



6/13/04 Ancient technique returns as EUP wolf

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EASTERN UPPER PENINSULA -- A wolf expert from Central Michigan University reached back to the 12th Century for an experimental technique to discourage wolf predation on three area farms.

Enlisted in the effort to ward off wolves from livestock farms, CMU biologist Tom Gehring came up with a line of low-lying flags strung around farmers' fences in an experiment to discourage marauding wolves suspected of killing dozens of lambs and cattle.

Called "fladry," the long lines of fluttering flags were used by Polish and Russian wolf hunters 900 years ago to "herd" wolves into a funnel-shaped enclosure toward a waiting hunter, Gehring said. He said the ancient hunters learned that wolves would shy away from low, flapping flags, even when they could easily jump over or shinny under the single strand of rope holding the hundreds of flags.

Unlike the ancient wolf hunters, however, the latter-day return of the technique aims to deter wolves, not kill them.

"The flags seem to be a virtual barrier to wolves," Gehring said from his Mt. Pleasant office. "It may be a tool that could work at farms that have had wolf problems," he added.

"Our goal is to protect farms from losses and we also want to protect the wolves, too," Gehring said.

Working with support from the university, the Department of Natural Resources, the Humane Society and Defenders of Wildlife, Gehring and a graduate student are using the "fladry" method at three local farms. To test the ancient method, Gehring selected two farms where wolf predation is suspected and one with no reported wolf trouble.

The three farmers participating in the demonstration project are the Charlie Pennington farm in Pickford, the Eric Wallis farm near Rudyard and the Jim Spencer farm outside

Stalwart. Wallis and Spencer have experienced what they suspect was wolf predation on their livestock over the last three years.

Gehring said in a pilot test of the "fladry" technique last year, the Wallis farm experienced no lamb predation compared to the loss of as many as 53 young sheep in previous years. The biologist was not about to declare the old European herding technique as the "silver bullet" for warding off problem wolves -- nor is he ready to declare the area livestock losses necessarily the work of wolves. In describing livestock losses, he said affected farmers had so many animal losses they "couldn't account for."

Gehring said he would like to set up another test farm in the area this year, if possible.

Farmers, who began complaining of predation three years ago, have little doubt the losses are due to wolves. Farmer Jim Spencer, for instance, is almost certain his livestock losses are due to wolves or possibly packs of coyotes.

He said his 2000-pound bull was his most recent victim. He said the bull was worked over so badly that the animal has not been able to breed successfully with the cows in his herd. He attributes the bull's timidity to stress from an attack last year.

Doing the laborious legwork on the demonstration project is CMU graduate student Sarah Davidson, whose job is to set up miles of single-strand rope or wire and hundreds of three-inch by 18-inch fabric flags. The flag lines are set up on steel reinforcing rod posts around the periphery of fenced livestock pastures.

Whether the flagged pastures turn the trick on area farms or not, Gehring said the project will move on to another ancient protection technique next year. He said the flags will come down at the end of the warm season, suggesting that wolves will grow accustomed to the flags and learn to ignore them.

The biologist said fladry may be just the ticket to stave off losses to the relatively few farmers who suffer them from predation. "This could be a viable option. If not, we'll move on," he said. To his knowledge, the ancient technique has only been used one other time -- in a similar experiment in Alberta.

Over the winter, Gehring said surveys of wolf sign will be conducted around the demonstration farms. He said fitting some wolves with radio collars may also help researchers gain a better feel for wolf migration through the region.

Gray wolves, he said, are known to migrate over a wide area, at times covering several states.

The next phase in the project will likely involve use of specially bred guard dogs to be given to participating farmers to raise with their livestock. The chosen breed, Great Pyrenees, have been used for centuries by European herders as guards against predatory animals.

Furnished by the project, one or two of the dogs will be given to each participating farmer to raise with the livestock. A very large breed of dog, Great Pyrenees are known to develop an identification as a member of the herd or flock and jealously protect the livestock from attack.

The dogs, like the experimental flags, would be furnished free of charge to the selected farmers. To develop the necessary bond with livestock, the Pyrenees must be raised with the herd or flock as puppies.

He said the guard dog phase of the project is still in the primary planning stage. He said a number of questions will need answers before that phase of the testing starts.

"A lot of farmers don't care if wolves are around if they don't kill livestock," Gehring said. He noted that in 30 years of study of the large number of gray wolves in Minnesota, only about one percent of farmers in wolf regions have predation problems.

"I suspect that very few farmers in the Eastern Upper Peninsula have lost stock to wolves," he said. "It may be that some farms are just in the wrong place," he added.

The object of his multi-year research, Gehring said, is to find proven methods of limiting predation. "Wolves do attack farm animals ... We're looking at a lot of non-lethal control methods. We're not against lethal control but that just can't be the only way," Gehring said.

The CMU biologist said he is in the project for as long as it takes.

"I don't know how long it will take. If it takes a career, it takes a career," he said.