

FROM MAGIC TO TRAGIC: THE HISTORY OF WOLF RECOVERY AND MANAGEMENT IN NORTHWEST MONTANA

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In 1973, Northwest Montana wolf (*Canis lupus*) recovery began with Dr. Bob Ream, University of Montana Wolf Ecology Project, and a handful of volunteers trying to verify presence. Verified presence increased slowly until 1986 when the first pack and reproduction, the Magic Pack, was documented. Since then and until recently, the Northwest Montana Recovery Area (NMRA) was the slowest growing, and survivorship of individual wolves was the lowest of the three recovery areas within the Northern Rocky Mountain Population (NRMP). In the last three years the NMRA population rate of increase is now similar to the Greater Yellowstone Recovery area. The NRMP wolf population reached recovery goals in 2002 and will soon be delisted. During this 35 year recovery period numerous biologists working for University, Federal, State, Tribal, and private interests monitored and managed the population and devoted much to the success of the project. The numerous events, stories, and people behind its ultimate success are colorful and scattered with both accomplishments and set backs. Managers developed a complex bag of tools for population monitoring and management, livestock conflict resolution, and public relations unique to wolves. Wolf management is one of the more controversial programs that face wildlife professionals, and as the wolf population increases so do the challenges. An increased wolf population is met with increased public concerns on multiple issues including ungulate hunting opportunity, livestock interests, human safety, and domestic dog conflicts. Emotions have run high recently when managers have been severely criticized by diametrically opposing publics for either killing too many wolves or for white-tailed deer declines believed to be caused by wolves. The future holds yet more challenges with litigation, pending wolf hunts, as well as the same challenges of the past.