

## The Northern Rockies



The alpha female (left) and male (right) of the Canyon pack move along the Firehole River in Yellowstone National Park. Now that federal protection for wolves has been removed, wolves that venture beyond park borders are subject to the overly aggressive wolf-management tactics adopted by neighboring states.

**T**he Northern Rockies were once a gray wolf stronghold, but predator removal programs initiated in the 1880s essentially wiped wolves out in the region by the 1930s. Wolves received legal protections with the passage of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1973 and started dispersing into northwest Montana from Canada in the 1980s. In 1995 and 1996, a total of 66 wild gray wolves were reintroduced in Yellowstone National Park and in central Idaho. The purpose of reintroduction was to jump-start wolf recovery in the Northern Rockies. Wolves did their part, steadily increasing their numbers and range.

Today, thanks to the ESA, dedicated conservationists and the wolf's own robust ability to reproduce, gray wolves are back in the region and naturally recolonizing adjacent areas. At the end of 2012, there were at least 1,674 wolves, including more than 100 breeding pairs: 625 in Montana, 277 in Wyoming, 683 in Idaho, 46 in eastern Oregon and 43 in eastern Washington.

### The Potential

Vast areas of suitable wolf habitat remain unoccupied in national forests and national parks in the former western range of the gray wolf.

Unfortunately, just as wolves had established a healthy, interconnected regional population, they were removed from the endangered species list, first in Idaho and Montana, then in Wyoming. Wolf management shifted from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to the state resource agencies.

Overly aggressive management by the states is consistently reducing wolf numbers and the connectivity necessary for wolves to expand into unoccupied areas in the Northern Rockies and neighboring states. Consequently, full recovery of the wolf in the American West is threatened.

# Current and Potential Wolf Habitat and Dispersal Corridors in the Northern Rockies



Defenders advocates for the protection and management efforts necessary to retain and restore wolves in numbers sufficient to ensure their long-term survival and maintenance of the critical role they play in the ecosystem.

Keeping wolf populations healthy in the areas wolves currently occupy (solid red lines on map) is also essential to facilitate natural recolonization by wolves dispersing from existing populations (gray arrows indicate potential dispersal corridors) to additional suitable and appropriate wolf habitat (dashed red lines).

Note: The suitable habitat for wolves designated on the map is an approximation based on peer-reviewed studies, expert opinion of our staff and habitat modeling, a complex science that involves superimposing multiple factors such as wolf range and dispersal routes, road density and usage, vegetation types, prey density, presence of livestock, development, slope and elevation.

## The Challenges

The primary threat to wolves in the Northern Rockies is overly aggressive state management that caters to anti-wolf sentiment fueled by myth and misinformation. Conflicts over wolves center on livestock losses and the perceived impact of wolves on elk and deer populations and hunting opportunities. Ever since federal protection was removed, state policies and legislation have been aimed at dramatically reducing wolf populations in the region. Even though the states pledged to manage wolves like other native species, state fish and game commissions and legislatures have been directing and pressuring their wildlife-management agencies to significantly lower wolf numbers through lethal control, hunting and trapping.

Unlike black bear and mountain lion hunters, wolf hunters can get multiple tags (up to 10 per person), hunt nearly year-round, trap and snare in some parts of Idaho, and kill pups. Wyoming has removed all protection for wolves across most of state, once again making the species vulnerable to eradication from important portions of its historic range. The state quickly opened both a regulated hunting season and an unregulated predator zone that covers more than 80 percent of the state where wolves can be killed by anyone—and by almost any means—year-round, including on national forest lands.

More than half of the known wolves in the predator zone were killed in just the first few months following delisting. These wolves are important not only for their ecological benefits but also because they are in the best position to disperse into the historical range of the wolf in Colorado and Utah, where there are still no documented wolf packs despite excellent suitable habitat and public support for their return.

No other species, especially one with a total population of less than a few thousand, is being managed as aggressively as Northern Rockies wolves. People who are unwilling or unprepared to share the landscape with wolves have unduly influenced the management of these important predators. In less than two years, more than 1,100 wolves were killed in the

## The Push to Delist

**Just 13 years after the first releases in Yellowstone, the push to remove gray wolves in the Northern Rockies from the endangered species list began.**

### 2008

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) removes Northern Rockies wolves from the endangered species list, approving management plans that allow Montana, Idaho and Wyoming to reduce their wolf populations to 150 wolves each, slashing the regional population from nearly 1,800 to 450 wolves.

After Defenders of Wildlife and others sue FWS, citing the inadequacy of these state plans and lack of the connectivity between wolf populations specified in the recovery plan to ensure genetic diversity, a federal judge reinstates protection for wolves.

### 2009

FWS attempts to delist wolves again, this time excluding Wyoming on the basis of its inadequate wolf-management plan.

### 2010

After another lawsuit, a federal court overturns the 2009 decision to delist wolves, ruling that FWS can not remove protection in only a portion of the Northern Rockies wolf population's core range, because conditions that support the recovery of wolves must be present in a significant portion of their entire range in the region.

### 2011

A legislative "rider" attached to a must-pass budget bill ends federal protection for wolves in Idaho and Montana, eastern Oregon and Washington and northern Utah, the first-ever removal of a species from the endangered species list by Congress. Wyoming wolves remain on the list because the state still does not have an FWS-approved wolf-management plan.

### 2012

Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar reaches an agreement with the Wyoming governor to reverse course and accept Wyoming's wolf plan with only minor changes, and FWS again delists wolves in Wyoming. The state quickly opens a regulated hunting season. It also establishes an unregulated predator zone that covers more than 80 percent of the state, including national forest lands, where wolves can be killed by almost any means year-round.

### 2013

Defenders goes back to court in an attempt to restore ESA protection for wolves in Wyoming.



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Northern Rockies, and states seem determined to slash wolf numbers even more. The federal delisting plan offers no mechanism to prevent Idaho, Montana and Wyoming from killing all but 150 wolves each and requires no scientific justification that 150 wolves constitute a healthy, recovered wolf population.

For Northern Rockies wolves to recover and assume their important role in ecosystems, states must manage wolves as an accepted and valued native species—like mountain lions and black bears. States must also ensure adequate connectivity between wolf populations to allow for natural recolonization in Washington, Oregon, Utah and Colorado. Education and outreach efforts are also vital to foster more tolerance for wolves and to promote the use of nonlethal methods to address conflicts and to secure a future for wolves in the region.

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Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife: [wdfw.wa.gov/conservation/gray\\_wolf/](http://wdfw.wa.gov/conservation/gray_wolf/)



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A wolf specialist with Wildlife Services, the federal agency charged with wolf control, installs fladry—colorful flags affixed to a barrier. This simple, economical, effective nonlethal wolf deterrent is widely used in sheep-grazing areas.



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