

Verdict in for wildlife mystery in Nevada where DNA tests show suspected wolves were coyotes

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The verdict is in. The latest wildlife mystery in Nevada has been solved.

Scientists who set out on a trail through the snow near the Idaho line to gather evidence like detectives in search of a suspect relied on the scat and fur samples they collected to determine a trio of animals spotted during a helicopter survey in March were not [wolves](#) after all, but rather a group of wily coyotes.

DNA testing confirmed the results with 99.9% certainty, the Nevada Department of Wildlife announced this week.

The sighting in northeast Nevada near Merritt Mountain about 90 miles (144 kilometers) north of Elko initially spurred a great deal of excitement as it would have marked only the second time in a century that wolves were spotted in the state.

The Nevada Department of Wildlife went to great lengths to set the record straight with extensive DNA testing partly because the department has spent the past two years trying to figure out why a [growing number of moose have been migrating in recent years from Idaho into Nevada](#).

Prior to 2018, only a handful of [moose](#) had been sighted in Nevada over the previous century. Experts estimate their numbers now exceed 100, and Nevada wildlife commissioners have approved the state's first moose hunting season this fall for just two animals while scientists continue to study their population and demographic trends.

Some had speculated the wolves might be pursuing the moose. Wolves are among predators that stalk young moose in the Northern Rockies, where ranchers blame them for livestock deaths, but scientists have found no evidence of that in Nevada.

After the helicopter contractors looking for moose as part of a collaring project in Nevada spotted the three animals resembling wolves on March

17, state biologists followed up with their own helicopter search and then with ground surveys in the area via snowmobiles.

They followed tracks with dimensions consistent with a wolf, installed trail cameras and eventually were able to collect several hair, fecal and [urine samples](#) for the DNA analysis.

Department Director Alan Jenne said in announcing the DNA results on Monday that what set the investigation apart from others was the rigorous examination applied to the samples, including sending them to two independent labs instead of just one.

"We appreciate the diligence of our biologists, assisting laboratory personnel and the public's cooperation throughout this process and we will continue to monitor the area for any indication of wolf presence," Jenne said.

In 2017, a single gray wolf was documented in Nevada [near the California line](#) west of the Black Rock Desert about 120 miles (193 km) north of Reno. It later was determined to be a lone visitor related to the Shasta pack in northern California. Before then, the last confirmed Nevada sighting of a wolf was in 1922, near Elko County's Gold Creek.

"We understand the significance of such sightings and the importance of accurate identification," Jenne said. "NDOW will continue to work closely with state and [federal agencies](#) to uphold our mission of protecting Nevada's ecosystems and wildlife while also maintaining transparency as a top priority in all our communications with the public."

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