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# 25 Years Of Re-living With Wolves In Yellowstone

PARK SERVICE VETERAN NORM BISHOP TRIED TO PREPARE THE YELLOWSTONE REGION FOR WOLVES. TODAY HE REFLECTS ON WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

by **Norman Bishop**



Canis lupus, the gray wolf. Have we become smarter in thinking about wolves? Photo courtesy National Park Service

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Norman Bishop spent decades working as a public education naturalist with the National Park Service. Prior to the restoration of wolves in Yellowstone and afterward, he gave more than 400 public talks on canid predators and helped write the Environmental Impact Statement that cleared the way for their historic. return to Yellowstone and central Idaho. In this essay, below, he reflects on what happened.

**By Norman Bishop**

Wildlife lovers are celebrating an anniversary: Twenty-five years ago in January 1995, the U.S.

Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service translocated 14 gray wolves from Alberta to Yellowstone and 15 to central Idaho to restore them to those areas. In 1996, another 17 wolves from British Columbia were moved to Yellowstone, and 20 to central Idaho.

Today, the northern Rocky Mountains are home to 819 wolves in Montana, 540 to 810 in Idaho, and 286 in Wyoming—of which 80 lived in Yellowstone in 2018 and around 97 at the end of 2019.

The story of reintroduction began 50 years before 1995, when **Aldo Leopold, father of game management** in America, in a review of *Young and Goldman's Wolves of North America*, wrote, “Viewed as conservation, [this book] *The Wolves of North America* is, to me, intensely disappointing. The next to last sentence in the book asserts: ‘There still remain, even in the United States, some areas of considerable size in which we feel that both the red and the gray [wolves] may be allowed to continue their existence with little molestation.’”

Then he asked, “Where are these areas? Probably every reasonable ecologist will agree that some of them should lie in the larger national parks and wilderness areas; for instance, the Yellowstone and its adjacent national forests. ... Why, in the necessary process of extirpating wolves from the livestock ranges of Wyoming and Montana, were not some of the uninjured animals used to restock the Yellowstone?”

Finally, Leopold asked, “Are we really better off without wolves in the wilder parts of our forests and ranges?”



Conservation history made: In January 1995, the late Mollie Beattie, then national director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt (blue jacket) and Yellowstone Superintendent Mike Finley to the right of Babbitt, carried in the first group of wolf transplants to their pens in the Lamar Valley of Yellowstone. The author of this essay, Norman Bishop, can be seen in the photo at far right. Photo courtesy Jim Peaco/National Park Service.

In the wake of what happened in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and central Idaho a human generation ago, that question is being asked yet again.

Colorado conservationists who recognize the value of wolves to the integrity of wild ecosystems have joined as "the Rocky Mountain Wolf Project" in an effort to educate their neighbors about the reality of wolves, and the project's action fund has gathered signatures on a petition to place Initiative 107 on the 2020 ballot.

If passed, the initiative would direct Colorado Parks and Wildlife to restore wolves to the state by 2023. We could also consider this the fiftieth, rather than the 25th anniversary of wolf restoration, because the first Endangered Species Act was actually passed by Congress in 1969, and then the better-known revision was passed in 1973.

As early as 1971, a meeting was held in Yellowstone to consider the possibility of restoring wolves there. After biologist John Weaver in 1975 found there were no existing wolves in the park, the Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Team drafted the first plan to restore wolves in the region. That one was signed in 1980.

A revised plan was completed in 1985 and signed in 1987. Five years later, Congress finally authorized the next big step, preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), in 1992. After holding hundreds of hearings, and recording over 160,000 comments, the Fish and Wildlife Service signed the EIS in 1994.

Amid a plethora of lawsuits, wolves were finally translocated from Alberta to the park, starting January 12, 1995. What we have learned in the last 25 years represents a quantum leap forward in knowledge about wolves. All those lessons, and the findings of the 1994 EIS, are applicable to the proposal to restore wolves to Colorado, represented by Initiative 107.

From numerous studies, we now know that reintroducing wolves would help to restore Colorado's wild natural balance. **Concerns about wolves' impact on hunting can be allayed by data from Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming.**



**Consider these numbers: In 1995 the elk population in Wyoming was estimated at 103,448 and the elk harvest that year was 17,695. In 2017, the elk population was estimated at 104,800 (31 percent over objectives set by state game managers) and the elk harvest was 24,535. Notably the average**



The Junction Butte Pack in Yellowstone. Photo by Doug Smith

hunter success rate was 35 percent.

In Montana the 1995 elk population was 109,500 and I could not find the harvest data for 1995. In 2018, Montana's elk population was estimated at 138,470 ( 27 percent over upper objective) and the 2017 elk harvest was 30,348, some 6,000 more than in Wyoming.

In Idaho, the 1995 elk population was estimated to be 112,333 and the harvest that year was 22,400. In 2017, the Idaho elk population stood at 116,800 (4,000 more than when wolves arrived.

