

The Mexican gray wolf (*Canis lupus baileyi*) is the rarest and most distinct subspecies of gray wolf. Hunted to near extinction, only 42 lobos roam the wild today. This image of the small wolf, which is adapted to desert landscapes, was taken in captivity.

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# R U N N I N G W I T H T H E W O L V E S



What is the place of the wolf in the West? Conservationists and cattlemen have debated this question for decades. Now, as the federal government considers revoking its status as an endangered species, Ashley M. Biggers heads into the forests of southwestern New Mexico in search of the Mexican gray wolf and some common ground in the midst of this vast divide.

As the sun descends toward the horizon, I recline in a prized patch of light, eager to soak in the last bit of warmth before the evening chill sets in. I scan the modest hills around me, hopeful I will catch a glimpse of one of the most endangered species in North America: the Mexican gray wolf. In search of it, a few intrepid friends and I are camping in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest, just north of the Gila National Forest, in southwestern New Mexico. Mexican grays are extremely rare—there are only 42 in the wild—and we’ve camped where we’re likely to encounter this magnificent predator in its natural habitat. Curious, adaptive, and communicative, the wolf is also territorial, and a cunning and efficient hunter. For many, the wolf is a symbol of wildness; it’s howl reverberating in the human psyche as a reminder of our fight to survive in the face of uncontrollable natural forces. And this wildness may be why the 19th century’s pioneers viewed the wolf’s presence as an obstacle in the taming of the West.

Beginning in the late 1800s, a U.S. government and private predator extermination program used a battery of traps, poison, and rifle shots to remove nearly all the wolves from the New Mexico landscape with nearly surgical precision. In the 1970s, the government changed its tune. In a reversal of the policy that had nearly wiped the species from existence, it began capturing live wolves in Mexico, the only place they still existed in the wild, for a breeding program intended to stave off extinction. The Mexican gray wolf, a.k.a. the Mexican wolf, along with all other subspecies of gray wolf (*Canis lupus*), was designated an endangered species in 1976. The breeding program began during this time with just



**Top**—In 1998, when Mexican gray wolves were released into the wild, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service aimed to establish a population of 100 wolves by 2008. Today, the wolves still face a number of obstacles to their recovery, including illegal shooting, conflicts with cattle, and genetic degradation that can make pups like this one a rarity. **Bottom**—Although the Mexican gray wolf was designated as an endangered species in 1976, the federal government is now considering removing all species of gray wolves from the list. Both of these images of wolves were captured in the wild.

seven Mexican grays, including only one miracle female. In 1982, the government recommended that the lobo (*Canis lupus baileyi*), the rarest and most genetically distinct subspecies of gray wolf, be reintroduced to its native habitat of southern New Mexico and Arizona, where the small (50–80 pounds), buff-and-gray animal is adept at skimming across desert landscapes.

In 1998, after years of debate about where to establish a wild population, 11 wolves were released into the newly designated Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area (BRWRA)—a decision that voters supported then and now. The BRWRA, encompassing more than 4 million acres, includes the Apache National Forest and White Mountain Apache Reservation in Arizona, and the entirety of the Gila and Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests in New Mexico. These areas are some of the largest undeveloped and roadless—relatively speaking—swaths of land with appropriate habitat for the wolves. However, cattle also graze two-thirds of these areas, making inevitable encounters between the skilled predators and the heavy, slow-moving stock.

Aldo Leopold, a former sportsman and the grandfather of the conservation movement, wrote in 1949, in his environmental

treatise *A Sand County Almanac*, “There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot.” For those who, like Leopold, cannot live without wild things, the wolves’ release represents the return of some modicum of untamed nature. For others, like cattle ranchers and hunting outfitters, the wolves’ release represents a threat to their livelihoods.

At play in this controversy are two valid and diametrically opposed visions of the West: that of the land as a treasure to be protected in its wild, ecologically balanced state, and that of the land as a resource to be leveraged. The survival of the Mexican gray wolf hangs in the balance.

Tonight, as the last golden rays disappear through the lattice-work of stately ponderosa pines and ancient alligator junipers, sounds and smells from around the camp’s cookstove call my attention. For now, my aim to see a wolf in the wild will have to wait.

