

Wolf hunt is on in Idaho -- for now (Update)

September 1 2009, By TODD DVORAK , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- The first public wolf hunt in decades in the lower 48 states is off to a slow start.

Hunters in Idaho could begin shooting wolves just before sunrise Tuesday in seven hunting districts in the central and northern mountains.

By midday, however, state officials were still waiting for the first wolf kill report and an estimate of how many hunters were tracking the predators.

"Anybody that went up there at first light this morning is probably still out in the woods," said Ed Mitchell, spokesman for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

State rules require hunters to notify the department within 24 hours of a wolf kill and present the skull and pelt to wardens within five days.

So far, Idaho has sold more than 10,700 wolf permits, mostly to hunters who will head to the backcountry next month when elk and deer season begins. Montana's wolf hunt is scheduled to begin Sept. 15. Hunters there snatched up more than 2,600 tags on Monday, the first day of sales.

The hunt began as U.S. District Judge Donald Molloy considered a request for an injunction by environmental and animal protection groups opposed to the killing in Idaho and Montana.

The wolves were removed from the endangered species list in those

states just four months ago. The groups fear there aren't enough protections in place to maintain their comeback.

An estimated 1,650 of the animals now live in the Northern Rockies thanks to a controversial reintroduction program that started in 1995.

Idaho set a quota of 220 wolves this hunting season as part of its plan for managing the population. The quota is 75 in Montana.

The federal government handed over gray wolf management duties to each state after the animals were removed from the endangered list.

The creatures were once abundant across North America, but by the 1930s had been largely exterminated outside Alaska and Canada.

About 300 wolves in Wyoming are still under federal protection because the government has not approved the state's management plan.

Last year, about a dozen wolves were killed in Wyoming during a brief period when the state management plan declared wolves wandering outside established recovery zones could be shot and killed on site. That policy was later scrapped by a federal judge.

Idaho officials and hunting guides say the opening weeks of the season are likely to be slow.

Outfitters said they are not booking trips for hunters exclusively looking to bag a wolf. But guides are encouraging clients to buy wolf tags to have handy when tracking deer and elk later this fall.

"Any success we have with wolves will be more of a happenstance sort of thing," said Richard Huff, a guide for Silver Spur Outfitters and Lodge near Grangeville.

Wolves are hard to track because they move 30 to 50 miles a day, and hunters can't use bait or artificial calls.

"But I can tell you if I see one it's going to be adios," Huff said.

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Citation: Wolf hunt is on in Idaho -- for now (Update) (2009, September 1) retrieved 15 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-09-wolf-idaho-.html>

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