

# LOBO WATCH

## Editorial News Release

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### **Are The Northern Rockies In A Predator Pit?**

Just what is a "***Predator Pit***"?

Wolf researchers have come to use the term when referring to an area where predators have pulled prey populations down so low that recovery of those populations is impossible, unless there is a drastic reduction in the number of predators. The situation results from how predators affect prey numbers in two different ways. One is the manner in which predators, especially wolves, kill far more adult prey animals than needed to survive, commonly referred to as "***surplus killing***". The second is the destruction of the prey age class, due to the loss of newborn young of the year. And the loss of that recruitment can be either due to outright killing of fawns and calves in the spring (with excessive surplus killing), or due to the stress predators (especially wolves) place on pregnant females in winter, causing them to abort their fetuses. In the classic ***predator pit*** situation, a rising number of predators results in a constant decline in prey numbers, with the average age of surviving prey animals becoming older and older with each passing year - to the point that reproductive growth becomes impossible and the prey base begins to die off from old age.

This accurately describes the situation in much of the Northern Rocky Mountains of Montana, Idaho and Wyoming today.

Through the 1970s and 1980s, populations of elk, moose and other big game had recovered well from the record lows of the early 1900s, and by the mid 1990s many areas of the Northern Rockies boasted record wildlife populations. And through all of that recovery from the market hunting era of the late 1800s, there were still viable populations of mountain lions, black bear, and in some areas even a few grizzlies. The only missing predator was the wolf. America's sportsmen had poured billions of dollars into modern conservation projects, many of which took decades to accomplish, and they

had been rewarded with an abundance of game. So much so, that during the 1980s and 1990s many joked that "***The Good Ol' Days Are Now!***".

Now, they know there was more to that feeling than anyone at that time could have realized.

Against the wishes of the vast majority of sportsmen in this country, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began releasing wolves back into the Northern Rockies in 1995. And as wolf numbers quickly grew, thanks to federal protection under the Endangered Species Act, the dynamics of the predator to prey ratio likewise quickly changed. When the first 31 wolves were dumped back into Yellowstone National Park (1995-1996), close to 20,000 elk made up the northern Yellowstone elk herd. Today, there are more than 400 wolves within the Greater Yellowstone Area - and the northern Yellowstone elk herd, which is one of several herds in the region, has plummeted to fewer than 6,000 remaining animals. And those that have managed to survive the constant pursuit of wolf packs, some of which are now known to number 20 or more adults, have become a very geriatric herd. In 1995-96, the average age of that elk herd was around 4 years of age, today the remaining animals are an average of 8 to 9 years of age. Calf recruitment in the spring is presently near zero.

Yellowstone's elk herds are dying. And so are the elk herds in many other areas of western Montana, northwestern Wyoming, and the northern half of Idaho. The area is definitely well into a predator pit situation. And the elk aren't the only big game that's now quickly disappearing. Moose, which were once plentiful in the Northern Rockies, have become nearly non-existent. In fact, within Yellowstone National Park, they could probably qualify as an "***Endangered Species***". Likewise, throughout the entire region, mule deer, bighorn sheep and mountain goat populations are also in serious decline - and the problem is wolf depredation.

Sportsmen and others who are concerned about the future of wildlife in this once wildlife rich region of the country are now beginning to organize to take on those who seem to have one goal in mind - and that is to put an end to sport hunting. Who are the enemies?

Topping the list is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. We now know that when Congress denied funding for capturing Canadian wolves and transplanting them into Wyoming, Montana and Idaho, USFWS literally stole the money needed for the project from the excise taxes sportsmen paid on firearms, ammunition, archery equipment and fishing gear, through what is known as the Pitman-Robertson Act. These funds are to be used exclusively for wildlife habitat and fisheries improvement. USFWS helped itself to somewhere between \$60- and \$70-million dollars to finance several unauthorized uses - including the funding needed to dump wolves back into the Northern Rockies ecosystem.

Right there with USFWS is a long list of anti-hunting "**environmental**" organizations, including the Defenders of Wildlife, the Sierra Club, the Human Society of the United States, and a few dozen others. These groups have learned to use wolf impact on big game populations as a tool to put an end to hunting. Without a surplus of big game, there's no need for hunters. It's that simple. And one former upper echelon USFWS division chief, who blew the whistle on the theft of millions from Pitman-Robertson funds, also says that USFWS has entered into **under-the-table** agreements with the environmentalists - those who want more wolves, and fewer hunters.

And as absurd as it may sound, several of the state wildlife agencies which sportsmen have funded and supported since those agencies were founded have also bought into all the lies, deceit and theft that has now been associated with the Wolf Recovery Project of the Northern Rockies. And as these same sportsmen learn more about all that's wrong with introducing non-native, non-endangered Canadian wolves into Montana, Idaho and Wyoming, upper management within a couple of these agencies continues the cover up of the damage wolves have already dealt big game populations, livestock impact due to wolf depredation, the loss of hunting opportunities, how USFWS manipulated wolf science to justify the introduction of an invasive wolf subspecies, the true number of wolves in their respective states, and what it is going to take to gain control of this problem.

