

Wolf population doubled in Washington state over past year

March 4 2013, by Lynda V. Mapes

Despite the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife shooting of seven wolves last summer because they were killing cattle, the state's population is burgeoning, a new survey shows.

The number of confirmed gray wolves and [wolf](#) packs in the state nearly doubled during the past year, according to the survey, which based on field reports and aerial monitoring in 2012 found at least 51 wolves in nine packs, with five successful breeding pairs.

The previous year's survey confirmed 27 wolves, nine wolf packs and three breeding pairs.

"We have remarkable growth of wolves in Washington," said Donny Martorello, carnivore section manager for the Department of Fish & Wildlife, which conducted the survey. "This is what you see when a colonizing population is finding suitable habitat and really taking off."

It is possible the number of wolves in Washington is even greater than could be confirmed in the survey, with easily more than 100 wolves actually in the state, he added.

There are nine confirmed packs in Washington, and two suspected packs, as well as two packs that are largely out of state but overlap into Washington. They are the Hozomeen, in the North Cascades over the Canadian border, and the Walla Walla Pack, in Oregon.

There are no confirmed packs west of the Cascades - yet. "It will happen, Martorello said. "The Cascades are not a barrier to them."

Wolves dispersing to new territory will easily travel 300 to 600 miles, and they readily cross highways and swim rivers.

The wolves' success in Washington is the result of successful recovery of the animals in Montana, Wyoming and Idaho under way since the 1990s, Martorello said. Descendants of those animals are now dispersing to Washington.

Wolves are just completing their breeding season now, and will soon head to natal dens. Pups born in April will be full size by December.

The densest concentration of wolves in Washington is actually in the sparsely populated northeast corner of the state, home to the Wedge Pack, seven members of which were killed by wildlife officers last year. In its survey, the department found two remaining members of that pack.

The gray wolf is listed as a state endangered species throughout Washington and is protected under the federal Endangered Species Act west of Highway 97.

Meanwhile on the Colville Indian Reservation, Chairman John Sirois said contractors working for the tribe had recently net-gunned a more than 130-pound male wolf. The animal was tagged and released.

The tribe has been monitoring wolf populations on its reservation of more than 2,000 square miles since 2007, using everything from DNA analysis of scat to winter snow-track surveys to remote cameras. Four captured wolves have been fitted with tracking collars and released.

The tribe has two packs, the Strawberry Pack, and Nc'icn Pack, named

for the Colville word for wolf, on its reservation.

The tribe opened a hunting season on wolves this winter that concluded Friday. The next season may be in August, said Randy Friedlander, a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Indian Reservation and wildlife division manager of the tribe's Department of Fish & Wildlife.

So far, he's heard of only one hunter even seeing a wolf.

"They are pretty tricky, pretty wise," Friedlander said. But he must have some kind of special wolf mojo. "I can't get away from them," Friedlander said. "Every time I go out in the woods I see tracks or hear them."

The tribe initiated its hunting season in part to maintain robust elk and deer populations.

"We caught quite a bit of grief this year because we had a season," Friedlander said. "I don't know what they would say if they knew we ate a lot of deer and elk. For us it is about trying to strike that balance."

Gray wolves were nearly wiped out in Washington by poisoning and trapping. Once common throughout most of Washington, wolves were functionally extirpated by the 1930s. Sightings picked up again in 2005.

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