
A FORTY YEAR ODYSSEY WITH MONTANA WOLVES: BEGINNINGS THROUGH FIVE YEARS OF STATE MANAGEMENT

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This study traces wolf population growth in Montana from initial searches for wolves in 1973, through the first wolf radio-collared in the North Fork Flathead in 1979 up to the 2014 population. Reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone NP and Central Idaho in 1995 and 1996 resulted in two “non-essential experimental” Montana recovery areas in addition to the Northwest Montana “endangered” recovery area. From early in wolf recovery to present, livestock depredation control actions have removed individuals or packs from the population. The first public harvest of wolves began in 2009, was stopped by legal action in 2010 and resumed in 2011 to present. The Montana population appears to have leveled off at approximately 700-900 wolves. Minimum counts peaked at 653 in 2011 and have been approximately 625 wolves for the last two years. Approximately 60% of Montana’s wolves occupy the Northwest Montana recovery area. Through the 5 years state harvests have been conducted, harvest quotas and restrictions on methods of take have been gradually relaxed. However, those changes have resulted in relatively little change in harvest or in Montana’s wolf population. Wolf depredation control actions have decreased since the advent of public harvests. Wolves are here to stay at about the current population level, assuming no drastic changes in public harvests or wolf control actions.