# Hunt Represents Successful Wolf Conservation

On September 16, a hunter killed the first wolf in Montana's first regulated, fair chase wolf hunting season. His shot in a remote wilderness area of southwestern Montana signaled that wolves in the northern Rockies are fully recovered to the point that populations can now support regulated hunting seasons.

To those unfamiliar with how wildlife conservation works, it may seem strange that a hunting season represents a healthy and recovered wildlife population. After all, wasn't hunting responsible for killing all the wolves in Montana in the early 1900s?

Actually, no. What drove wolves to near extinction in the West were largely state and federal eradication programs and bounties that encouraged indiscriminate shooting, trapping, and poisoning of any and all wolves across the region. That was a different era, a time when many predator species, including bald eagles, were viewed as vermin that should be wiped out to protect both game animals and livestock. We've learned a lot since then, and attitudes toward many wildlife species have changed greatly.

Wolves were protected by the federal Endangered Species Act in 1973. The population in Montana slowly recovered and then took off after the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service released 66 wolves into Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho in the mid-1990s. Numbers in Montana grew from just 1 wolf in 1980 to roughly 500 today. As a result of this successful population recovery, the federal government returned wolf management authority to the state. With that new authority, Montana approved—as it does for other large carnivores such as cougars and black bears—a carefully regulated hunting season that allows for a portion of the wolf population to be sustainably harvested each year. In this, the first year of hunting, the FWP Commission opted for a conservative harvest of no more than 75 wolves. This ensures that the population will not decline and allows our department to carefully monitor the population during and after the hunting season.

Montana's wolf hunting season will not endanger the health of the wolf population. State and federal monitoring shows that wolves continue to move among subpopulations in the three recovery zones—the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, northwestern Montana, and central Idaho—as well as to and from Canada. This movement will help maintain genetic diversity. Montana's wolf season was designed to not impede wolf dispersal, such as by stipulating that no more than 25 percent of the harvest can come during December, when wolves are especially mobile and moving among subpopulations.

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While Montana's wolf population will remain healthy, it still needs control to retain a reasonable balance of the carnivores and other wildlife. In hunting districts near Yellowstone, wolves have killed up to 20 percent of the elk. Calf recruitment in parts of the Bitterroots this past spring dropped to a record low. And wolves may be worsening the effects of recent severe winters on northwestern whitetail populations. Also, 77 cattle and 111 sheep were confirmed as killed by wolves last year, and more wolf depredations likely occurred but could not be verified. The wolf hunting season is intended to help reduce livestock losses and lessen effects on wild ungulate populations.

Each year, hunters in this state kill roughly 1,200 black bears and anywhere from 300 to 600 mountain lions as part of carefully regulated seasons. But because bears and lions produce new cubs and kittens each year, and the animals have ample habitat in which to live, the populations of both species remain healthy. This department manages bears and lions in balance with their habitat, other wildlife, and the people who live in Montana. The same holds true for elk, deer, and all the other game species.

And it will be the same for wolves, too.

—Joe Maurier, *Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks*

## NATURAL WONDERS

ILLUSTRATION BY PETER GROSSHAUSER

**Q.** ***Where do I go to catch the biggest rainbow trout in Montana?***

**A.** The biggest rainbows come from the Kootenai River, where they grow to steelhead size. That state record is a 33.1-pound monster caught in 1997. Rainbows over 15 pounds are caught there each year. The next biggest rainbows come from the prairie ponds east of the Continental Divide, especially those on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, where trout regularly top 10 pounds. Big rainbows also swim in a few spring creeks, such as Armstrong and DuPuys, located in the Paradise Valley.