



Wolves and Their Prey

Wolves prey mainly on large hoofed mammals (known as ungulates) such as deer, elk, moose, caribou, bison, bighorn sheep and muskoxen. They also eat smaller prey such as snowshoe hare, beaver, rabbits, opossums and rodents. Although some wolves occasionally prey on livestock, wild prey is by far their preferred food source. Wolves are often unfairly maligned for preying on elk and livestock in particular. We've provided the information below to put these relationships in context and to describe Defenders' efforts to minimize conflict.

Elk

Elk and wolves evolved together on the landscape and help keep their habitat balanced and healthy. In fact, wolves often enhance prey populations by culling weak and sick animals from the gene pool, leaving only the strongest animals to reproduce.



Elk herds naturally fluctuate over time. They do so in response to changes in habitat, nutrition, disease, hunting pressure, predation, weather and a number of other factors. Wolf predation can impact specific herds, but other factors, such as over-browsing, development, roadways, motorized recreation, fire suppression, and disease are often the more weighty culprits. Recent studies on Yellowstone elk and wolves have found that weather and hunter harvest affect elk declines more than wolf predation.



Some hunters report that it is more difficult to find elk since wolves have returned to the region, leading some to mistakenly assume that elk numbers have significantly dropped. Rather, as documented by researchers, the wolf's hunting behavior of testing their prey for weakness can cause elk to linger less in open areas, move to higher altitudes, seek out more hidden areas, or move toward human-dominated landscapes where landowners may offer less hunter access. Increased ATV use is also affecting elk behavior in some of the same ways. These behavioral changes mean that hunters and wildlife managers may need to adapt their strategies to accommodate the more

savvy elk. Meanwhile, overall estimates for Idaho, Montana and Wyoming in 2009 suggest there are more than 350,000 elk in the region—more than enough for both wolves and humans to hunt and hunter harvest remains high across most of the region.

Livestock

Wolves may prefer to hunt wild prey, but unattended livestock can make an easy meal. It doesn't take much for a wolf to isolate a young calf or lone sheep, especially when left unguarded. However, based on National Agriculture Statistics Service and wolf management reports, wolf depredations still account for less than 1% of livestock losses in the region - including unconfirmed losses. Far more livestock are killed by disease, bad weather, birthing problems and other predators – even stray dogs – than by wolves. Despite this fact, Defenders is working hard to minimize conflicts and increase tolerance for wolves.

Proactive strategies to reduce conflict – Defenders has been partnering with ranchers since 1987, developing and implementing nonlethal solutions to minimize conflict between wolves and livestock. Here are a few methods that have proven successful over the years:

- Wolves are natural predators and focus on animals that are easiest to kill. They also have a very keen sense of smell. By taking simple steps such as removing dead, diseased or dying animals, ranchers can help to protect their healthy livestock.
- Livestock guarding dogs can be valuable tools in alerting humans when wolves are present or close by. However, these dogs are not designed to fight off the wolves themselves, and once they sound their alarm, they will need human support to protect the livestock. And in the spring and early summer, when wolves are caring for their pups, the presence of dogs can provoke wolves to defend their young.
- Erecting permanent or temporary barriers are an excellent way to divert predators from livestock. Using fladry—a series of red or orange cloth flags hung at intervals along a rope—has proven effective in keeping wolves out of designated grazing areas. Fladry can also be combined with a



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electric rope, called “turbo-fladry,” to provide an even stronger deterrent.



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- Keeping a strong human presence around livestock such as a range rider can help to protect the animals. Cowboys can patrol around the animals at dawn and dusk when the wolves are most active, listen for howling, and monitor the agitation of the animals to see if a wolf is in the area. Wolves feel threatened by a constant human presence and the more people that are on the range, the less likely wolves are to come around.
- Scare tactics such as alarm systems, shock collars, and nonlethal ammunition (e.g., rubber bullets, beanbag shells) are an effective way to keep wolves away without killing them.
- Switching to an alternative grazing allotment or pasture, even on a short term basis when packs are rearing young pups, can help reduce livestock depredations.