

More Wolves for Yellowstone

Project biologists released 17 gray wolves in Yellowstone this past winter and early spring as a second phase of the wolf restoration efforts begun there last year. The 11 females and 6 males ranged in age from 9 months to 5 years, weighed between 72 and 130 pounds, and came from 6 packs in British Columbia. In April, following 10 weeks in acclimation pens, the wolves were released and joined 18 wolves already living in and around the park from similar releases in 1995.

The releases came after the late February through early March breeding season in the hopes that the wolves would den in April or May. Acclimated and released in four different areas of the park, two of the four packs scattered. Several wolves wandered to the Gallatin Range northwest of the park. A pregnant female appears to have denned in the Custer National Forest in Montana. Others from her group remained in the park, wandered to the Gallatin National Forest west of the park, and moved to Shoshone National Forest east of the park. A second known pregnant female, carrying six pups, died of hot spring water burns near Old Faithful; her mate remained in the south-central part of the park following her death. Five wolves released near Rose Creek in northern Yellowstone have generally remained in the park in the upper Slough Creek drainage.

Last year's releases of 14 wolves resulted in the birth of nine pups from two packs. Altogether, five wolves have died. A Red Lodge, Montana, man was convicted of killing a male wolf and given a 6 month prison sentence and \$10,000 fine. Animal damage control agents dispatched a wolf north of the park after determining that it had preyed on sheep on two separate occasions. The final rule for managing the restored wolves provides for their removal in the event of livestock depredations, and the project biologists and cooperating agencies felt this action would most likely benefit the overall recovery effort. Defenders of Wildlife compensated the ranchers for their livestock losses. Two additional wolves have been shot outside the park in Wyoming. In one case, a rancher turned himself in to authorities when he realized he had mistakenly killed a wolf during a coyote hunt in calving season. Cooperative throughout the investigation, the man was fined \$500. The other perpetrator is still at large. The fifth wolf was hit by a vehicle within the park.

Despite these setbacks, the restoration effort is generally thought to be going well. Three of the six original wolves from the Crystal Creek Pack remain generally in the Lamar and Pelican Valleys in the park; winter visitors reported seeing them chase and feed on elk. The Rose Creek Pack stays mostly in the Slough Creek and Hellroaring areas in the park. Last fall, the alpha female and her seven surviving pups were joined by a young male, formerly of the Crystal Creek Pack, who has now become the alpha male. The Soda Butte Pack ranges along the northern front of the Beartooth Mountains and in

upper Slough Creek inside and outside the park. By late April, biologists noted signs that the alpha females from all three of these packs, and possibly some of the newly released packs, were denning.

Especially exciting is news that a male and female from two different 1995 release areas have paired, comprising the first naturally forming wolf pack in Yellowstone in more than 60 years. The pair has mated, appears to have denned, and could have a litter by summer.