Looking at Wolves as Scientific Subjects Rather Than as Storybook Villains

John McClung

University of Minnesota

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas

Part of the Zoology Commons

Recommended Citation
Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas/vol37/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science by an authorized editor of University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. For more information, please contact skulann@morris.umn.edu.
Looking at Wolves as Scientific Subjects Rather Than as Storybook Villains

JOHN MCCLUNG*

ABSTRACT — Minnesota researchers, attempting to separate objective data about timber wolves from emotional attitudes, are compiling information gathered over a period of several years in the state’s north woods. Findings suggest that laws to protect and preserve this animal may be as necessary as programs to control predations on deer or domestic livestock.

Throughout history *Canis lupis* has symbolized cunning, savagery, and cruel death for man and beast alike. In Minnesota *Canis lupis* is the gray ghost of the north woods. He is the timber wolf.

His place in legend and folk myth is entrenched as nature’s arch villain, rivaled only by such popular repre­hensibles as the serpent and the vampire bat. Few indeed are the children in this country who are unaware of the near escapes of Little Red Riding Hood and Peter of Peter and the Wolf, not to mention the Three Little Pigs.

Equally few are the modern-day deer hunters of northern Minnesota who fail to include the wolf in their barrage of complaints following an unfulfilled hunting season.

But for all his enemies, the wolf is not without a growing number of friends. Two of that number are Dr. Albert Erickson, former Curator of Mammals at the University of Minnesota’s Bell Museum of Natural History and currently Director of the Wilderness Research Center at the University of Idaho, and doctoral candidate Victor Van Ballenberghe.

To Erickson and Van Ballenberghe, the wolf is the subject of an intensive study, paralleled by a similar study of Black Bears. Their research goal is to determine the size of the wolf population in Minnesota and the effects of *Canis lupis* on wildlife populations, primarily deer.

Since the Summer of 1969 Van Ballenbergh has been trapping and studying wolves in the northeastern section of the state, largely in the Superior National Forest. The work is being sponsored by a grant from the Special Projects Foundation of the Big Game Club of Minneapolis, a group of hunters and sportsmen interested, as are the scientists, in gathering responsible information about the wolf in an atmosphere thick with emotion and probable misconceptions.

Van Ballenberghe, working in western Cook and eastern Lake counties, spent the first month of the summer of 1969 learning the fine art of trapping wolves. It wasn’t easy. In that month of trapping, only one animal was captured. But with time, patience and experience came success. By summer’s end 30 animals had been taken, including seven mature males, 11 females and 12 pups. Subsequent success through the winter and summer of 1970 has raised the total of captured wolves to 83.

Working as many as 15 trap lines a summer in the 730-square-mile area, Van Ballenberghe and his co-workers patrol every trap daily, sometimes covering 125 miles of back roads in a day.

Data-gathering Procedure

Once trapped, a wolf is tranquilized and then weighed, measured, examined for old injuries or impairments, and tagged. Coat color and shedding patterns are noted, and blood samples are taken. Shortly thereafter a healthy, if slightly wobbly, wolf is released to go about his business in the wilderness.

In addition to the ear tags, 27 of the wolves have been fitted with collars containing long-range radio equipment that can be monitored either on the ground or from the air. In that way, hunting and ranging activity of the animals can be closely followed and recorded.

The radio studies have indicated that the average home range of the wolf is in the vicinity of 25 to 75 square miles in summer and up to 1,000 square miles during the winter.

Although the study is far from complete, and Van Ballenberghe is hesitant to make statements of fact at this time, he has gathered enough information to dispel a few of the most persistent stories about wolves.

“For one thing,” he says, “wolves are not nearly as big as people think. The largest one captured thus far, a big male, scaled at only 86 pounds. The average weight for males is about 70.2 pounds — far short of the 100 or more pounds people believe they weigh. Females average about 58 pounds.”

“Also,” Van Ballenberghe says, “we question whether the wolf is a limiting factor on the deer population. Certainly deer, moose, and other wild animals are killed by wolves. But I suspect that may well be due to the reduction of habitat for the deer, combined with a series of four or five very severe winters experienced in the northern part of Minnesota in recent years. After the area was heavily logged thirty or forty years ago, great sections of brush and secondary growth sprang up, and that was to the benefit of the deer herd. But since then, most of those areas have once again become stands of timber, and the

*JOHN M. MCCLUNG is a University of Minnesota graduate student specializing in technical and scientific journalism.

understory necessary for the deer has largely dis­
appeared."

