Wolf Management

One State's View

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In May 2008, the Idaho Fish and Game Commission (IFGC) adopted the first regulated hunting season on gray wolves in Idaho history. With this action, wolves take their place alongside such predators as black bears and mountain lions as game animals, with wolf populations to be "… preserved, protected, perpetuated, and managed…" for the benefit of all, as required by Idaho State Code (see sidebar on page 42). In making this decision, the IFGC established a population goal of 518 wolves statewide, more than five times the minimum required population of 100 needed to get the species delisted from its former endangered status under the federal Endangered Species Act.

This action is a landmark decision for the nation and for Idaho. It is a reaffirmation that wildlife management is primarily the responsibility of state fish and wildlife management agencies, acting in their rightful role in fulfilling their public trust and responsibility for resident wildlife resources. One of the cornerstones of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation as described by Boone and Crockett Club founder Theodore Roosevelt, ownership of wildlife is to be vested in all citizens, and wildlife protection and management is assumed to be a responsibility of state governments.

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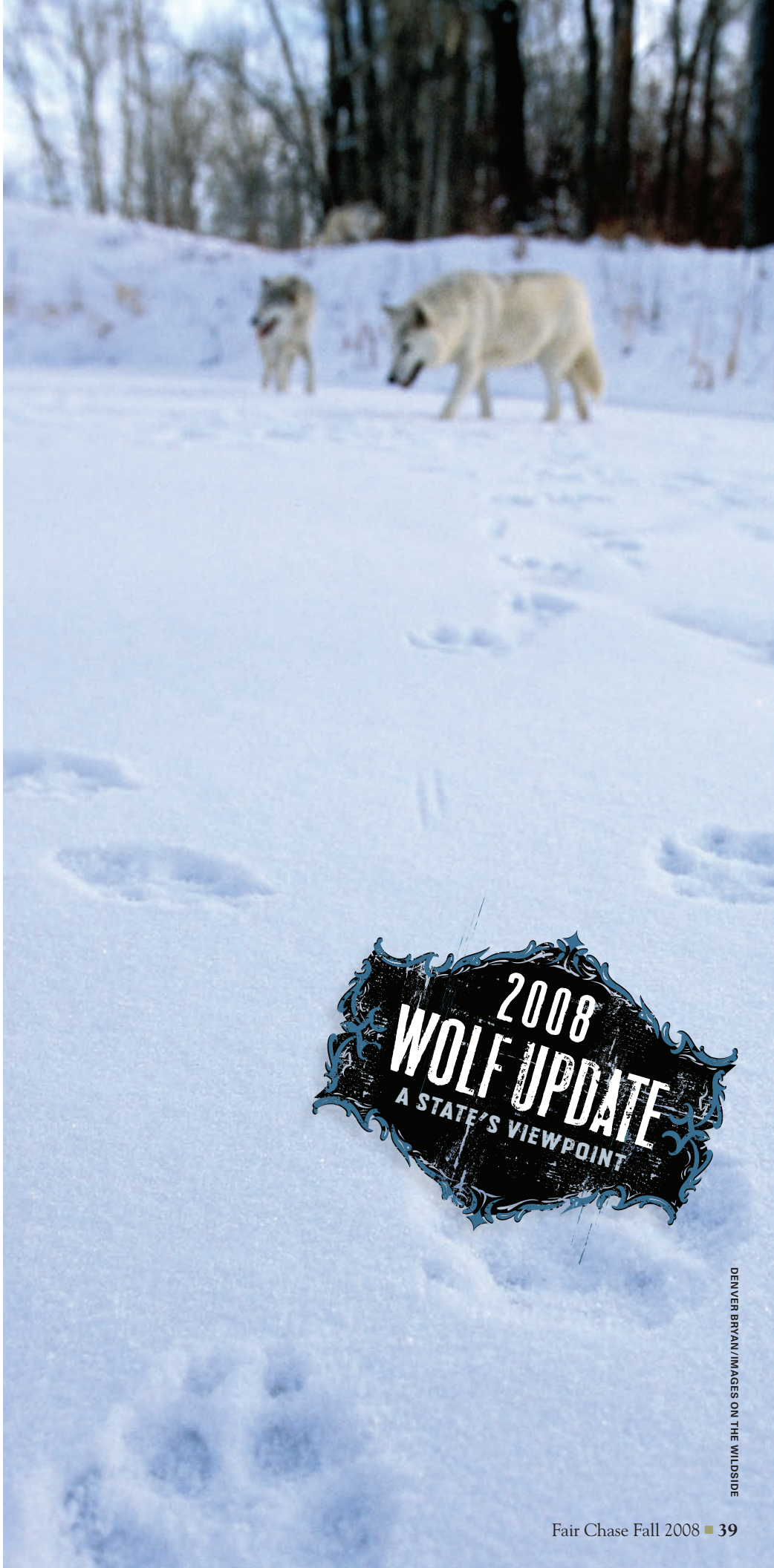
Idaho takes wildlife management seriously. Rich in wildlife and wild places, Idaho is one of the very few contiguous 48 states that can still provide vast expanses of land little altered by human development. Within just three federally-mandated Wilderness

