

After being driven to near extinction, wolves are back in Washington. Can we coexist with them?

June 2 2021, by Lynda V. Mapes, The Seattle Times



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

They walked in on their own: The first wolves in more than 100 years known to call Washington state home, after this native species was

nearly wiped out by hunting, trapping and government extermination campaigns.

Today, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife kills [wolves](#) only when they have repeatedly killed cattle, a relatively rare event, with about 80% of Washington [wolf](#) packs typically staying out of trouble with people.

Which brings us to the wolf that Ben Maletzke, statewide wolf specialist in the wildlife program for WDFW, likes to call The Old Guy.

Wolf 32M LIVED some 12 years as the patriarch of the Teanaway pack, kicking off the recovery of wolves in Washington despite living in cattle country, amid ranchettes, in a region that sees heavy recreational use year-round. He lost a mate to poachers, and the pack's territory was roasted by wildfire in 2014. But still, Wolf 32M and his family persisted, bringing the call of the wild back to the Central Cascades for the first time in a century, just two hours from Seattle.

One of the fundamental tasks in recovering an endangered species is to know its population. So, on a recent winter day, Maletzke was out in the Teanaway pack's territory, looking for wolf tracks and checking wildlife cameras.

Maletzke glided through powder on his snowmobile, a fresh snowfall providing perfect conditions for tracking work. Here, the winter ecology of the pack's core territory was written in tracks. The soft sweep of grouse wings, the trot of a turkey, the hooves of mule deer and elk: all on the menu for a hungry wolf. But there was no sign of wolves that day. Maletzke was not surprised: "There are a lot of zeros when you are a wildlife biologist," he said, changing out a data card in a motion-triggered wildlife camera.

Farther on the trail, he unpacked a chain saw to cut a tree fallen across the path, all in a day's work for a backcountry biologist. "My mother says I got a Ph.D. in recess," he said, gunning the snowmobile up into the mountains, into the core of the Teanaway pack's home ground.

These wolves are what he calls steppingstones in recovery, the animals that could help lead the way to new territory, such as the vast sweep of country south of I-90 not yet recolonized by wolves. Recovery is still in early stages in Washington, with fewer than 200 wolves documented, and no statewide presence yet established.

Wolves disperse to new territory to find mates and begin packs of their own. Packs won't overlap; the map Maletzke shows of known packs, with their movements tracked by radio collar, presents territories so strictly observed you would think they were fenced.

Wolves have few predators, but they can be killed by other wolves defending a territory or a kill. It is this pack dynamic that wildlife biologists are counting on, in time, to urge wolves into areas where they do not presently live. "We just need a couple to pick up and go," Maletzke says. "It will happen." For there are few animals more resilient or wily than the wolf.

Wolves are the most widely distributed of all land mammals, and one of the most adaptable.

They are formidable athletes, able to swim, climb, lope and run, travel more than 43 miles a day, and run in bursts up to 38 miles per hour. They can swim 8 miles at a stretch and easily travel more than 100 miles in a day when prey is scarce.

Wolves are built for their emphatically carnivorous diet, with a mouth full of 42 teeth meant to stab, slash, tear, puncture, lacerate, crush and

grind as needed. They eat nearly everything.

In Washington, major prey are deer, elk and moose. But wolves also eat coyote and every small mammal from rabbits to mice and squirrels; in addition to birds, including wild turkey, grouse and even songbirds. They will scavenge dead animals and harass cougars and bears off their kill. Wolves in coastal British Columbia eat salmon.

Their stomachs can hold 22 pounds of food at one blowout meal—or they can fast for weeks at a time if they have to.

Wolves don't ambush prey the way cougars do. They are what are called "coursing" predators, flowing like a river over the land, running animals to exhaustion, culling the weak, the sick and the small. It is no accident that wolf pups are born the same time elk and deer birth their young—creating food for the growing wolf pack.

But wolves will attack animals as big as a moose, working in a pack to bring down an animal up to 10 times the weight of a wolf. They will even ambush beavers waddling overland: A beaver dam near a den site is a convenient larder.

With millions of olfactory sensors, their sense of smell is hundreds of times more acute than our own.

Wolves do everything as a pack: Hunting, eating, resting, traveling and caring for their young. A lone wolf usually is in transition, looking for a new pack.

Songsters extraordinaire, wolves moan, yelp, squeak, bark, whine, whimper, snarl, woof and howl loud enough to be heard 6 miles away through forested terrain, and farther on open ground. Legendary wolf tracker Carter Niemeyer says there are few things he'd rather do on an

August night than go out into the woods and howl for wolves, just to hear them go off in response.

He sees progress in Washington since he helped document the state's first pack.

"I think everyone is getting used to wolves and mellowed out a little bit," Niemeyer says. "I think if the politicians let it alone, I think people could coexist."

Wolf recovery has been a flashpoint for environmentalists, ranchers and politicians on all sides of the issue. Washington Gov. Jay Inslee has taken a personal interest in wolf recovery in the state, most recently overruling the Fish and Wildlife Commission to require that the department initiate a formal rule-making process to guide lethal removals of wolves when they kill livestock.

Inslee, a Democrat, says success of wolf recovery in Washington is important.

"I care about this magnificent, living system in Washington state in which all is connected, one species to another," Inslee said in an interview. "It is clear we have disrupted that skein of life in ways that are not natural. We have learned that when you take a keystone predator out of an ecosystem, it is not helpful."

Restoring the wolf is about restoring balance to the system, Inslee said, "and that is in everybody's interest. This is hard work because wolves are very successful carnivores, so there are inevitably conflicts.

