



RESTORING WOLVES TO COLORADO

Getting Here



In December 2023, Colorado Parks and Wildlife will embark on a reintroduction of gray wolves (*Canis lupus*). This marks the first step to restoring the connectivity of wolf populations from Mexico to the Arctic. Wolves once swept across Colorado as an integral native carnivore, but they were exterminated from the state by the 1940s in an effort to increase elk populations which had dwindled after unregulated hunting. Meanwhile, similar government-sponsored predator reduction efforts eliminated wolves throughout most of the western United States. Now, all eyes are on western Colorado, which is home to the largest unoccupied wolf habitat remaining in the West.

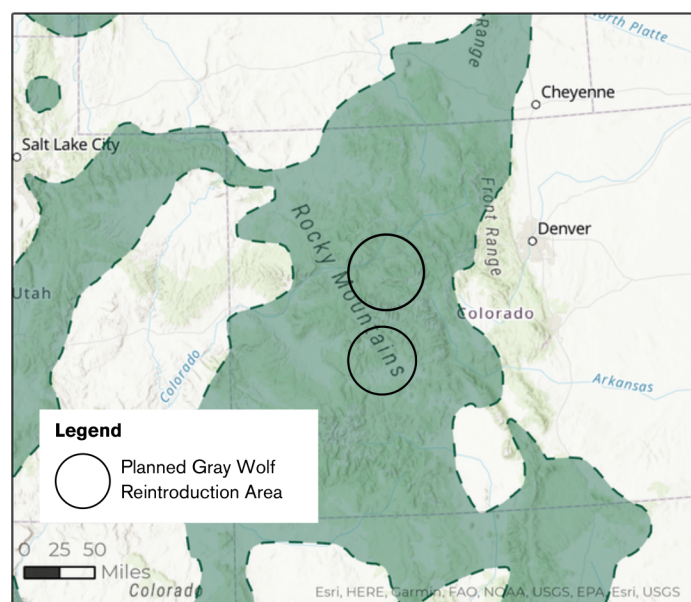
Recent Wolf History in Colorado

Since the reintroduction of gray wolves to Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho beginning in 1995, there have been several confirmed sightings of lone wolves making the journey from the northern Rockies into Colorado, but without a mate, these animals cannot form packs and reproduce.

It wasn't until 2020 that Colorado Parks and Wildlife announced the presence of the state's first wolf pack in 80 years. Unfortunately, the exciting news was short-lived as half of the pack was killed in Wyoming only a few months later and the remaining members were never accounted for. In 2021, two new lone wolves formed a breeding pair in the North Park basin and produced the first fully documented litter of wolves born in the state since the 1930s. Sadly, once again, three of the pups were killed in Wyoming the following year. While several additional members of North Park's pack are still unaccounted for, two male wolves are present — **bringing Colorado's wolf count to two.**



Figure 1. Southern Rockies Suitable Habitat



Despite these opportunities for wolves to re-inhabit the southern Rockies, none of these occurrences led to or met the federal definition of a population. In this same time period, gray wolves successfully expanded their range west from the northern Rockies, forming multiple packs in Washington, Oregon, and even northern California. Despite the availability of suitable habitat (Figure 1), what has prevented them from permanently settling to the south in Colorado?

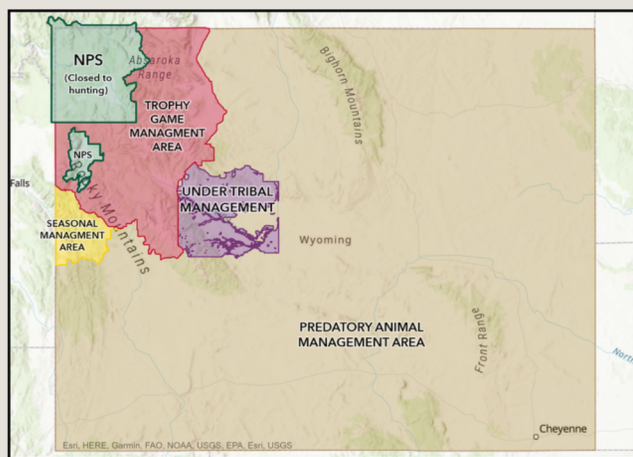
Roadblocks to Recovery

Gray wolves exist in the wild to the south in New Mexico and to the north in Wyoming, but for a combination of political, social and ecological reasons, they have not been able to travel in adequate numbers to establish a viable population in Colorado.

To the south, the reintroduced population of Mexican gray wolves (*Canis lupus baileyi*) — a rare subspecies — must, by law, stay within a designated area in the center of Arizona and New Mexico. Any wolf that ventures beyond it is captured and relocated.

To the north, gray wolves are limited to the northwest corner of Wyoming, about 15% of the state. Within the boundaries of Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks wolves are fully protected, but outside the parks wolves are managed by the state of Wyoming (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Wyoming Game and Fish Department's Wolf Management Zones



The Wyoming Game and Fish Department strives to keep their total population at 160 wolves. Within the Trophy Game Management Area, wolves can be legally hunted with a license. Throughout the remaining 85% of the state, in the Predatory Animal Management Area, wolves are classified as “predatory animals” that can be hunted without limit by anyone using any means.

In addition to this government-sanctioned intolerance across most of Wyoming, wolves attempting to travel to Colorado’s border must also pass through the Red

Desert. This expanse of over 9,000 square miles is largely devoid of the wooded landscapes that offer wolves the cover they need for hunting and avoiding humans and other threats. Given this inhospitable and exposed landscape, wolves rarely succeed in making the journey from the Yellowstone region to Colorado.

Another possible route, which provides wolves with more preferred habitat, is to cross through northeastern Utah. However, Utah’s longstanding policy is to remove any wolves found traveling through this corridor. The past two decades since the Yellowstone reintroduction have clearly demonstrated how difficult it is for wolves to overcome the challenges to successfully return to Colorado on their own in the numbers needed to create a self-sustaining population.

Establishing Long-Term Populations

Gray wolves are extremely social animals that depend on their families, or “packs,” to survive. A pack of wolves typically consists of a breeding male and female and their offspring. Wolves are monogamous breeders that often form life-long partnerships. Once a juvenile is 2 to 3 years old, they may leave their parents and become a “lone wolf.” However, they are only alone for as long as it takes to find a mate and establish their own territory where they can start a new family.

Beginning in 2023, Colorado Parks and Wildlife will reintroduce a small number of wolves to their suitable habitat in western Colorado (Figure 1). Wolves will be gradually released across the span of three to five winters in an effort to re-establish a self-sustaining population in the southern Rockies and enhance native ecosystems. This will ensure that future wandering lone wolves — including those already in the state — will have the opportunity to find a mate and start their families in Colorado.



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