areas (Selway-Bitterroot, Gospel-Hump, and Frank Church River-of-No-Return), Idaho set aside nearly four million acres of land where wildlife flourishes as it has for hundreds of years, away from human development.

Idaho's four million acres of wilderness and thousands upon thousands of acres of associated timberlands stretching southward from Canada to the Snake River along the western slopes of the Rocky Mountains still provide a place where bighorn sheep, mountain goats, American elk, mule deer, whitetail deer, and moose co-exist with predators—black bears, mountain lions and, yes, gray wolves. Managing all those species and their many interactions is a full-time job for the Department of Fish and Game's (DFG's) 500-plus employees, involving day-to-day management decisions for each and every species based on the best scientific information available and supported by a comprehensive program of wildlife law enforcement. As if management of the wildlife itself was not sufficiently complex, biologists must also ensure that wildlife populations are balanced with the needs and interests of all Idaho citizens: hunters, ranchers, outdoor recreationists, and even those who may never visit the state but want assurance that wildlife populations are healthy and secure.

Idaho citizens have always been very protective of their wildlife resources. The First Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Idaho in 1863-1864 passed statutes setting limits on harvest of big game animals. Following statehood, one of Idaho's first actions was declaring state ownership of its resident wildlife. Just nine years later, the Fifth Idaho Legislature created the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (DFG) to enforce fish and game laws. The state expanded the DFG's role in in 1938 to include the protection and management of wildlife.

Wolf management, or perhaps better, wolf reintroduction, has been controversial in Idaho for two decades. The DFG was an active partner with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in preparing the Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan, published in 1987. Evidence of wolves living in Idaho (a single here and there, perhaps one pair) was found, but there was no evidence of a functional population, such as pack formation or successful reproduction. After hundreds of hours of dedicated searching, DFG biologists concluded that natural recolonization of Idaho by wolves from other existing populations was a remote possibility.



DENVER BRYAN/IMAGES ON THE WILDSIDE

As the USFWS held public hearings around the state, the nation watched. When the process culminated with development of an Environmental Impact Statement on the reintroduction of gray wolves to Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho and signed by the Secretary of the Interior, many Idaho officials became increasingly alarmed that the process was moving too fast. Officials demanded flexibility to deal decisively with wolves that might cause depredation on livestock, and they wanted clear answers to concerns about protection of livestock—and people—if wolves were present. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service attempted to address those issues in a "Final Rule," which stripped Idaho's resident gray wolves of protection as "endangered" in favor of a less-restrictive status as a "nonessential experimental population" south of Interstate 90, which crosses the Idaho Panhandle. While this designation allowed the USFWS to write special rules to reduce impacts of wolves on livestock, many believed that additional assurances were needed.