### STRIKING A BALANCE



As with all endangered species, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is tasked with shepherding the gray wolf’s recovery. The gray wolf has flourished in states such as Idaho and Montana, and as a result the federal government is considering removing it from the list of endangered species. However, in the Southwest, the Mexican gray wolf, a subspecies, continues to struggle. Though wolves may be symbols of wildness, the USFWS’s management of them has hardly been freehanded. When the Mexican grays were first released in the BRWRA, they were given a “non-essential, experimental” status—a bureaucratic term that has had real consequences for the wolves. At the time, though the Mexican grays were the only wolves in the wild here, this phrase categorized them as unnecessary for the long-term survival of subspecies, and allowed them to be strictly managed. The USFWS and the menagerie of partner agencies that oversee the wolves established policies regarding where the wolves can travel (not outside the BRWRA), what they can eat (elk and deer, not cattle), and where captive-bred wolves can be released (Arizona, not New Mexico).

The USFWS also set the goal of reaching a population of 100 wild wolves by 2008. David Parsons, the former USFWS recovery coordinator who planned and implemented the wolves’ 1998 release and who is now a carnivore conservation biologist for the Rewilding Institute, a nonprofit environmental organization, says they determined that goal based on the range and prey needed to support 100 wolves. But Parsons says the area may be able to support an even larger population, and could even benefit from it: “There’s a lot of new research [that wasn’t available in 1998] that’s revealing the important role wolves play in structuring ecosystems.” Wolves have a ripple effect throughout the environment that makes the habitat healthier and more diverse. However, Parsons notes, “The wolves haven’t reached substantial population levels [in the BRWRA] to fulfill their ecological role.”

Dr. Benjamin Tuggle, southwest regional director for the USFWS, corroborates this view. “The bottom line is that predators have a place in the ecosystem,” he says. “The reason we’re trying to bring wolves back is to restore the balance that was lost when we removed them from the

landscape. Our mandate is to fulfill that ecological balance, and predators are part of that equation.”

“Wolves have had a negative connotation in the Western psyche for a very long time, but today, for many people, wolves . . . symbolize ecological restoration,” says Michael Robinson, a conservation advocate for the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity, and who lives near Silver City. “For many of us who live in the Gila, as well as for New Mexicans . . . having the Mexican wolf back, albeit struggling, is a slim but powerful token of hope that our species can learn to live in balance.”

## OUT OF BOUNDS



The next morning, we heft our packs and journey farther into the open forest. We pick our way along a rocky section of the Continental Divide Trail, passing stands of oak and spindly pines that are beginning their reach for the canopy. Later, we startle crows scavenging on an elk carcass. Vestiges of pink flesh still cling to the ribcage, the bones stark white against the earth. Perhaps a pack of coyotes, a mountain lion, or a black bear—all of which frequent this area—felled this prey. Or perhaps it was wolves.

Though the wolves have evaded us, we observe many human hunters in the forest. Clad in neon-orange, they rumble past on their ATVs, pursuing the abundant elk said to be in the area, though none report having had any luck so far.

Jack Diamond, who runs Beaverhead Outfitters and ranches with his family outside Winston, says the wolves have affected his business: Fewer elk in popular hunting areas mean fewer visitors requesting his outfitting skills. Diamond is adamant that wolves don't belong in the area. “I don't blame any of these issues on the wolf,” he says. “I blame it on the people who are trying to put the wolves in this area. I just don't think it will ever work.”

Though flourishing gray-wolf populations have decreased the hunting in and around Wyoming's Yellowstone National Park, an area scientists say was once overpopulated by deer and elk, visitors now flock to the area—to the tune of \$35 million a year—to see the wolves. Diamond says he hasn't received any requests through his outfitting business for wolf tourism, nor does he expect to. Conservationists, however, remain hopeful that more wolves will mean more people wanting to visit the places they inhabit.

