

spirit of the wild

Wolves—Wilderness Icon Expands Range



□ by Michael Furtman

Draper Lake is a long place from anywhere, even by canoe country standards.

I awoke to a drab, drizzly morning after a night of storms so fierce we could only sleep after reaching exhaustion from sitting huddled on our foam pads as defense against lightning strikes. The roar of the storm, both from wind and thunder, had been deafening making the less-than attractive morning nevertheless welcome.

I walked down to the west end of the island and surveyed the scene. Sheets of half-fog,

half-drizzle limped across the open water between us and the mainland. Water dripped from the shore-hugging cedars, splattering in great rings on the now calm lake. Not a pretty day to be sure, but I was thankful the storm had passed us without damage.

Apparently, so were the wolves.

On the main shoreline three wolves, wet coats plastered to their bodies, scrambled among the boulders. Reaching a flat spot, they too looked out over the lake. Then in one of those

magical moments that cause all of us to return again and again to canoe country, one wolf pointed its muzzle toward the gray dawn and howled long and loudly.

I try not to anthropomorphize animal behavior, but that howl seemed nothing less than a mournful cry at being wet and miserable. And I could sympathize.

Canoe Country—A Refuge For Wolves

Not very long ago, if you wanted to hear a wolf anywhere in the lower 48 states, it



FRANK ARKO

During the dark days of wolf persecution the canoe country wilderness became the last critical refuge of the timber wolf in the lower 48. Today human attitudes have become more tolerant and the wolf has expanded its range and population.



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had to be done in the canoe country. Driven by persecution and poisoning from everywhere else in their U.S. range, wolves held on in what became the Boundary Waters largely because of the area's remoteness and the constant influx of wolves from nearby Canada—where populations were more stable.

According to Bill Berg, formerly a wildlife biologist for the state of Minnesota, wolves were bountied in Minnesota from 1849 (when they were worth \$3) through 1965 (a wolf pelt brought \$35) when all bounties ended in the state. Although bounties generally did not control populations of other predators, they had an impact on wolves. By the early 1900s wolves were rare in southern and western MN and by the 1950s wolves were gone from those areas of MN.

But they still managed to persist in and near canoe country, which became a hotbed during the next forty

years of wolf research. One of the earliest studies was done by Milt Stenlund in the early 1950s. Stenlund studied the Superior National Forest in northeastern MN where the Boundary Waters is found. After extrapolation to the rest of northern Minnesota, Stenlund's data indicated a population of 450-700 wolves, most of which resided in 12,000 square miles of the main wolf range.

Despite the annual taking of about 200 wolves per year by bounty trappers, wolf numbers remained stable for the next two decades. By the time the bounty ended and wolves became protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973, it is thought there were approximately 500-700 wolves left in the state. After the bounty ended in 1965, wolves could still be legally trapped and hunted year-round in Minnesota. The MN DNR records indicate about 250 wolves were killed annually

until 1974, when wolves became completely protected under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Few animals are as well studied today as is the wolf, but that wasn't always true. After protection by the ESA, the wolves of canoe country and surrounding woodlands became the focus of an enormous amount of research.

Perhaps the most famous of these biologists is L. David Mech. In the mid-1970s Mech, using his data from wolf densities in three study areas and extrapolating it to the known wolf range at the time, figured the wolf population exceeded one thousand animals. Not long after, during the winter of 1978-79, the MN DNR used field personnel from several resource management agencies to report wolf sightings and movements. This information was combined with results from four radio-tracking studies, resulting in a state-wide population estimate of 1,235

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wolves. This figure persisted as the official population estimate for ten years. In the early 1980s work my Mech, Steve Fritts and Bill Paul identified areas of newly colonized wolf range that suggested range and population were expanding to the west and south.

By 1989 when another survey was completed, the wolf population in Minnesota had crept up to somewhere between 1,500-1,750 animals living in 233 packs, each pack averaging five wolves. By the similar 1998 survey, wolf numbers had increased to a remarkable 2,450 individuals in 385 packs, and wolves had managed to repopulate habitats long empty and much further south and west in the state than believed possible. Indeed, wolf colonization spread not only through Minnesota but into Wisconsin and finally to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Wolves have been seen almost as far south as the Iowa border, but their primary range lies north and east of a line drawn from about

Pine City to Warroad.

A Remarkable Recovery

There are several reasons why wolves managed to rapidly expand their range: their own resiliency as a species, protection under the ESA and logging. Yes, logging.

Once thought of as animals of pure wilderness and predicted to never cross a four-lane highway, wolves proved everyone wrong.