Taking all these issues together, the 1995 Idaho Legislature rejected the draft plan for wolf recovery and, in a last-ditch effort to slow the process of wolf reintroduction in Idaho, blocked the state DFG from assisting Fish and Wildlife Service efforts to release wolves in Idaho.

Undeterred by state concerns, the Fish and Wildlife Service recognized the Nez Perce Tribe as a management authority for wolves and developed cooperative agreements with the Tribe for monitoring released wolves, while Fish and Wildlife Services remained responsible for control of wolf depredations. The USFWS forged ahead, releasing 35 wolves in central Idaho and 31 in Yellowstone National Park in 1995 and 1996.

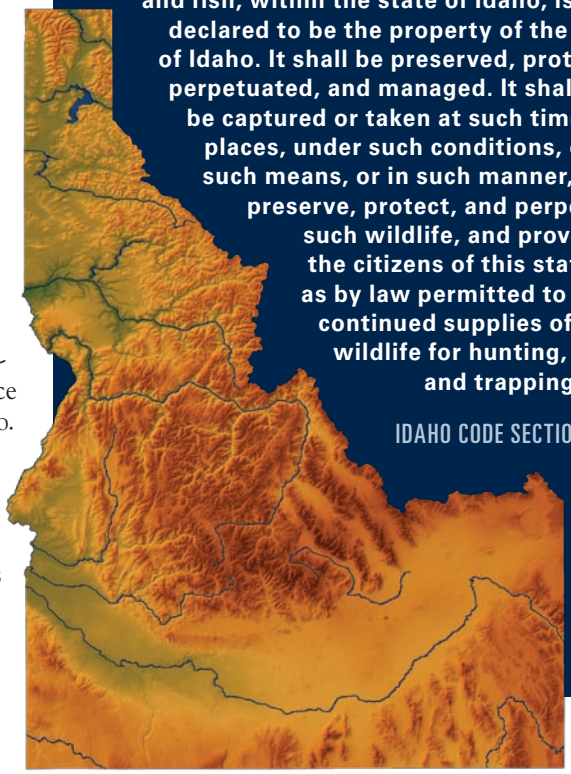
In biological terms, the release succeeded beyond the expectations of most biologists. The few wolves known to be present at the time of release were quickly joined by the newly released animals, establishing packs and territories. By 2002, the original objective of 30 breeding packs distributed among the states of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming for a period of three years had already been met. Wolf populations annually increased at a rate of more than 20 percent in many years.

Whether in favor of wolf introduction or not, Idahoans were forced to react to the presence of wolves and to respond to the growing impacts of wolves on their environment. Behavior of big game herds changed, as elk and deer learned ways to avoid wolves. Livestock behavior changed, too, as owners adopted new herd management practices. Wolves quickly established themselves as a presence in Idaho, with affects on human recreation and hunters—positive and negative. Since the state's fish and wildlife management agency had no authority to manage wolf populations in those areas where impacts to big game herds were believed imminent, frustration levels were high among all parties.

IDAHO STATE CODE

All wildlife, including all wild animals, wild birds, and fish, within the state of Idaho, is hereby declared to be the property of the state of Idaho. It shall be preserved, protected, perpetuated, and managed. It shall only be captured or taken at such times or places, under such conditions, or by such means, or in such manner, as will preserve, protect, and perpetuate such wildlife, and provide for the citizens of this state and, as by law permitted to others, continued supplies of such wildlife for hunting, fishing, and trapping.

IDAHO CODE SECTION 36-103



The Idaho Legislature acted to improve the political situation in 2002 by approving the Idaho Wolf Conservation and Management Plan, and (in 2003) approving a house bill authorizing the Department of Fish and Game to again participate in wolf management decisions. Although most requirements identified by the Fish and Wildlife Service as necessary for the states to resume management of wolves had been completed by Idaho as of 2003, delisting was delayed as challenges to wolf management worked their way through the federal judicial system, and Fish and Wildlife Service personnel responded to clarify management issues with the affected states.