As we hike deeper into the forest, we have yet to encounter the San Mateo pack said to roam here. The pack began as a male/female pair in 2003, and established territory in the San Mateo mountains. However, this was just outside BRWRA's invisible boundary, so the USFWS caught them, then re-released them within the BRWRA. Then a new problem arose: After a series of cattle depredations, the male was fatally shot for violating the “three-strikes-and-you're-out” rule. The rule, which requires that any wolf that kills three cattle in one year be removed, has been responsible for at least 70 wolves being taken from the wild. Depending on the situation, a wolf may be moved

to temporary or permanent captivity, or shot. The USFWS abandoned this policy in 2008, after environmental groups filed a lawsuit arguing that it was a detriment to the wolves' recovery. Since then, the New Mexico Cattle Growers Association and other similar organizations have filed suit to reinstate the three-strikes rule, which they maintain is a vital means of protecting their herds.

In early 2010, the San Mateo pack's widow found another mate and birthed a litter of pups, but her new mate was found dead in June. The cause of death is still under investigation, but illegal shooting, which has claimed the lives of at least 32 wolves, or vehicle collision, which has killed at least 12, may have been the cause. At the close of 2010, the twice-widowed female was running with five juvenile pups—herself a step toward the Mexican gray's survival, considering that there are now only two breeding pairs in the recovery area, and that their litters have been smaller, possibly due to inbreeding.

Although captive-bred wolves have been regularly added to the BRWRA populations over the last 11 years, scientists chose to release none in 2010, even as the wild population dwindled. Regulations mandate that captive-bred wolves be released only in the smaller, Arizona portion of the recovery area—a decision that, environmental groups and USFWS regional director Tuggle agree, was “politically motivated” to placate New Mexico ranchers. However, existing wolf packs have already claimed the Arizona portion of the recovery area, and experts predict that introducing new individuals would lead to fights over territory.

“Today, for many people, wolves symbolize ecological restoration.”

—Michael Robinson

## PREDATORS AND PREY

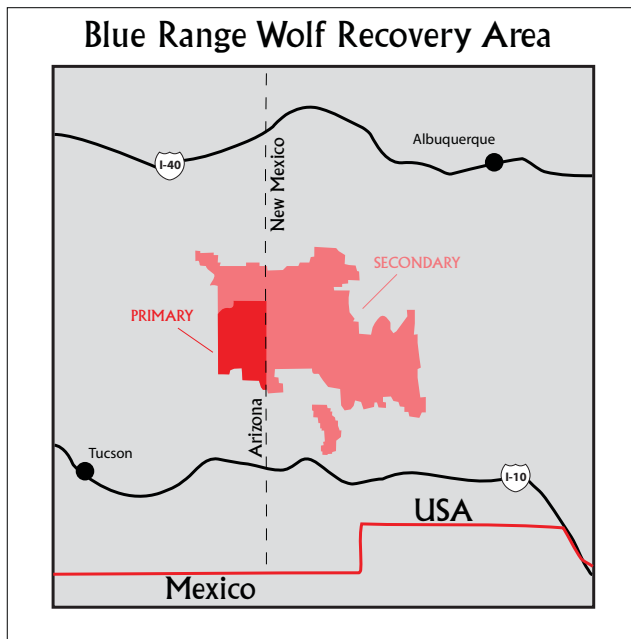


The San Mateo pack is hardly the only one to prey on cattle. Though there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that wolves prefer deer and elk—there are even accounts of wolves passing *through* herds of cattle to stalk wild prey—encounters with cows, sheep, and even horses are documented. As of 2008, there were 123 confirmed cattle deaths in the BRWRA due to wolves.

Laura Schneberger, president of the Gila Livestock Growers' Association, whose 480 members comprise ranchers with grazing allotments in the Gila and others who support their cause, is quick to point out that official numbers may not account for all of a rancher's losses, which she estimates are seven deaths to every one confirmed. Of course, the death of a single cow also means losing any calves she might have borne. Additionally, the stress of harassment by wolves can cause cows to miscarry and/or lose weight. And though the yearly average number of confirmed deaths represents only one percent of the cattle grazing in the BRWRA, the losses aren't equally distributed among the ranches. “You can lose anywhere from 10 to 100 percent of your profit if you get a pack that is killing on your allotment,” explains Schneberger, whose husband's family has been ranching at the RafterSpear ranch, outside Winston, since 1964.

