



John Shibley / Associated Press

**Central Michigan University graduate student Sarah Davidson studies whether flagged lines, such as the one surrounding a sheep pasture near Rudyard, deter wolf attacks.**

## Environment

# Wolf return a mixed blessing

Michigan wrestles with animal's predator image as federal agency prepares to lift protections.

By Francis X. Donnelly / The Detroit News

**MARQUETTE** -- With the gray wolf about to be removed from the endangered species list, wildlife biologists are celebrating the culmination of a remarkable comeback.

Pushed to the brink of extinction by a century of hunting, trapping and poisoning, the animal somehow persevered and now thrives in the wilds of Minnesota, Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Farmers and cattlemen like the wolf's imminent removal from the list for a different reason: It may make it easier for them to kill the predator.

They say the recovery of the species has been a little too successful, complaining that its burgeoning population has begun attacking their livestock.

So no sooner have wildlife officials and scientists solved one conundrum involving the wolf than they're faced with another: How do they balance the needs of the animal with those of humans?

"The biggest challenge is to maintain tolerance among the public," says Tom Gehring, an assistant professor of biology at Central Michigan University who has studied wolves for nearly two decades. "It's a fragile tolerance. It could be a powder keg issue."

It's a delicate balancing act, he says, because too many timber wolves could lead to a return of the negative image that nearly got it exterminated by the 1950s.

But how many is too many? And how should wildlife officials go about limiting the number?

In some ways, the challenge facing government regulators and scientists now is just as big as the one they faced a half-century ago.

The responsibility for dealing with the wolves will fall to the small handful of states where they remain.

As part of the process for removing the animal from the endangered list, management of the issue will be transferred from the federal government.

The move also will lighten protective measures, but Michigan officials say it's too early to say how.

Biologists say possible remedies to overpopulation range from nonlethal methods — such as collars that would shock the animal if it got too close to farms — to wolf hunts and outright killing of ones that repeatedly prey on livestock.

As the state looks for answers, it will try to appease two groups that have polar opposite views on the issue.

Conservationists don't want to see any of the 360 wolves in Michigan killed. Some farmers and ranchers, on the other hand, wouldn't mind seeing them all wiped out.

"We're concerned about the perception that there's a limit to how many would be tolerated," says Anne Woiwode, director of the Michigan chapter of the Sierra Club. "The reason the wolf entered the endangered list was because it was aggressively limited."

Before Michigan gets a chance to bring together the disparate groups, the federal government must complete its removal of the wolf from the endangered species list in the eastern United States.

The Interior Department hopes to make the decision shortly after it finishes receiving public opinion in mid-November.

The final decision could be delayed by a possible appeal by conservation groups. They said the delisting is premature because, while the wolves are plentiful around the Great Lakes, they're scarce in the rest of the eastern half of the nation.

If an animal was ever destined to be controversial, even during what should be its most celebrated moment, it's *Canis lupus*.

To some, it's the symbol of nature, its howl the song of the wilderness.

But it also has been one of the most vilified animals in history, dating back to 17th-century fairy tales that Europeans later brought with them to the United States.

The wolf — reviled and revered, threatened and threatening — is either a majestic animal or a malicious predator, depending who you're talking to.

"I hear guys say, 'I won't have that crap around my place,'" says Jeffrey DeBacker, 50, a dairy farmer from Cornell in the central UP.

"When you start hearing that, it means they'll begin shooting. Then it will be back at the original situation where all of them get wiped out."

DeBacker says he has lost eight cows to wolves, and the state has done little to prevent the attacks or compensate him.

According to biologists, wolves aren't malicious. Rather, they're curious, shy, even gentle. They get along with humans and rarely attack livestock, preferring whitetail deer.

They're further described as nocturnal, elusive creatures that can run 40 miles per hour and have a sense of smell 100 times keener than humans'. They wander in packs of two to 12 members over territories up to 200 square miles.

Related to dogs, they look like super-sized German shepherds with the males weighing an average of 77 pounds.

Farm dogs sometimes try to run with the wolves, but that could be a mistake costing the canines their lives.

### **How wolf's decline began**

At one time, the gray wolf roamed over much of North America, from Canada to Mexico.

But generations of killing had virtually erased them from the United States. In the Upper Peninsula, the song of the wilderness went silent by the mid-1950s.

Then came the Endangered Species Act in 1973. The same federal government that once paid bounties for the deaths of wolves made it a felony to kill or even export one.

"They were as successful in bringing them back as they were in wiping them out," says Walter Medwid, executive director of the International Wolf Center, a research facility based in Ely, Minn.

Minnesota was one state where the timber wolves had always managed to survive, he says. With federal protection, their numbers multiplied and some migrated to Wisconsin. By 1989, three of the Wisconsin animals came to Michigan.

The Upper Peninsula homecoming continued through the 1990s as a growing number of Wisconsin visitors were joined by ones from Ontario.

With 360 today, the number of wolves in the UP is approaching what it was when the area was first settled two centuries ago. None of the animals live in the Lower Peninsula.

It was a surprising conservation success, similar to the ones for the bald eagle, gray whale and peregrine falcon.