Perhaps the worst of the state wildlife agency lot has been Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Sportsmen in this state have become extremely agitated at MT FWP's inability to get a handle on the impact wolves are dealing elk, moose and other big game - and that was very evident at one of the agency's regional meetings to discuss wolves and wolf "**management**" on June 2, 2010. That meeting took place in Missoula, for the state's Region 2 management unit.

A presentation by Regional Supervisor Mack Long, Regional Wildlife Manager Mike Thompson, and Regional Wolf Coordinator Liz Bradley, to detail the impact wolves were having on big game populations and various proposed wolf season harvest quotas, only tended to further agitate the 150 or so attending the meeting. Their anger was very evident, and some of the accusation very pointed. It was clear that they had had enough of wolves, and enough of losing the wildlife populations they had funded to build. And they wanted something done, and done quickly to turn things around.

But, there was no encouragement from those making the presentation. They presented three different levels of harvest. If the statewide quota was set at 153, they claimed it would reduce the number of wolves in the state by only 9-percent. Should FWP go with a harvest quota of 186 wolves, that would reduce the state wolf population

by 13-percent. If the quota was set at 216, Thompson claimed that the overall state wolf population would be reduced by 20-percent.

But, 9-, 13- or 20-percent of what? The sportsmen of Montana are fully aware of the fact that MT FWP does not have a clue about the true number of wolves within the state. During an Environmental Quality Committee meeting at the State Capitol Building in Helena in early March, the agency admitted they had not done an official wolf count since 2008. The Chairman of that committee questioned the accuracy of their counts when he shared that two years ago, when he asked how many wolf packs were in the area of his home in northwest Montana, FWP told him just one. Then, this past winter they admitted they knew of at least six, maybe eight packs there.

Extremely few of the sportsmen in that room for the meeting bought FWP's claim of having just 500-550 wolves in the state. Most feel there are at least twice that many, as evidenced by the loss of big game numbers all along the western side of Montana.

Attending the meeting was Bob Ream, Chairman of the MT FWP Commission, who had willingly worked with the introduction of the non-native Canadian wolves throughout the Northern Rockies at the start of the project. He angered the crowd even more when he stated, ***"More than 60-percent of the wolves now in Montana came here from Canada on their own."***

If that's true, why did USFWS feel so compelled to embezzle more than \$60-million dollars from the funds provided by sportsmen for improving wildlife and fisheries habitat - in order to introduce wolves? Many of those at the meeting felt that it was just more of the agency's cover up of a mad-scientist experiment gone bad.

So, what would it take to bring Montana's (along with Idaho's and Wyoming's) elk, moose and other big game populations out of the ***predator pit*** situation they've been thrown into by misguided federal and state wildlife agencies? One thing is for certain, it'll take a heck of a bigger reduction of wolf numbers than 20-percent!

Before writing his acclaimed book, ***"Wolves in Russia - Anxiety Through the Ages"***, author Will Graves spent several decades researching and studying wolves and their impact in that country. He shares that to reverse the negative impact wolves have on wildlife populations, livestock production, plus the emotional, health and safety threat to human inhabitants of a wolf populated region, the Russian government found it necessary to reduce wolf populations by as much as 80-percent. And they did so by using semi- and full-auto gunfire from helicopters. During Grave's research, wolf control in that country carried a price tag of about \$45-million annually.

Will Graves claims, ***"Wolves cannot be managed...they have to be controlled!"***

In his May 2008 declaration for the wolf delisting hearing and pending "**wolf management hunts**", Dr. L. David Mech stated, "**It has not been demonstrated that 'a substantial reduction' in wolf abundance will occur, and my opinion is that it will not because merely to hold a wolf population stationary requires an annual take of 28-50% per year.**"

Mech went on to declare that wildlife agencies outside of the Northern Rockies recovery area try to kill 70% of the wolf population annually in order to achieve a reduction in wolf numbers. He was referring to what it takes to keep wolf levels low enough to prevent a **predator pit** situation in Alaska and areas of Canada. According to this wolf biologist and researcher, who is considered by many to be the top wolf expert in the world, sport hunting as currently being implemented by the wildlife agencies in Montana and Idaho normally do nothing to reduce wolf populations.

Even if MT FWP goes into the 2010 wolf season with a quota of 216 wolves, and that quota is met, it simply means that by next spring there will be still more wolves on the landscape of Montana than there are as this is written - and that western Montana's **predator pit** situation will only worsen. More elk, more moose, more deer, more bighorn sheep, more mountain goats will be lost to the wolves, and those animals that do manage to survive the continuous onslaught of those apex predators will inch one more year closer to being lost to old age. The big game populations that have provided food for western families, an opportunity for sportsmen to harvest the surplus bounty and enjoy time afield with family and friends, and which have simply provided viewing enjoyment for countless wildlife watchers are dangerously close to being lost forever.

Sportsmen fully realize what they are losing, and they feel those who they have entrusted to wisely manage these wildlife resources are now asleep at the wheel - or just don't care anymore. Wolf impact on the Northern Rockies is a bomb that's about ready to explode, and the fuse keeps getting shorter and shorter. - **Toby Bridges, LOBO WATCH**

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