



Fact or Fiction? Debunking common myths about wolves

Wolves have been demonized and misunderstood for much of human history, long before the first campaigns began in the 1880s to eliminate them from the Western landscape. Mislabeled as vicious, evil or unpredictable creatures, they have been blamed for all manner of ills, from spreading disease to putting ranchers out of business. We've addressed some of the more common myths below in an attempt to clear the air, cultivate greater respect for these native animals, and increase awareness of the wolf's proper place in the ecosystem.

Myth: Wolves are spreading the tapeworm *Echinococcus granulosus* and may infect humans.

Some wolves do contract the Echinococcus tapeworm, but this problem is not unique to their species. The disease comes primarily from the deer and elk on which they feed, not the wolves themselves. In fact, all the wolves reintroduced in Yellowstone were screened and treated for this parasite prior to their release. The parasite is much more common in species like coyotes, foxes, sheep and domestic dogs. It doesn't pose a health threat to people unless they handle the feces of an infected animal. The country's wolf biologists, who have handled dozens of wolves and their scat, have not contracted a single case of this contagious parasite.



Myth: The wolves that were reintroduced to Yellowstone and central Idaho in the mid-'90s were non-native "Canadian" wolves.

The Rocky Mountains were once a continuous range for wolves from Canada down to Mexico. The gray wolves currently in the Northern Rockies are the same species (*Canis lupis*) that once roamed across much of the west before they were eliminated by humans. Many of them descended from wolves that walked across the Canadian border on their own in the 1970s and 1980s to re-colonize their historic range in northern Montana. And the wolves that were trapped in Canada and released in Yellowstone and central Idaho were selected for the similarity of their habitat and prey.

Myth: Wolves are wiping out elk and other prized game species in the region.

Overall, elk and deer continue to do well in the region. The 2009 hunting forecast from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation estimated regional populations (in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming) at more than 350,000, with most herds at or above management targets. In addition, there are more than a million deer, leaving plenty of game for both hunters and wolves.

Elk herds naturally increase and decrease in size over time. They do so in response to changes in habitat, nutrition, disease, hunting pressure, predation, weather and a number of other factors. Sometimes predators may cause local impacts on local prey populations, but predator numbers are primarily driven by the availability of their prey, which in turn is controlled by the availability of food and the uncertainty of the weather. These intertwined factors demonstrate nature's inherent balance, and ensure that elk, deer and other ungulates are not 'wiped out' by the animals that eat them.

Defenders of Wildlife Wolf Compensation Trust

Myth: Wolves pose a serious threat to humans and their pets.

Many westerners consider living with wildlife an important part of their natural heritage. Wolves add to that rich wildlife experience and, just like bears, moose, bison, and mountain lions and other animals, should be shown similar respect. Humans should always take care to protect their family, property and beloved pets from wild animals and teach their children to respect all wildlife.

Like most other wildlife, wolves typically have an innate fear of humans and tend to keep their distance. Anyone who has watched, tracked or hunted wolves knows how difficult it can be to get close to these wary creatures. In fact, human presence is one of the strongest deterrents to wolf depredations on livestock and is a key strategy for proactive intervention.

There have been reports, however, that wolves may be responsible for the death of two people in the last 100 years in North America. These attacks, if substantiated, are indeed tragic but are also extremely rare. Far more humans have been killed by bee stings, grizzly bears, mountain lions and pet dogs than by wolves, and many more people die from road accidents with elk, deer and cattle than from all wildlife attacks combined.

Myth: There are more than enough wolves on the landscape already, warranting no further protections.

There is no magic number of wolves that will guarantee the long-term survival of the species in the Northern Rockies. Many wildlife biologists agree that at least 2,000 wolves are needed for successful recovery, but existing policies would allow all but 150 wolves to be killed in each state. Beyond the numbers, distribution is the key to long-term viability of the wolf population. The three subpopulations in the northern Rocky Mountain ecosystem must be interconnected via dispersal pathways and migration corridors to ensure genetic viability and ecological function.



Minnesota alone has been able to successfully manage their wolf population to maintain more than 3,000 individuals in the northern portion of the state. With a much larger land area and excellent habitat, there's no reason the Northern Rockies can't support a healthy, interconnected wolf population.

Myth: Wolves will destroy the ranching business by killing livestock.

Wolf depredations on livestock still account for less than 1% of livestock losses in the region. More livestock are lost to other predators like coyotes and even stray dogs than to wolves. Far more are killed by disease, bad weather, birthing problems and other natural causes. Furthermore, Defenders has a successful track record of working with ranchers and other livestock producers to minimize wolf conflicts. Nonlethal methods such as using range riders, guard dogs, portable fencing, hazing and changing animal husbandry practices have all proven effective in deterring wolf depredations.