



Losses Lurking in the Shadows

Wolf problems keep growing for Western ranchers.

by *Heather Smith Thomas*



Ranchers across the West are experiencing more incidence of livestock depredation by wolves as these efficient predators expand their territory and numbers. Some

ranchers in the Northwest and Rocky Mountain West have been dealing with wolves ever since the government released the first ones in 1995.

In the mid 1990s, the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) re-introduced 66 wolves from Canada into Montana, Wyoming and Idaho; 31 wolves into Yellowstone National Park and 35 into central Idaho, according to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. Since that time, the population has grown from about 60 documented wolves in the northwestern corner of Montana to more than 287 wolf packs in the Northern Rocky Mountains, documented by USFWS in 2011.

Phil Davis, a rancher near Cascade, Idaho, has been losing cattle to wolves for a long time. Even though it is now legal in Idaho to shoot a wolf that is harassing or killing livestock and during the hunting season on wolves, Davis continues to work with United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) Wildlife Services (WS) help control the wolves.

“You can’t deal with them yourself because they are smart and often nocturnal,” he says. “We can’t protect our cattle because we don’t have the tools nor the time. Most ranchers are not experienced at trapping, and in our area sport trapping is not legal.”

Working together

Many ranchers are still cautious when dealing with wolves to make sure they are not doing anything illegal. “I’ve always dealt with WS for two reasons. First, they have the expertise, and second, it keeps us legal. Wolves are here because of federal action, and therefore the federal agency should help us deal with the problem wolves,” he says.

Ranchers are sometimes able to kill a wolf that’s killing livestock, but often the rancher isn’t in the right place at the right time. “We’ve managed to kill only two wolves during the daytime that we’ve seen, in 22 years – yet the wolves have been killing our cattle every year,” Davis says.

Another difficult situation for ranchers is that wolves have been driving elk herds down out of the mountains and into farm land. “Some areas now have depredation hunts on the elk because they are eating farmers’ and ranchers’ crops. The wolf problem is becoming urban, as well,” he says.

Most people don’t realize the extent of depredation on game and livestock. “Even many ranchers don’t know how many of their lost animals are due to wolves,” Davis says. “Some



kills can’t be confirmed because the animal is entirely eaten, with no trace left, while others are harassed to death.”

The rancher assumes the animal died of disease, bloat,

poison plants or something else – unless he skins the carcass and discovers hemorrhaging and mangled tissue under the hide, which are classic signs of wolf bites.

Economic effects

Lost livestock is not the only issue. Wolves have a greater economic effect on many cattle operations. Neil Rimbey, a range economist with the University of Idaho, has been evaluating the economic impact on ranches as part of a major study of wolf-cattle interaction. “I’ve talked with ranchers and gathered information that we’ve used in building representative ranch budgets,” he says.

The depredation loss, direct loss in killed animals, is what gets attention, but the first years of this study showed that some of the indirect losses actually have more of an affect on ranch profitability and sustainability. “There was a study in Lemhi County, Idaho, about 16 years ago in which calves on a BLM (Bureau of Land Management) allotment were tagged with tracking devices when they were turned out on the range. In this study, the ranchers and researchers were only able to actually find one out of every five calves that disappeared. In rugged country, this is probably typical,” Rimbey says.

“A more recent study in Wyoming indicated that this rate was actually low; in that state they are compensating ranchers on a one to seven basis (figuring a rancher will only find one out

continued on page 90...



Western ranchers find it difficult to protect their herds from wolves due to their expansive grazing ground.

of every seven animals killed by wolves),” Rimbey says. “They are only getting one confirmed depredation for every seven animals that are lost. The research in Wyoming also suggests that some of the indirect losses — such as more open cows, reduction in weight gain on the calves, more veterinary treatments for injured calves, stressed calves that got pneumonia, etc. — should raise the compensation rate up to about one to 14.”