Each generation of wolves, pioneering into what for them was new habitat, began to encounter more and more human artifacts—homes, highways, cities. Rather than retreating back to the wilderness, they instead adapted. Wolves today routinely cross highways, even the interstate between Duluth and the Twin Cities, as they hunt or seek out territories or mates.

While that surprised many people, perhaps it shouldn't have. It is interesting to note that of the large predators on the planet, the wolf's natural range (before it was widely

eliminated) was second in size only to that of humans. In other words—they had, over thousands of years, already demonstrated they could indeed move into and succeed in just about any habitat that provided them food.

Key to that successful movement back into long-abandoned habitats was the protection of the ESA. In 1974 wolves in Minnesota became completely protected and listed as “endangered.” In 1978 their status was changed to “threatened” to allow the killing of problem wolves; wolves which had moved into areas with farms and ranches and were verified as having killed livestock.

At times, as many as 200 of these wolves were killed per year by federal trappers, yet the wolf population continued to grow about 6% per year. The reason is simple. Wolves can sustain an annual harvest of about 30% per year and still increase in numbers; it takes an annual harvest of about 50% for the population to actually

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cause moose live at pretty low densities; that is, there aren't many around so wolves need to scour a large area to make a living.

But in the 1970s a lowly tree called the aspen, or popple, long considered little more than a weed by the timber industry, came into high demand. Young aspen also happens to be very good winter forage for both deer and moose and regenerates rapidly. After logging, the young forests in the Superior National Forest outside of the BWCAW became prime deer habitat. And with the deer, came the wolves.

Coupled with some mild winters, deer numbers increased rapidly. According to Berg, in Minnesota each wolf takes the equivalent of 18 to 20 adult-sized deer per year on average. Based on this average, wolves kill the equivalent of about 40,000 deer per year, compared to deer hunters who, until 1995, took 60,000-80,000 deer across the entire wolf range. But the winters of 1995-96 and 1996-97 set records for their severity, and deer numbers decreased by about half. Consequently, deer hunters took about 25,000 deer in 1996 in the Minnesota wolf range, while wolves (whose numbers remained unchanged) continued to take about 40,000 deer.

When prey populations fluctuate dramatically, predator numbers usually follow, and wolf numbers stabilized (or slightly decreased) following the deer decline, albeit temporarily. The winters of 1997-98 through 1999-2000 were among the mildest on record, thereby allowing the deer and wolf populations to again increase. By 1999 the deer hunter harvest had increased to 73,000 deer, and the wolf scent station index (DNR's annual index of wolf population) rose to a new record in Minnesota.

What is truly interesting since the crash of the deer herd

decline. Killing such a large number of wolves can only be done using methods from the past, which no one would condone today—unregulated poisoning and aerial shooting.

Finally, probably the best thing that ever happened to wolf recovery outside the Boundary Waters is logging.

Though wolves do just fine in pure wilderness, with the fire suppression that has occurred the last 100 years in the Bound-

ary Waters, the forest in the wilderness had little chance to regenerate. Since the wolf's primary food source are ungulates—hooved animals such as moose and deer—and these animals do best in young forests, the wolf numbers in canoe country are actually relatively small given the large size of the area. Furthermore, they tend to live in larger packs, with bigger territories. The territories are large be-

in the late 90s is the whitetail population rebounded to pre-crash numbers within four years, despite the fact that wolf numbers were at an all time high. These results prove the point that it isn't the predator that controls the prey population, but the other way around. Today the DNR actively encourages hunters to take more than one deer in many parts of the wolf-deer range because deer numbers exceed available habitat. In other words, both wolves and human hunters are experiencing abundance without unmanageable conflict.

A Bit Of Biology

Despite tales of 150-pound wolves, the truth is a lot of wolves in canoe country, and the rest of the region, aren't often any bigger than your average Labrador retriever.

Long legs tend to make wolves look big, but you'd be hard pressed to find a female wolf that weighs more than 80 pounds and most are nearer to 60. Males are larger—biologists call this sexual dimorphism—and although they can tip the scales as high as 120 pounds, most will weigh well under 100.

Grab your tape measure and run it down the length of your Golden Retriever. The number you came up with, probably somewhere between five and six feet from the tip of the tail to the end of the cold black nose, is likely to be close to the length of a wolf. At the shoulder a wolf will measure 26 to 32 inches.