In some ways, the wolf's story is more dramatic than the others. It had to overcome a negative image that could have hampered public support for its recovery.

“We had no idea it would grow at the rate it did,” says Brian Roell, who is wolf program coordinator for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. “If you had talked to (earlier state officials) and said we would have 360-plus wolves, they would have said it’s impossible.”

When government officials describe how wolves were misunderstood in the past, they sometimes sound like a Hollywood agent explaining away the bad-boy image of a client.

Old conventional wisdom: Wolves are ruthless loners that are threats to the Gingerbread Man, Three Little Pigs and Little Red Riding Hood. New conventional wisdom: Wolves are playful and family-oriented.

As part of the growing ecology movement, the public has come to like the animals, showing its support in public meetings and surveys that show 60 percent of respondents favoring its restoration.

### **Farmers wary of wolves**

Not everyone in the Upper Peninsula is celebrating the return of the gray wolf.

Farmers say the animal should have been removed from the endangered species list a long time ago. Some can’t understand what it was doing there in the first place.

In essence, they’re paying taxes to protect a predator who sometimes eats their sheep or cows. Their livestock is their livelihood, they complain. A cow could cost up to \$1,500.

For ranchers and cattlemen, the old image of the big, bad wolf is very much alive. Some wouldn’t mind exterminating all of them.

“I don’t want to see any animals extincted but, when it comes to my bottom line, I’m very concerned,” says farmer Greg Krause, 58, who raises 140 head of cattle in Engadine in the eastern UP.

“We just feel real run over. I’m just a little guy who’s a little squeak. Every time they kill our animals, it’s taking money out of our savings account.”

The farmers’ problems began in 1998 with the discovery of the first calf killed by a wolf. At the time, 140 wolves prowled the UP. As the population of wolves has grown, so has the number of dead livestock.

Residents began to take the law into their own hands as a half dozen wolves were illegally killed in 2001 and a similar number the following year. No one was ever charged with the shootings, which are punishable by up to a year in jail and a \$100,000 fine.

The gunmen used the same tactics employed by the grandparents of farmers. Back then, though, it was legal. Now ranchers call it “shoot, shovel and shut up.”

This is exactly the type of thing the state hopes to head off in the future as the population of wolves gets larger.

### **Nonlethal containment**

Wolves are more of a threat to deer than livestock, biologists say. Half their diet is venison with beavers and snowshoe hares also popular.

Although the attacks are rare, the number of wolves is growing 15 percent a year, so the incidents will become more common.

Michigan officials, who haven’t set a limit on the number of wolves, say they’re more likely to get tougher with animals that repeatedly kill livestock. They exterminated one such pack last year.

“I’m sure there will be challenges,” says Mike DeCapita, an endangered species coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in East Lansing. “Some people won’t like it. I hope it will be worked out.”

Scientists like Gehring of CMU are working on various nonlethal ways to protect the farm animals. Among them are outfitting wolves with collars that either shock the animals or set off a loud alarm whenever they wander too close to a farm.

Another tactic involves surrounding a pasture with a rope that holds pennants 18 inches apart. The wolves are wary of crossing such a line, apparently spooked by the motion of the flapping flags.

Gehring says no one technique alone is likely to protect the livestock, so a combination of tactics will be needed.

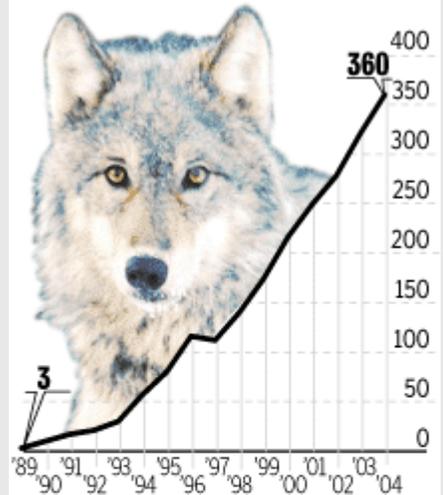
The Upper Peninsula has enough food and habitat to support between 400 and 800 wolves, biologists say. What remains to be seen is whether the UP has enough patience to tolerate that many.

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## Gray wolves in Michigan

Gray wolves have increased in the Upper Peninsula.

### POPULATION:



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■ **Family name:** Canidae (Canine)

■ **Population in other states:** There are approximately 2,500 gray wolves in Minnesota, 335 in Wisconsin, 81 in Montana, 271 in Yellowstone National Park, 285 in Idaho, 7,500-10,000 in Alaska and 57,000 in Canada as of 2003.

■ **Status:** The gray wolf is listed on the U.S. Endangered Species List as a threatened species.

■ **Appearance:** Color ranges from black, gray, rust and white.

■ **Size:** Males are usually 30 inches tall and weigh 57-130 pounds. Females are smaller.

■ **Life span:** Wild wolves are known to live up to 13 years.

Source: National Wildlife Federation and Wolf numbers from Michigan Department of Natural Resources

*The Detroit News*



Dawn Villella / Associated Press

**The gray wolf should be removed from federal protection in 23 states including Michigan, according to a proposal from Interior Secretary Gale Norton.**

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