As for the wolf's danger to man: "There has only been one case that I know of of an unprovoked wolf at­
tack on a man. In Alaska some 20 years ago, a railroad worker was riding a hand car down the tracks when a wolf lunged from the brush beside the track and pulled him off the cart. A train came along and the workers beat the wolf to death with axes. Although the animal was never examined for rabies or other disorders, it seems highly unlikely a healthy wolf would wait around to be bludgeoned to death.

"But on the more practical side, there is a good-sized wolf population in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area and no tourist, even in the remote areas, has ever been attacked, to the best of my knowledge.

"Even when you approach a trapped animal, he will seldom move as if to attack, but only try to get away."

Van Ballenberghe said that he has not generated any data on wolf predation of domestic livestock populations simply because there is very little livestock in the part of the state where he has been working. "But," he added, "even though I'm certain wolves do kill stock, I suspect many of the sheep and cattle kills are the work of coy­

otes rather than timber wolves. Many people don't differ­
etiate between coyotes, or "brush wolves," and true wolves.

Significant census data sought

One of the most important questions in the wolf story is just how many of the animals there are in Minnesota, the only state outside of Alaska with a significant wolf population.

"The official estimate, based on a state conservation department survey released last year," says Van Ballen­
berghe, "places the wolf population at about 750 ani­
mals. Enemies of the wolf claim there are as many as 40,000 wolves in the state. I can't give a third estimate because my study is incomplete and because I am not working throughout the state, but I would certainly sus­
pect the figure is closer to 750 than to 40,000 by a long shot."

Van Ballenberghe said some estimates place the over­
all wolf population in North America at around 50,000 animals, and this includes several sub-species.

"I believe we will have a wolf population in Minne­
sota as long as the wolf can retreat to the Boundary Wa­ters Canoe Area and other protected habitat, and as long as it is not excessively hunted or trapped for bounty, even though he is considered an endangered species by the Federal government," says Van Ballenberghe.

Prof. Erickson adds that "the fate of the timber wolf in Minnesota is largely a political issue. Although wolves have been protected from airplane hunting here since 1948, and the bounty was removed in 1965, the last session of the legislature passed an act to pay specified trappers and hunters a bounty for killing wolves follow­
ing one livestock owner's complaint. It amounts to a form of bounty, even though the average hunter can't collect it."

"What bothers many of us," said Van Ballenberghe, "is that the future of the wolf is largely political. Scienc­
tically we don't even know how many there are, much less what their real effect is on other wildlife and live­
stock."

On Nov. 2, 1970, most of the Superior National For­
est was closed by the U.S. Forest Service to the taking of timber wolves. The reason was to protect research ani­
mals, including Van Ballenberghe's, from being killed. Since then the state and the Forest Service have been preparing a management plan for wolves that includes provisions for a sanctuary area closed to all hunting and trapping in the future and also a research area temporarily closed to the killing of wolves. Both would be within the Superior National Forest.

The remainder of the state would be open to the hunting of wolves during specified seasons and with specified bag limits. Implementation of this program depends on the passage of a bill in the current legislative session declaring the wolf a game animal.

Van Ballenberghe said the plan is near completion, and as early as the autumn of 1971 a vastly different type of wolf management from the current indiscriminate killing may well be in effect for the state.

Another bill currently before the state lawmakers would designate the wolf as Minnesota's state animal, but they would still probably be hunted according to the state-federal program.

A co-investigator with Victor Van Ballenberghe on the timber wolf research was David Byman, a graduate student. He analyzed wolf scats to get information about food habits of the wolves. These findings are shown on the two accompanying graphs. Animal food intake was determined by tracings of hair, feathers, or bone in the droppings.

**Wolf's life not easy**

Van Ballenberghe does not believe the life of the wild wolf to be so easy as many think. "Of the 83 animals trapped thus far, about 11 per cent showed signs of visible injuries, including broken feet, infections, and scars. Two were blind in one eye.

"The point is, life just isn't easy for the wolf. Although he has no natural enemies, except possibly man, he has many problems. He doesn't just charge up and kill a deer. The deer fight back. Moose fight even harder. Often the wolf is injured in encounters with these animals.

"Although the wolf certainly is cautious and clever, he is not invincible by any means. If we wanted to, we could probably exterminate him from the country without too much trouble. Hopefully laws will be passed in the near future that will help to preserve this animal," the scientists say.