

Gray wolf is a surprise visitor in Grand Canyon

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A wolf in Yellowstone National Park. Photo courtesy of Yellowstone National Park

Nobody is sure who saw it first. A handful of National Park Service employees think they were among the first, in early October.

A turkey hunter snapped a fuzzy photo of it as the animal moved through a large open meadow surrounded by dense conifer forest just north of Grand Canyon National Park.

They had a mystery on their hands. Too big for a coyote. And it couldn't be a wolf. Nobody had seen a wolf there in 70 years. Maybe a wolf-dog hybrid - a pet - had escaped from its owner and had gotten lost.

Workers with the Arizona Department of Game and Fish saw it too and

snapped their own photos. This time they saw something else: a black radio-tracking collar.

The radio wasn't transmitting a signal and the animal eluded park biologists' attempts to capture it. The photos were sent out to wolf experts around the country in the hopes someone might recognize the collar.

"That was a telltale giveaway," said Mike Jimenez, the northern Rocky Mountains wolf management and science coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Jimenez recognized the collar. It was studded with little metal cleats, designed so the gray wolves the government tracks in the northern Rockies would stop chewing them off each other's necks.

"It is a fairly unique thing we've done," he said.

They had a [gray wolf](#). Still, they wanted further proof.

That came Friday, when a lab at the University of Idaho confirmed through DNA from the animal's scat that it is a female gray wolf who had roamed from the northern Rockies into Arizona - nearly 450 miles.

Park officials and conservationists are wondering where she will go next, and conservationists are excited over the possible return of gray wolves to Colorado - its presumed travel route - or Arizona at a time when the animals are in danger of losing [federal protections](#).

"In October it was perplexing - now it's exciting," said park service spokesman Jeff Humphrey. "But it certainly continues to be mystifying."

There are no known gray wolves in Colorado, though in recent memory

two wandered into the state and came to unfortunate ends. One was killed illegally and the other run over by a car, said Suzanne Stone, a conservationist with the group Defenders of Wildlife who has studied wolves in Idaho for 27 years.

Nobody is sure how the Arizona wolf ended up unscathed at the Kaibab Plateau, where it has been spotted at least once about a mile north of the North Rim entrance of Grand Canyon National Park.

"She is very special," Stone said. "For every wolf that we discover, there are typically more that we haven't, and hopefully that means there are more wolves that are trying to recolonize this historic park."

Tens of thousands of wolves used to roam North America from Mexico into Canada, but by the early 1900s the species had been hunted nearly to extinction in the Lower 48 under a government-backed predator control plan.

The gray wolf was listed as an endangered species in the 1970s, and in the 1990s 66 gray wolves from Canada were brought into the northern Rocky Mountains to jump-start the population.

Now there are almost 1,700 wolves in the Rocky Mountains and more than 300 breeding packs, Jimenez said.

The populations have swelled enough that the wolves are no longer listed as endangered in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Idaho and Montana and in parts of the Dakotas, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Oregon, Washington and Utah.

The gray wolf was de-listed in Wyoming as well, but a judge restored federal protections in September after finding fault with the state's wolf management plan.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has called the comeback a success and proposed in 2013 to remove the gray wolf entirely from the list of threatened and endangered species.

The proposals would maintain protections for the small subspecies of Mexican gray wolves that have been reintroduced into an area of eastern Arizona and western New Mexico but that are not allowed to colonize new regions.

Conservationists oppose the possible removal of federal protections, saying it would once again be open season on wolves in the country.

A decision is not expected until next year.

The Arizona wolf's journey, in particular, should make the government reconsider altering protections outside the Rockies, Stone said.

Without federal protection, the wandering wolf - or a potential future mate - could have been legally shot at any point en route to the Grand Canyon, she said.

"It is too soon to yank that protection away from them," she said.

The wolves from the northern Rockies have wandered as far as Oregon and Northern California, where one wolf - known to scientists as OR-7 - spurred a move this year to place the gray wolf on California's endangered species list, even though they haven't been in the state since a trapper in Lassen County killed the last one in 1924.

OR-7 started bouncing between Oregon and California in 2011. This summer, Oregon wildlife officials confirmed that he found a mate and had sired at least two pups - the first in the Oregon Cascades since the 1940s.

Conservationists are giddy at the thought that a similar story could play out in the Southwest.

If the gray wolf can form a habitat in Arizona, it could help conservationist efforts to get Mexican [gray wolves](#) reintroduced into the area as well, said Eva Sargent, Southwest program director for Defenders of Wildlife.

But only time will tell.

Meanwhile, state and federal officials are warning hunters in Kaibab National Forest - where hunting is permitted - to watch out for the protected wolf and not mistake it for a coyote, said Humphrey, the park service spokesman.

With the approach of winter, wildlife officials have scuttled any attempts to capture the wolf and replace its collar, though they hope to spot her now and then.

"She is going to be telling her own story from here," Stone said.

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