

WOLF MANAGEMENT IN NORTH DAKOTA

On one side of North Dakota, gray wolves are now under state management. On the other side, wolves are an endangered species under federal responsibility. This dual oversight circumstance is an interesting development, considering that neither side of the state has a wolf population to manage in the first place.

States to the east and west, however, do have resident wolves, and occasionally one of them wanders into North Dakota. Depending on where they wander, they now will be treated differently.

East of a line formed by the Missouri River up to the eastern end of Lake Sakakawea, and then east of U.S. Highway 83 to the Canadian border, wolves are now classified as a furbearer protected with a closed season by state law. Their designation is similar to that of black bear and river otter, which are also occasionally seen in the state, but do not have a population high enough to allow for a regulated hunting and/or trapping season.

Furbearer status, however, does not protect wolves if they threaten livestock or on rare occasions present a threat to humans.

West of the Missouri River-U.S. Highway 83 line, wolves remain a federal endangered species that can only be killed after repeated instances of depredation, and then usually only by designated federal authorities.

Or put another way, in eastern North Dakota, a landowner could justifiably shoot a wolf stalking cows and calves, even though it had not yet killed any livestock. In the west, a landowner could face federal charges for shooting a wolf under the same circumstances.

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to change that quirk in policy so wolf management is consistent across the state.

Wolf History

Prior to European settlement, North Dakota had wolves from one corner to the other. At one time, scientists recognized two wolf subspecies, commonly called timber wolves and Great Plains wolves, but now, populations in the Upper Midwest and West are considered the same species and called gray wolves.

These largest of North American canine carnivores lived large off abundant moose, elk, bison and deer. During the late 1800s, however, most of the state's big game animals were eliminated by market hunters and settlers trying to feed their families.

Wolves switched their diet to sheep and cattle brought along by settlers, who along with government agents set out to basically eliminate wolves. That mission was mostly accomplished in North Dakota by the early 1900s.

When wolves were eventually protected by the Endangered Species Act starting in 1973, only a few hundred remained in the lower 48 states, most of them in northeastern Minnesota, and on Isle Royale, an island in Lake Superior that is part of Michigan.

Listing under the ESA meant increased scientific research, protection from unregulated killing, and eventual reintroduction efforts. Today, the Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that more than 4,000 wolves live in northern Minnesota, Isle Royale, northern Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

This regional wolf population is called the Western Great Lakes Distinct Population Segment. While North Dakota does not have any long-term resident wolves, the eastern part of the state is considered part of this DPS, along with eastern South Dakota, northern Iowa, northern Illinois and lower Michigan.

In early March, the Fish and Wildlife Service officially "delisted" the Western Great Lakes DPS, which basically means wolves in that region have recovered to the point that protection by the Endangered Species Act is no longer needed. States with resident wolf populations had to develop management plans detailing how they will try to keep wolves from going back on the endangered species list.

Each state has set its own guidelines for when or if it will allow regulated hunting and trapping. Minnesota, for instance, determined it will not consider public hunting and trapping, except in response to depredation, for at least five years.

Since North Dakota doesn't have any resident wolf packs, nor enough suitable habitat to support a resident wolf population, the Game and Fish Department is not required to have a detailed, approved plan. By state law,



SOURCE: U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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wolves are furbearers under Game and Fish management. Hunting and trapping seasons are opened or closed by annual governor's proclamation.

Unless wolves become something more than occasional transients, it's not likely North Dakota would declare an open season, and the Game and Fish Department has no plans to encourage wolf packs to establish in the state.

At least, that's the way it will work in eastern North Dakota. In the west, for the time being, wolves are still endangered. Game and Fish Department officials were hoping that would change with a recent Fish and Wildlife Service proposal to delist wolves in what is called the Northern Rocky Mountain Distinct Population Segment. This population is estimated at more than 1,200 animals in the northern Rocky Mountains of Montana, Idaho and Wyoming.

Under the current delisting proposal, the Rocky Mountain wolf population boundary ends at the Montana border. Listing status outside this area would not change, meaning that any wolves traveling through western North Dakota would still be classified as endangered species. The same is true for western South Dakota, which is also a gray area between the Great Lakes and Rocky Mountain DPSs.

Game and Fish administrators feel that if the Rocky Mountain population is indeed delisted, it doesn't make sense that wolves would remain endangered in a 150-mile strip of land in western North Dakota, and not endangered for several hundred miles on either side.

In addition, the Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to delist wolves in much of eastern Wyoming because this part of the state is "largely unsuitable habitat and is not a significant portion of range for the northern Rocky Mountain wolf population. That area is not necessary to maintain the recovered population ..."

This statement almost precisely describes the entire state of North Dakota. If wolves are delisted in eastern Wyoming under this criteria, Game and Fish officials feel North Dakota should have the same consideration. Game and Fish and Fish and Wildlife Service staff have met to discuss this issue and the federal agency has committed to working with North Dakota and South Dakota to remedy this problem in the future.

The Game and Fish Department supports the delisting and is strongly encouraging the service to continue efforts to delist wolves in areas where there is no suitable habitat, so **Both Sides** of North Dakota are included in either the Western Great Lakes or Rocky Mountain DPS.

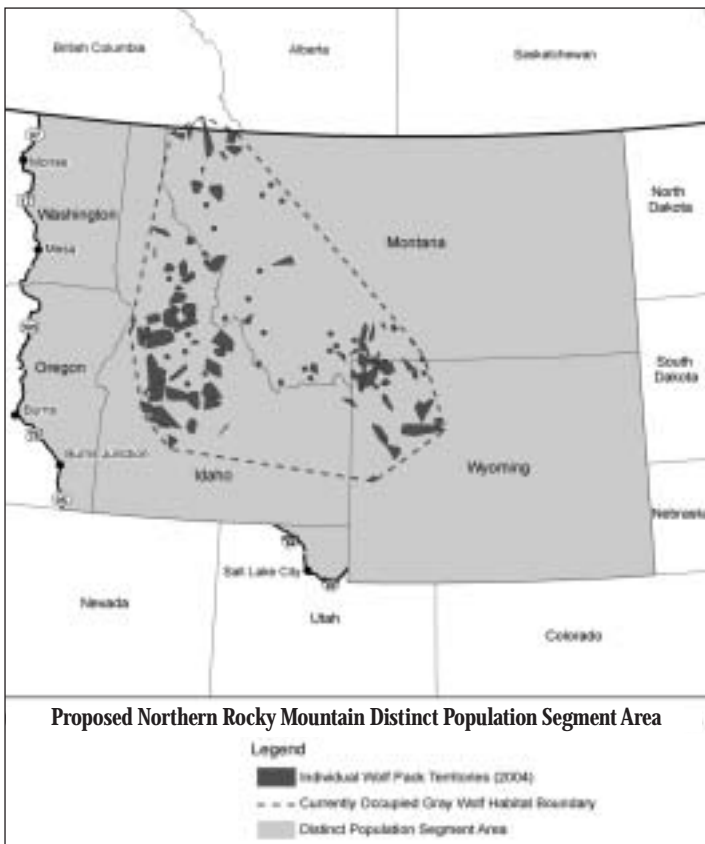
What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an email at ndgf@nd.gov; call us at 701-328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.



HAROLD UMBER

North Dakota doesn't have a resident wolf population. Now and again, one wanders through.

Note: In mid-April, three animal protection groups sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service over its decision to delist wolves in the Great Lakes population.



SOURCE: U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

FROM BOTH SIDES