All through the decade and more since wolves were released into Idaho, populations grew rapidly. The original objective of maintaining a minimum population of 30 pairs (or about 300 wolves) spread among the three-state wolf recovery areas for a period of three years was met in 2002; wolf populations in Idaho alone exceeded 200. With annual population growth exceeding 20 percent most years, the wolf population in Idaho doubled again, to 400 wolves, in 2004. By the end of 2007, the minimum population estimate for Idaho wolves was over 730, with a population of nearly 1,000 projected by the summer of 2008.

As wolf populations grew and young wolves dispersed, packs began to appear well outside of wilderness areas, spreading into ranches, farms, and rural communities. Reports of wolves began appearing far from typical wolf habitat, and in adjoining states. Verified depredation on livestock increased from less than 50 in 2002 to more than 450 in 2007. The number of remedial actions, such as the lethal removal of offending individual wolves and even entire packs, quickly escalated as did the cost of those actions, climbing from $150,000 to more than $350,000 during the same period.

Responsibility for state involvement in wolf management increased as the Fish and Wildlife Service relinquished much of the day-to-day management of wolves to Idaho through a revised "10-j" rule. Idaho wildlife managers became increasingly involved in day-to-day management decisions and responses to wolf management issues. Under the leadership of statewide wolf biologist Steve Nadeau, DFG biologists prepared a detailed species management plan to address the myriad issues involved with management of wolves as a big game animal, joining similar plans for the management of elk, deer, bears, and all other big game species in Idaho.

Idaho Fish and Game Commissioners officially approved the Wolf Management Plan on March 28, 2008, the final step to transfer wolf management authority from the Fish and Wildlife Service to the State of Idaho.

In May, Commissioners reviewed all

available information on wolf populations, and added wolves to the list of other big game hunting seasons the Commission had adopted at a previous meeting. The proposed seasons were established to support the wolf population at approximately 500 to 700 wolves statewide over a five-year period—a population level that corresponds to numbers that biologists believe will maintain wolves—and conflicts—at manageable levels. The commission imposed strict requirements to insure that populations would not be reduced below safe threshold limits. Hunting, removal due to depredation, and natural losses are all included in determining allowable wolf mortality limits. Idaho was divided into 12 wolf management zones, each with an individual mortality limit on the total number of wolves that may be removed annually.

Hunters will be allowed to harvest one wolf annually with the appropriate tag, but must report their harvest within 72 hours and present the animal for collection of biological information within 10 days. The wolf hunting season matches up with seasons for hunting elk and deer statewide, opening September 15 in backcountry (primarily Wilderness) hunt areas and October 1 elsewhere. The season will close December 31 or when the mortality limit for the management areas is met.

With nearly 1,000 wolves currently in Idaho, the widely dispersing new crop of youngsters makes it unlikely that wolf populations will be reduced significantly over the coming five-year interval. Experience from Alaska and elsewhere indicates that hunting may ultimately have little effect on controlling population size—the wolves do that themselves through the distribution of defended pack areas across the landscape.

Despite the management guidelines established, Earthjustice, a legal firm representing The Humane Society of the United States, Defenders of Wildlife, and several groups, sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in federal court demanding that wolves be restored to federal management under authority of the Endangered Species Act. It sought, and won, an injunction to block state laws and proposed hunting seasons. Federal judge Donald Molloy issued a preliminary injunction on Friday, July 18, 2008, that immediately reinstated the Endangered Species Act protections for gray wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains—the area that includes all of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming; the eastern one-third of Washington and Oregon; and portions of north-central Utah. Molloy's decision also rendered null and void any and all hunting permits issued by the states since they were delisted on March 28, 2008.

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Whatever the final outcome in federal court as a result of the current lawsuit and injunction, returning wolf management to the states, and hunting to citizens of this great nation, is bound to happen at some point. When it does, it will be yet another victory in restoring wildlife populations once on the brink of extinction, and proof again that the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation is the greatest engine for wildlife conservation and associated outdoor recreation ever developed. ■