Of course, it really shouldn't come as any surprise that the measurements from wolves and large dogs are pretty close. The wolf and the dog are actually the same animal. Hard to believe when you look at a Pekinese, but even within that little dog is every gene that is in the wolf. Our dogs look so different from wolves because we have made them that way by selectively breeding for

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certain traits. However, all dogs have descended from wolves, probably wolves of Middle-Eastern descent, since that's where the first archeological remains of domestic dogs are found. Genetic testing reveals no other source of material in dogs—there are no coyote genes, no fox genes—nothing but wolf genes.

Unlike our dogs which come into heat twice a year, wolves remain true to the prototype.

That is, their breeding cycle is timed so they give birth in the spring only, thus allowing pups the full summer and fall to achieve enough growth and development to survive their first winter. That means most breeding takes place in January or February, and following a two-month gestation, pups are born.

Like the animals they prey upon, winters are the hardest time of year for wolves too, and

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mortality rates increase during winters. But unlike deer and moose, who have a harder time during severe winters, wolves actually do better in the canoe country (and elsewhere in the north) when the snows are deep because they can more easily capture prey.

Wolves are considered mature at one year of age, but actually start hunting with the pack at six months. Until that time, other pack members—not just the parents—actively bring food back to the pups. Often this food is carried inside the wolf and regurgitated for the pups upon return. Although a wolf has the potential to live as long as any dog, a five or six year old wolf is actually quite old; few in the wild live past ten. Life is tough in the woods.

What you've heard about only the lead male and female doing the breeding (the Alpha pair) is true. Through acts of aggression, the "top dogs" reinforce their position so they

can have exclusive reproductive rights in their pack. If another wolf wants to breed, it can challenge a leader or leave to try to start its own pack. Both come with dangers. Alpha females have been known to kill even their own daughters who sought to displace them. Moving out is risky too because finding a mate and establishing a territory is difficult. An encounter with a neighboring pack could lead to a quick death, as wolves defend their packs aggressively against all intruding canines.

While a pack can have as few as two wolves, most wolf packs outside of the canoe country (which will feed on the smaller, more abundant white-tailed deer) tend to have four to six individuals. Wolves in the Boundary Waters and Quetico, where moose are the main prey, often form larger packs of about a dozen members.

While it has long been thought this pack-prey size

ratio was based on the number of animals needed to take down the prey, it may not be as simple as that. Even when a large pack kills a moose, the actual killing may be done by just a few pack members. It may be the larger packs found among moose-hunting wolves has to do with the amount of food an individual prey species can provide. A moose, at four to eight times the size of a deer, can feed significantly more wolves at a time.

Wolf packs change in individual make up too. If you were to start with a pack of ten wolves today, in ten years, it is very likely not one of the original ten wolves would remain, even if the pack remained the same size. Wolves die, some disperse and, in some cases, new wolves from outside the pack may be allowed in.

The notion that one old, wise wolf leads a pack for years and that the pack social structure



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would fall apart if the alpha pair were killed, simply isn't true. There is always another wolf, waiting in the wings, to assert itself and move into a position of dominance.

Wolves And People

A few years ago a friend of my wife from her hometown of Milwaukee called. Seems they were planning a trip to northern Minnesota to go camping, and she was worried about the wolves eating her kids. I told her not to worry.

That's a fairly easy statement to make. While there have been a few rare instances in which wolves have attacked people elsewhere—often in cases where the wolves were diseased, had been acclimated to people because people had been feeding them or where prey was exceptionally low. The fact is, wolves really want nothing to do with us.

If it is safe to say that at no time or place in the world have

more people and more wolves lived in such close proximity as they do today in northern Minnesota. While wolves do kill some livestock and dogs, they have proven to be adept at staying away from people. There are many humans who've lived their entire lives in the north country and never seen a wolf, despite the increasing numbers.

Still, wolves, like bears are formidable predators deserving of respect. Visitors to the canoe country have little to fear from them but should a chance encounter occur, it is wise to give them their space. More likely, though, a visitor will only be on the receiving end of a chorus of wolf howls, a sound that even in canoe country is not common.

It may come, as it did for me, on a quiet morning on a remote lake. Perhaps instead you will hear it rise from some distant ridge as you sit with friends

around a cheery campfire. In any case, it will not be something you will soon forget; long after the bug bites and sore backs of your canoe trip have been forgotten, the wildness of that call will linger in your soul.

That you heard it while in the wilderness is also not insignificant. While wolves in Minnesota outside the canoe country are now flourishing, their future bright, they are there only because of wilderness. Without wilderness, there would have been no refuge for them during the dark days of wolf persecution. Without wilderness, there would have been no reserve of wolves to once again pioneer back into country they once called home.

If wolves are not just wilderness dwellers any longer, it is only because wilderness gave them a critical refuge while people developed a greater tolerance for the big predator. □