

The Big Bad WOLF ... How bad is he?

Mike Phillips knows wolves. From 1994 to 1997 Phillips he was the National Park Service's first project leader for the Yellowstone wolf restoration effort and before that was the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's field coordinator for red wolf recovery in the Southeast.

Even so, he's not particularly pleased that wolf numbers have exceeded the original vision in the northern Rocky Mountain region – 1,500 wolves in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming, when only 100 were projected for each state.

The problem occurred when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service extended recovery to Colorado and Washington.

"They extended recovery much further afield than ever imagined," Phillips said, saying FWS has gotten cute. "Nobody ever imagined when we built the recovery plan that the vision would extend to the rest of western U.S. — that's ridiculous. The wolf is recovered and should be removed from the endangered species list."

State management plans allow for resolving wolf conflicts with livestock producers and establishing reasonable hunting seasons and harvest quotas.

Phillips says wolves typically do not cause problems with livestock, but when they do, "The problems are real, involving private property. When there's conflict we should resolve it quickly" by killing problem wolves.

And, he says, "We should have a legal harvest. Philosophically, I see no difference between hunting a gray wolf for its hide and a pheasant for its meat."

Phillips says he hunts birds in Montana and, on occasion, deer.

Even with his objections to the extension of the wolf recovery program, Phillips had compliments for the federal administrators. "The gray wolf is a great success story that speaks to all the good work being done so well. The program finished ahead of schedule and under budget."

Mike McKeever knows wolves. For 32 years he's been in the sheep business down Jordan way, and two years ago, was one of the ranchers hit hard north of Brockway.

The area outside the Northern Rockies wolf recovery area but inside an "experimental" area. He sees that designation simply as a way to protect wolves that wander out of the recovery area — too experimental for his tastes.

The McKeever's lost 39 sheep to predator attacks, but that's only part of the story. "We were hit in the middle of breeding. Our ewes weren't looking for bucks but scattered and nervous." He says he was 200 lambs short because of ewes that didn't breed or did not deliver at the usual rate for twins. A neighbor who was hit has kept lambing statistics for years. He calculated that twin lambs dropped 60 percent due to the attacks.

McKeever and his wife, Noreen, would find carcasses strung in a line across a hilly 2,000-acre pasture. "There were orange-size chunks torn out of the ewes' hamstrings, and their throats were ripped ear to ear."

Inspectors first laid the killings on dogs, but McKeever doubted it. "Those ewes had an inch and a half of wool on their throats, and dogs don't have the teeth to go through that."

Later, it was determined that a wolf was to blame; both ranchers submitted claims, each in excess of \$20,000, to the Defenders of Wildlife.

But DNA testing declared the wolf a hybrid. The claims were rejected, and producers took the loss. "It looked like a wolf to us," McKeever said. "I'd bet that if you tested the wolves transplanted from Canada, you'd find there's no such thing as a pure wolf." Besides, he says, it isn't the dog in the hybrid that's doing the killing. "A wolf is a wolf."

In one incident, ewes were killed right by a lambing shed not far from the house. "We had grandkids here helping us shear. It makes you kind of wary."



Rep. Mike Phillips is from HD66, Bozeman. He is a scientist whose research interests include recovery of imperiled species.

Editor's Note:

You put a wolf on the cover of a magazine, you'd better have something to report inside. Here we give space to a wolf recovery expert and a sheep rancher hit hard by a wolf. We expect to hear other opinions on this divisive creature. Put "Wolf Forum" in the e-mail subject line or on the envelope.



Mike McKeever raises sheep near Jordan. He says wolves were eradicated for a good reason. "Keep them in the park."