Management challenges

The change in cattle behavior affects management and is harder on the land and facilities. Cattle will often come back down off the mountains to escape wolves. They may use some areas more heavily while avoiding others. Cattle also crash through fences.

“Both the Oregon and Idaho ranchers have mentioned the increase in labor and costs associated with managing cattle now, compared to what it was before they had wolves,” Rimbey says. “They now have to go out more frequently to check cattle, hire more riders and spend time meeting with Fish and Wildlife Service to try to get confirmation on death loss, etc.”

Rimbey says many ranchers mention cattle being more difficult to manage. “They can’t bring dogs when working cattle; the cattle just keep attacking the dogs. The cattle will also attack a person on foot.”

The study helped confirm what ranchers have suspected regarding behavioral changes in cattle and the economic effects.

“For instance, each 1% change in calves weaned in Idaho amounts to about a \$1,750 change in gross revenue, or nearly \$6 per cow. This is just a starting point,” Rimbey says.

A cattleman’s perspective

Len McIrvin and his son, Bill, who run Hereford cattle on their Diamond M Ranch in northeastern Washington, have suffered tremendous losses. “We had wolf damage starting about 12 years ago, but not as severe as recent years,” McIrvin says. “In 2011 we had 16 head killed; in 2012 it was 40 head.”



Sometimes even fencing off a herd will not deter wolves from harassing cattle in Western states.

Cattle running in big pastures make protecting livestock a challenge. “The idea of ‘protecting’ our cattle is ridiculous because they are out in the mountains, often in heavy timber and rough country,” McIrvin says. “There are many cows that we won’t see all summer long.” He notes that some will disappear, eaten by wolves, before anyone knows what happened.

“If you have cattle in a 10-acre backyard pasture next to your house, you might have a chance to protect them, but no guarantee. We have a neighbor who put up electric fence around his winter calving area, with ribbons tied to it to try to deter wolves from coming into that little pasture. He was calving, and had to bring his cows into a small area to try to protect them because wolves were hitting them awfully hard.”

McIrvin describes how his neighbor was able to determine the wolves’ behavior thanks to fresh snow. The first night after he put up electric fence and flagging, wolf tracks went around the enclosure but didn’t enter. The next night the wolves were coming in under the hot wire, and on the third night, there were several calves dead. “The wolves didn’t actually kill any, but the cows were so upset that they trampled several newborn calves as they stampeded around trying to protect their calves,” McIrvin says. “This was right outside his backdoor, less than 100 yards from his house.”

He says a few years ago the Wedge pack in Stevens County killed 40 of their calves. “The USFWS (United States Fish and Wildlife) came in and took out 6 wolves — leaving just two in that pack,” he says. “On that range, between the Columbia River and the Kettle River along the Canadian border, we run 400 cows. In 2014 we didn’t have any cattle killed on that range, and the next year we were short a few.”

McIrvin’s Diamond M Ranch runs about 700 cow-calf pairs in Ferry County, the next county west of Stevens County. In Ferry County the McIrvin’s had problems with the Profanity Peak pack. “In 2014 that pack killed 28 calves, and nearly that many in 2015, along with some cows,” McIrvin says.

It can be a challenge to find them all. “Sometimes you have to ride 20 miles from where you unload your horse to get into where the cattle are. My son found two pair one day, and there were wolf tracks all around those cattle. He and another man rode in about 20 miles through deep snow to find those cattle, and the wolves were circling them and howling. He knows there were at least six wolves in that pack. It was thick timber, and he never saw a wolf, but for more than six hours there were wolves circling the horses and cattle as they trailed out. The wolves stayed just out of sight in the trees, circling and howling steadily — the most eerie feeling imaginable.”

The USFWS makes decisions if and when to remove a pack. “If they immediately come in

when there's a troublesome pack and eliminate or drastically reduce the numbers, in our experience this temporarily solves the problem," McIrvin says.

Wolves multiply quickly. "The wolves are overrunning us in this northeastern corner of the state," he says.

