 2018 as the population has been increasing



Graphic from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife 2017 Wolf Annual Report

## WOLF MANAGEMENT ZONES (WMZ) and federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) status in Oregon.

dramatically," Brown stated.

In 2017 there were 11 packs in Northeast Oregon and one in Southwest Oregon, distributed in parts of Baker, Grant, Jackson, Klamath, Lake, Umatilla, Union, Wallowa and Wasco counties.

"A single wolf can roam a huge area – two to three times a pack area – so those are the ones you don't see all the time, except for when they are passing through," Brown commented.

She added ODFW officials diligently follow up on all public wolf reports by surveying tracks, reviewing trail camera footage and taking genetic samples from scat, hair and tissues.

Radio collars also assist in monitoring wolves, however, Brown called the collars "a mixed blessing" due to their high rate of loss and failure. She said ODFW uses two types of collars: the VHF version can last six to seven years while a GPS collar only works for about one year.

Brown stated, "Out of 68 wolves collared in Oregon, we're currently monitoring 16 collared wolves. We had 11 collar failures and dispersals in 2017."

Air surveillance is another method used by ODFW officials, although Brown admitted flying in a helicopter at \$570 per hour can make a big dent in her budget.

"How much do you spend to find the next pack, and the next?" Brown asked. Brown added she willingly used her resources last year to find enough wolves to ensure the East WMZ remained in Phase III of the Wolf Plan.

"If we didn't have seven breeding pairs at the end of the year we would have gone back to Phase II, and then we would be required to have seven breeding pairs for three years to go back to Phase III," she said.

## The Allure of Bone Piles

Brown stated it was natural for wolves to move away from where they were born and travel for long distances. However, she added a single wolf is much more vulnerable than a pack.

Through a radio collar, ODFW officials tracked a wolf that left the Chesnimus pack in late December one year. The wolf traveled to La Grande where, after several attempts, it crossed Interstate 84 in early January, and then continued west for another 236 miles until finding a mobile slaughtering operation.

"A wolf will travel until it comes across something interesting," Brown said. "We contacted the owner of this slaughtering operation and found out he was also getting ready to calve nearby. He finally buried his bone pile, and without this attractant the wolf finally left."

A similar situation was documented in February 2010, when a collared wolf left the Imnaha pack to feast on bone piles in the valley outside of Wallowa, sometimes bringing another 13 to 16 wolves with him. The attractant was another mobile slaughtering operation where the owner was feeding offal to his dogs.

That spring, Brown said, "We had our first conflict when the wolves were flushed out of a pasture near a ranch house, where the producer was putting the hides of dead calves on other calves to keep them warm."

The wolves finally left the valley after the owner of the

mobile slaughtering business cleaned up his bone piles that summer.

"If you leave this stuff around it may keep wolves in the area and could increase depredations," Brown said. "Bone piles and carcasses can attract wolves and keep them in the area. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

## Documenting Wolf Deaths and Depredation

In 2017, the most recent year statistics are available, there were 13 documented wolf mortalities. Twelve were human caused (five lethal removals, four illegal killings, and three additional killings, all under investigation). There was also one wolf death due to disease.

There have been a total of 40 documented wolf deaths since 2000: 34 were caused by human activities, both intentional and unintentional; three died from natural causes; and three died from unknown causes.

Confirmed livestock losses in 2017 included 11 calves, one llama, one alpaca and 23 domestic fowl, compared to 11 calves, seven sheep, one goat and one llama in 2016. The 2017 depredations occurred in Jackson, Umatilla, Union and Wallowa counties.

Interestingly, Brown said depredations in Oregon have not increased at the same rate as the wolf population, and she credited livestock producers for removing attractants.

Brown added not all packs depredate, and only about one-quarter of the packs in Oregon have confirmed kills.

Since 2009, there have been 242 animals confirmed injured or killed by wolves, and Brown noted there were no horses, bulls or any pets targeted by the predators.

She said 75 percent of confirmed wolf depredations occurred on private land, with the majority of cattle and sheep depredation (59 percent) taking place in May, August, September and October.

Brown said ODFW has two primary roles when it comes to wolves: to delineate wolf areas and confirm depredation using an evidence-based investigative process. Brown explained a wolf kills by repeatedly biting an animal to death, but the wounds are not always visible until the animal is shaved or skinned.

"A wolf's teeth are not sharp. It doesn't break the skin, but still causes severe trauma," Brown said, adding, "Wolf depredations have serious business ramifications."

Brown said in the East WMZ a person or agent may shoot a wolf without a permit if it is caught in the act of "biting, wounding, killing or chasing livestock or working dogs" on their property or land as long as no bait or other actions were taken to attract the wolves.

Brown added this has already happened twice in the East WMZ, once by a herder who caught a wolf attacking his sheep, "but this doesn't make the news."

She cautioned that any landowner or agent who shoots at a wolf "must have their ducks in a row or it won't be legal." For instance, if a wolf is feeding on a dead calf on the ground the wolf cannot be shot as there is no immediate concrete evidence it actually killed the calf.

Brown also cautioned about the use of "agents" and she said Baker County Commis-

sioners are working with legal counsel to draft a blanket agreement for landowners.

"You don't want just anybody shooting (wolves) on your property. The producer is responsible for what happens," Brown said.

The Oregon Wolf Plan states non-lethal measures to prevent wolf-wildlife conflict must be the first choice of wildlife officials. Lethal methods are to be a last resort, as in the five wolves removed in 2017 (four from the Harl Butte pack and one from the Meacham pack) due to chronic depredation situations.

## Compensation for Depredation

The Oregon Department of Agriculture's Wolf Depredation Compensation and Financial Assistance County Block Grant Program was implemented in 2017 to provide four types of financial assistance: direct depredation payment, missing livestock payment, preventative measures and program implementation costs.

Monies for the program were set aside by the Pittman-Robertson Fund for Tomorrow's Needs Act of 2017 and are derived from hunting licenses and other fees.

Ten Oregon counties were awarded \$252,570 in grant funds in 2017. Baker County received a total of \$23,219, with zero dollars allotted to death/injury; \$16,125 allotted for missing livestock; \$6,599 for preventative measures; and \$495 for administrative costs.

Umatilla County received the highest grant award (\$96,558) followed by Wallowa County (\$76,640).

The funds are dispersed in each county by a special committee appointed by the county commissioners. Locally the Baker County Wolf Depredation Compensation Committee consists of one county commissioner, two people from the livestock industry, two people representing wolf conservation and two people from the business community. The group meets on an "as needed" basis.

The most recent meeting of the Baker County committee took place January 23 (see related story).

Baker County Commissioner Mark Bennett, who serves on the committee and was in attendance at the January workshop, anticipates Oregon will run out of financial assistance funds this year due to the number of requests.

He added that, due to a cost-sharing provision in the program, "Oregon is limited on the amount of federal money we can get because of what Oregon is providing. We're totally at the mercy of what the legislature allocates."

## Information for Producers

Brown urged producers to check out [www.odfw.com/wolves](http://www.odfw.com/wolves) for updated information about packs and predation. Producers can also sign up for regular e-mail updates from the agency.

Finally, Brown reminded ranchers there are several things that can be done to help reduce predation. She asked producers to "share all wolf reports so we can assist and inform; scare or haze wolves away from livestock; and clean up all carcasses."

Further details about ranching with wolves and the wolf issue in Oregon will be featured in upcoming editions of the *Hells Canyon Journal*.