Notably, 18 elk units were assessed to be at or above population objectives set by the state, 10 units were deemed below objective for a variety of reasons that certainly include predation but also human harvest, agriculture, habitat degradation and droughts. In 2017 elk harvest in Idaho was 22,751—300 more animals than in 1995.

**In 1995, the elk population in Wyoming was 103,448, the wapiti population in Montana was 109,500, and the number of elk in Idaho was 112,333. Recently, the elk population in Wyoming was 104,800, the population in Montana 138,470 and total elk in Idaho was 116,800. In each of those states, hunter harvests are high.**

Today, we hear in the public rhetoric that wolves have been a disaster for elk hunters. Read the numbers above which come from local state wildlife agencies again.

Peer-reviewed studies make clear that native species like the wolf are essential to ecosystem health and integrity. A sample product of those studies can be reached by going to the issue of Yellowstone Science titled “*Celebrating 20 Years of Wolves.*”

Author of two previous wolf books, long-time Park Service biologist Rick McIntyre, who has intensely monitored wolves in Yellowstone since they arrived, has recorded 100,000 sightings, and has written a new biography of one wolf, *The Rise of Wolf 8*, that was identified by Amazon as

one of the best scientific books of 2019. It is available through your favorite local book sellers.

As there was for the 1995 reintroductions, there is widespread, bipartisan support for restoring wolves to Colorado as revealed by public opinion surveys conducted over the last 20 years, and as recently as February 2019. And there are some people who simply do not want to believe in science.

Experience in the northern Rocky Mountain states has demonstrated that wolves can be restored and managed in a manner that is humane, effective, affordable and respectful of the needs and concerns of Coloradans.

Just as there are unsubstantiated claims that wolves have devastated big game herds in the northern Rockies, there are parallel false assertions that wolves threaten the livestock industry.

There were about six million cattle in the northern Rocky Mountains (NRM) in 2014. The 140 cattle taken by wolves made up 1 in 43,000, or 0.000023 percent of cattle in the states. There were about 825,000 sheep in the NRM in 2014. The 172 sheep taken by wolves made up 1 in 4,800, or 0.000208 percent of sheep in the states. Several conservation organizations are providing effective proactive, non-lethal means of limiting livestock losses to wolves.



Doug Smith inspects a bull elk in Yellowstone that was eaten by wolves. Photo courtesy Jacob W. Frank/National Park Service

Recently, Yellowstone Wolf Project leader Doug Smith and his staff provided some interesting data points compiled between 1995 and 2018.

° ° ° Wildlife researchers in Yellowstone flew 1470 flights, totaling 5120 hours to observe wolves.

° ° ° They visually counted wolf packs 53,064 times and recorded 334,509 hours of wolf behavior, located wolves with GPS technology 351,143 times, and hiked, skied or snowshoed 20,007 miles.

° ° ° They captured and radio collared 412 wolves (601 were re-collared), found 8173 carcasses and determined 6637 were wolf kills (80 percent of those were elk).

° ° ° They necropsied 5194 wildlife carcasses (278 of which were wolves) and they wrote 85 scientific publications, three books, and 22 book chapters, 27 technical reports, gave 4305 formal presentations, 14,767 informal presentations and wrote 37 popular articles. In addition they presented at 45 conferences and gave 1915 interviews.

We know a lot more about wolves than when I helped write the Environmental Impact Statement and the Lamar Valley has become the premier place for watching wild wolves in the world.

A University of Montana economic study determined that the increase in visitors to Yellowstone to view wolves netted \$35.5 million annually for the 20 counties surrounding the park.

Tens of thousands of visitors come in the shoulder seasons to watch wolves. On human safety: From 1995 to 2018, Yellowstone hosted 101,070,722 visitors, none of whom was injured by a wolf. Among 2.7 million tent campers in Yellowstone from 1995 to 2018, no camper was injured by a wolf.

As a native Coloradan, who studied botany and zoology at the University of Denver, then forestry and wildlife management at Colorado State U., and spent the last three decades studying wolves, I know we owe it to future generations to maintain the health of Colorado by keeping wildlife like wolves on the wild landscape. You don't have to like wolves but it is important that you base your judgments of the animals on facts, which exist in abundance.



### About **Norman Bishop**

Norman A. Bishop was a national park ranger for 36 years, at Rocky Mountain National Park 1960-62, Death Valley 1962-64, Yosemite 1964-66, Mount Rainier 1966-72, Southeast Regional Office 1972-1980, and Yellowstone from 1980 to 1997. He was a reviewer and compiler of 1990 and 1992 "Wolves for Yellowstone?" and the

1994 Environmental Impact Statement titled *The Reintroduction of Gray Wolves to Yellowstone National Park and Central Idaho*, and was the principal interpreter of wolves and their restoration at Yellowstone National Park from 1985 until 1997, when he retired to Bozeman. He has received numerous awards including the Stephen T. Mather Award from the National Parks Conservation Association and recognition from the International Wolf Center.

[BACK TO HOME](#)



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