Schneberger has had several conflicts with wolves on her ranch. In 2003, for example, she allowed an alpha female that

## Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area



At 4.4 million acres, the BRWRA is twice the size of Yellowstone National Park. It is made up of a primary recovery zone in Arizona, where captive-bred wolves may be released, and a secondary area zone in New Mexico where the wolves have expanded their range.

had killed a cow to continue to scavenge on it in the hope that this would prevent further kills. Instead, the wolf killed more cattle on Schneberger's allotment, and was ultimately fatally shot for her transgressions. (Scientists haven't been able to prove that wolves become habituated to the taste of cattle; however, anecdotal evidence supports the notion.)

Though neither the USFWS nor the U.S. Forest Service, which oversees grazing allotments, requires ranchers to alter their husbandry, some have taken preventive measures. Schneberger has crossbred her stock with longhorn cattle so they can better defend themselves. She says other practices recommended in the wolf-recovery plan—such as burying carcasses, moving birthing and branding corrals, and free-range grazing only seasonally (instead of year-round)—aren't realistic, or would further cut into ranchers' profits. "Those suggestions are just telling people to get out of business," she says. Schneberger also dismisses other measures said to deter the predators, such as flandry (colored flags strung on ropes or wire), and "howl boxes" that trick the territorial wolves into believing that another pack is already hunting in the area. The wolves, she notes, are too clever to be tricked for long.

Beginning with the wolves' release in 1998, the nonprofit Defenders of Wildlife reimbursed ranchers for their financial losses due to depredated livestock. More recently, the USFWS has taken over that responsibility. USFWS regional director Benjamin Tuggle would like to build up a principal fund of several million dollars, the interest from which would pay for the loss of cattle and preventive measures. The 501(c)3 National Fish and Wildlife Foundation will oversee the management of the interdiction fund, which, thanks in part to a \$45,000 donation from Defenders of Wildlife, currently totals \$90,000. In the future, Tuggle hopes a local council of stakeholders, including

ranchers and hunting outfitters, will determine how and when to dispense these monies.

Tuggle acknowledges that the ranchers have borne the economic brunt of the wolves' reintroduction. However, he also holds steadfast to his belief in the wolves' importance as a species and in the ecosystem. "The biology of reintroducing wolves is not that complex. It's the social aspects of it that are the most complex," he says. He hopes to soon begin the process of updating the plan guiding the Mexican gray wolf's recovery, and to have a revised strategy in place in three years. Drafting it promises to take on important issues for the wolf's survival, and to set environmentalists and ranchers snarling at each other once again in the tug-of-war of their respective visions of the West.

A century ago, conservationist Aldo Leopold wandered the same country the wolves and I do today. A young hunter went with trigger itch, at the time he believed that fewer wolves meant a hunter's paradise, and shot a wolf. In a passage from *A Sand County Almanac*, he observes, "We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain."

Today, as I hike a forest path, I wonder if these gentle mountains and the wolf share a wildness we humans have lost. In favor of our modern, safe, prosperous world, we have caged and stored away our own wildness. Perhaps in preserving the wolves' wildness, we protect the vestiges of our own. And in this salvation, perhaps we will recall that we could again, as we once did, coexist.

The next morning in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest, as dawn casts blue light over our campsite, deep, raspy barks call me from sleep. A pack is on the move; they sound back and forth. Beckoning. Warning. Could this be? I listen closer.

And then, just as it echoed across this rugged landscape a century ago: an unmistakable howl. 🐺

**Ashley M. Biggers** thanks her friends for heading into the woods with her in search the Mexican gray wolf. She would like to run with the wolves all the time, but is often desk-bound in her role as the associate editor of *New Mexico Magazine*.

### FOR INFO

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Mexican Wolf Recovery Program  
[www.fws.gov/southwest/es/mexicanwolf](http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/mexicanwolf)

### CONSERVATION

Center for Biological Diversity: [www.biologicaldiversity.org](http://www.biologicaldiversity.org)

MexicanWolves.org: [www.mexicanwolves.org](http://www.mexicanwolves.org)

Rewilding Institute: [www.rewilding.org](http://www.rewilding.org)

WildEarth Guardians: [www.wildearthguardians.org](http://www.wildearthguardians.org)

### RANCHING

Gila Livestock Growers Association:  
[www.gilalivestockgrowers.org](http://www.gilalivestockgrowers.org)

New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association:  
[www.nmagriculture.org](http://www.nmagriculture.org)