"But we are having success with the growth of these packs."

One thing all sides agree on: despite lethal removals, the wolves are

going to keep coming. Of that, Jeff Flood, wildlife specialist for the Stevens and Ferry county sheriff's departments, has no doubt.

"I got nothing against the wolf, he is what he is," Flood says. For livestock producers used to working some 60 years now without wolves to contend with, wolves are an added expense, headache and heartache when a beloved animal is killed or maimed—something that compensation payments from the state can't fix. Stress also means some calves are lighter in weight—so they sell for less. Pregnancy rates are off in some herds. "We in northeastern Washington are taking the brunt of it," Flood says. But he says he is no "fire and brimstone" wolf hater.

"I have come to realize we will always have wolves, from here on out. Cattle will always die because of wolves, but wolves are going to die for it, too.

"I work with ranchers in both counties, and most are doing just fine."

When they once roamed wild on the Olympic Peninsula, wolves and orca whales and the Indigenous people today called Quileute began their ancient association.

The stories say the first Quileute ancestors were transfigured by Kwati, a shape shifter and transformer. The wolf has deep meaning for the Quileute, whose masks, baskets, rattles and carvings carry its visage.

Elder Roger Jackson has carved several wolf masks and continues to practice the wolf dance. He carries many stories of wolves, and the teachings of their ability to transform from wolves on land to wolves of the sea: Orcas. "That is the original old, old story that our people a long, long time ago brought out," Jackson says, "of the wolf of the sea and the wolf of the land."

The power of the wolf is very strong, Jackson says. "It depends on the people that take care of it, it will be medicine if they take care of it right. But you really, really have to be careful on bringing that power out and using it; you have to know what you are doing."

Ann Penn-Charles, sitting with Jackson as he spoke, explained that women have the important job of surrounding the wolf dancers to contain the power within the dance circle. "They always come out in equal pairs," she says of the wolf dancers. "Us ladies with our (dance) shawls, we keep the power inside that circle." She explains that the teachings of wolves have always influenced Quileute society.

"It gives us our tight family connection," Penn-Charles says. "We keep in contact with each other at all times, we don't leave anyone behind."

As wolves disappeared from the peninsula, tribal members adapted, taking kids to the Olympic Game Farm in Sequim to see captive wolves, to learn how they move, Penn-Charles says, so they could learn to do the wolf dance properly.

How much longer will it be before wild wolves again are roaming the peninsula? The return of the wolf will make whole not only Native cultures, but the ecology of a landscape missing one of its top predators.

Harriet Allen is an author of the state wolf recovery plan. She remains hopeful for Washington wolf recovery, starting with the arrival of the Lookout pack more than a decade ago. "They did it all on their own," Allen says. "We had the habitat, and it happened just the way we envisioned it would." She is inspired by the story of Takaya, a wolf that wandered down Vancouver Island, swam out to Discovery Island near Victoria, and survived alone on the island for eight years, learning how to hunt seals and seabirds.

He did fine until he swam back to Vancouver Island—where he was shot by a hunter last year.

In the winter of 2019-20, Maletzke started seeing a new black wolf on his cameras in 32M's territory, just about the same time that he noted 32M was noticeably slowing down. He was having trouble keeping up with the pack—and even with getting up. His muzzle had grayed. By March, he was pushed out of his territory and traveling alone.

In early summer 2020, Maletzke got the call about a lone wolf seen hanging around a horse pasture. Maletzke arrived to see old 32M lying down. "It took him about a minute to get up," he says. "I wasn't sure he was going to make it. It took him 45 minutes to go about a half a mile. He walked off into the woods."

After not hearing anything more for a while, Maletzke decided to dial in the old wolf's radio collar. He got a mortality signal.

The patriarch who had weighed 94 pounds in his prime was down to 88 pounds when he died in July 2020 of natural causes, says Maletzke, who found his carcass in a dense, brushy creek bottom. Maletzke keeps 32M's skull for remembrance, the powerful teeth yellowed with age. He was at least 12 years old—old for a wolf in the wild. His progeny live on, some dispersed hundreds of miles to B.C. But one 2-year-old male headed east and founded the new Naneum pack, helping to further wolf recovery in Washington.

All along, the Teanaway pack has stayed mostly out of trouble, probably helped by a lot of range riding intended to help reduce conflicts over wolf recovery by keeping wolves away from cattle.

"He is an example of wolves living and doing what they do, even around people," Maletzke says of wolf 32M, an ambassador for his species for

people who have never before lived with wolves in Washington.

Story Warren, a student at the University of Montana, was just a girl when she first saw 32M's tracks in the Teanaway River Valley—a thrill that helped spark a serious interest in wildlife that now fuels her studies.

"His huge, distinct tracks were just so crazy to see," she says. "Even when you are looking for wolf tracks, they are bigger than you would expect and more exciting to find.

"I was just blown away, it was unfathomable to be in my home state and find something so outlandish, so unexpected, so wild."

To her, the return of the wolf is about more than the species, it is about recovering something even bigger: Hope.

"Growing up in my generation there is so much bad ecological news, a lot of hopelessness about climate change and loss of biodiversity and extinctions," Warren says. "At the same time, we are growing up in this very technological, artificial world.

"To have something as wild as wolves coming back to Washington and other parts of the Pacific Northwest is just very exciting and encouraging for me personally. Just to know that such an amazing and powerful creature exists."

©2021 The Seattle Times. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: After being driven to near extinction, wolves are back in Washington. Can we coexist with them? (2021, June 2) retrieved 16 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-06-driven-extinction-wolves-washington-coexist.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.