Wolves also kill to teach their pups. The animal is run to exhaustion and dies from the stress and trauma of multiple bites, but there is no outward sign of damage.

"A few years ago when we had the most losses, we found one calf dead, without a mark on it," McIrvin explains. "Bill and I couldn't figure out what killed it. We finally called our county sheriff because we'd had so many losses that summer. We always call the sheriff, and let him call the game department."

The sheriff and game department people came out to examine the calf. "It was a 500 lb. calf with no external signs of trauma. As soon as he started skinning that calf, you could see the bloody, pulverized tissue underneath. These are Hereford cattle, and thick-hided, with a lot of hair, and we could not see a mark on it until we peeled the hide back, and found the mangled hamburger underneath."

McIrvin feels strongly that there is no way to protect livestock from wolves, except to eliminate the wolves that prey on livestock.

McIrvin says the relationship between wolves and humans is different today than in the past. "The female wolves are not training their pups to stay away from people. The pups are learning that livestock are an easy meal." **HW**

State management efforts lead to controversy

In 1973, Congress passed the Endangered Species Act requiring federal agencies to protect "endangered" and "threatened" species. Wolves native to the Western states were low in numbers due to decades of diligent suppression efforts. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) planned to introduce an experimental population.

In 1995 and 1996, the USFWS released 32 Canadian gray wolves from Alberta, Canada, into Yellowstone National Park and an additional 34 wolves into the Salmon River Wilderness Area in Idaho. Wolves would theoretically stay in the backcountry and feed on deer and elk and would be protected until their numbers expanded.

After the populations reached target levels in the various states, management of the federally protected wolves was to be turned over to the states' game departments for them to determine how to address the issues with depredation.

In 2011, the wolf population in Idaho was removed from federal protection. By 2016, there were an estimated 800 wolves in the state. Idaho Fish and Game seeks to control the population with a hunting season for wolves with a limited number of tags. Ranchers may also shoot a wolf out of season if the wolf is killing livestock, and ranchers can get help from the state to eliminate wolves that consistently prey on livestock.

In 2015, hunters and trappers in Idaho legally killed 256 wolves and another 75 were killed by officials or by ranchers protecting their animals.

Depredations in some areas are still a problem. Ranchers can work with the state agency and USFWS in these situations, and problem packs can be removed. This wolf-control policy is loudly protested by environmental wolf-advocacy groups.

Oregon is struggling to gain a workable plan to control expanding wolf populations. The wolf population in eastern Oregon is no longer listed as threatened. Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) has been working on a 5-year wolf conservation and management plan that will be adopted later this year. The plan builds on what the state's wildlife biologists have learned about wolves over the years. In 2016,

they documented at least 112 wolves, including 11 packs.

The Oregon plan requires at least the confirmed depredations or four probable attacks and one confirmed attack within a 12-month period before allowing lethal control of wolves.

Hearings on the draft plan held at Portland and Klamath Falls this spring brought out the opposing views on wolf control — showing the great difference between urban and rural thinking. Authors of the Oregon's draft plan stated that "people with the most positive attitudes about wolves have been those with the least experience with them. People who live in areas with wolves have more negative attitudes toward wolves than the general public, and the negative attitudes are further amplified by wolf predation of livestock. In Oregon, it is expected that an increasing and expanding population of wolves will result in more, not less, conflict in the future."

Washington is experiencing a similar conflict. Lethal control policies are the biggest issue for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), according to Danny Martorello, wolf policy lead for WDFW. In order to remove wolves that are causing problems, non-lethal preventative measures must have been tried first, and the pack must have caused four depredations, with further depredations likely.

The WDFW can only remove wolves in the eastern part of Washington because wolves in the western two-thirds of the state are still federally protected and the USFWS does not use lethal removal to manage problem wolves. An outcry from wolf advocates resulted after the WDFW shot seven wolves in the Profanity Peak pack that were killing cattle. As in Oregon the conflict in Washington over how to manage wolves is expected to become more heated. **HW**

