

Are those Great Lake wolves or wannabes?

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Today's Great Lakes gray wolf, de-listed by U.S. officials as an endangered species, probably is a hybrid and no longer the historic animal, biologists said.

Biologists Jennifer Leonard of Sweden's Uppsala University and Robert Wayne of UCLA say the historic Great Lakes wolf did not return from near-extinction. It hybridized with gray wolves moving in from Canada, coyotes from the south and west, and hybrids born of those mixing, The New York Times reported Tuesday.

The conditions for breeding the hybrid animals were created by wolf eradication, habitat destruction and subsequent protection programs, Leonard said. The animals should remain protected, she said, while researchers determine the extent of hybridization with coyotes and whether it threatens to overwhelm the genetic heritage of the native wolf.

Rolf Peterson, a wolf ecologist at Michigan Technological University and leader of the Fish and Wildlife Service's Eastern Gray Wolf Recovery Team, said the team has known that hybridization between gray wolves and coyotes was occurring in the region.

"What's new in this paper," he told the Times, "is that they found no evidence of hybridization with coyotes in the historic samples -- and no pure historic wolves in the current samples."

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