Volunteers: Unsung Heroes of Wolf Recovery

By Andrew Savagian

Credit: Jessica Milz

Andrew Savagian is an outreach specialist with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and resides in Madison, Wisconsin.

In Montana and many other states that had indigenous wolf populations, the story of the decline, extirpation, and modern-day resurgence of wolves has become a well-known tale of endangered species rags-to-riches. After wolves were eliminated from the western United States in the 1930s, it was another 60 years before reintroduction and recovery efforts began to turn things around. Northwest Montana had six wolves by the mid-1990s, and in 1995-96 another 66 wolves were reintroduced from Canada to Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho. Today officials estimate wolf numbers in the northern Rockies at approximately 1,300—in northwest Montana alone, 2006 estimates put the number of wolves at 171, an increase of nearly 36 percent from 2005.

Impressive numbers, indeed, reflecting the extraordinary effort of many wolf management programs at state, federal, and tribal levels. The success, however, has an additional cast of unsung heroes: hard-working, rarely paid, dedicated volunteers. "Volunteers are very important—they're critical to everything we do," said Kent Laudon, wolf management specialist for Montana's Fish, Wildlife & Parks. "And every year so far our volunteer numbers have grown; there's a lot of ground to cover, and there's a lot of work to do."

Laudon is one of the main reasons why Montana reported more than 3,000 hours of volunteer time logged in for their wolf program in 2006. He and his wolf management colleagues help recruit and train a number of volunteers who conduct survey and tracking work in the Montana backcountry year round. In 2007, Laudon had nine volunteers working with him, helping him as he trapped and radio-collared 11 wolves.

Laudon noted that while volunteers help with the more mundane tasks of vehicle and equipment maintenance and record-keeping, they're also responsible for covering vast tracks of land looking for wolf tracks and other identification signs. "They're the scouts. We set up the maps and tell them, 'OK guys, we think there are wolves out there—go find them,'" said Laudon.

Other States, Nonprofit Programs

Several other states have also incorporated volunteers into their wolf management programs. In Wisconsin, where decades of bounty hunting had eliminated wolves 50 years ago, small numbers began to trickle in from Minnesota after they were put on the federal Endangered Species list in the 1970s. Today, again thanks in large part to the work of volunteers, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) estimates that about 540 to 570 wolves live in northern and central Wisconsin, roaming in 138 packs as of winter 2007.

"They've been very critical to our wolf recovery efforts since we started the volunteer program back in 1995," said Adrian Wydeven, wolf program coordinator for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. "We were already seeing the need for volunteers as we watched the wolf population increase, while realizing there was no increase in natural resource staff—we had to cover more and more ground with the same people."

Prior to going out in the field, Wydeven and other WDNR staff train volunteers in special carnivore tracking workshops between November and January, working mostly on helping students learn to identify mammal tracks and learn how to properly conduct surveys and record data. Last year, Wydeven worked with 124 volunteers, who helped collect wolf population and breeding data in the winter months, an ideal time for tracking wolves in the snow and from the air.

The idea for a wolf program using volunteers came to Wydeven after he witnessed successful bird survey programs using volunteers around the state. "I thought it was a great example of how to use volunteers for biological surveys," he said.

Though the main survey work occurs in the winter, Wydeven said his office encourages volunteers to visit their survey areas year round "to help them build a sense of stewardship." Regardless of when the volunteers help, it's hard to put a value on their important contributions. "Without them we'd have to have a workforce twice as big and it would be more costly for our program," Wydeven noted.

A small workforce is, by sheer definition, why nonprofit organizations also depend heavily on volunteers to make their offices and programs run. The International Wolf Center in Ely, Minnesota,

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Credit: Kent Laudon

Wildlifers and volunteers work together to study wolves in the field. From left, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks technician Kris Boyd; volunteer Shannon Kachel; author and volunteer Andrew Savagian; and volunteers Adia Sovie and Nick Mitrovich.

needs year-round help, with as many as 10 interns and volunteers working during the summer months. "We really rely on our volunteers," said Sheree Johnson, the interpretive center's director. "They can take on some of the tasks we don't have staff for. I think it would be difficult, if not impossible, to function [without their assistance]."

Johnson said volunteers and interns at the Center not only assist with general care of the facility, but also help by leading hikes, staffing booths, writing articles and doing graphics work. A smaller number may also get to assist in animal care activities for the Center's six resident wolves.

Calling All Volunteers

Federal agencies have also led the way in utilizing volunteers in wildlife field work. Doug Smith is the wolf project leader at Yellowstone National Park and has coordinated a successful wolf volunteer program for the past 14 years.

"Volunteers for us are tremendously important," said Smith. "They're the backbone to our field work and have played a very key role in our efforts since wolves were first reintroduced [to Yellowstone]."

Working out of the National Park Service's Mammoth Hot Springs office, Smith said due to his agency's long string of successful volunteer projects, he rarely advertises for volunteers, relying mostly on word of mouth to attract interested individuals. He has worked with about 175 volunteers since the program started and, even with just word of mouth, he still gets strong interest in his program, with three to four applications coming in for each volunteer position.

Applicants that Smith hires get housing and a small stipend, similar to programs in other states like Montana. While Smith describes the work volunteers are asked to do as "grueling," Smith gets many repeat applicants. For one Yellowstone study conducted by volunteers, three teams of three individuals each spend about 30 days in the field observing and recording wolf prey selection and kill rates.

"They work in the winter and are up before first light, driving back roads in the dark," said Smith. "That's the amazing thing about it—they'll come back five, six, seven times."

Smith and Laudon point to the many benefits of the learning experiences that volunteers get, including getting good credentials for future employment or getting a lead on a possible project for graduate study. "All the people I've hired or those that have gone on to grad school have started as volunteers here," said Smith.

When Laudon recruits volunteers, he sends internship announcements to several universities. He makes clear that while wildlife education and outdoor experience is preferred, it's not essential. "We definitely want to tap into the young cohorts in the field that are trying to get a break," said Laudon. "But other essentials include good people skills, being fun to be around and be able to fit in that environment where you're living and working outdoors. Things can change at a moment's notice out there, and ideally you want people who are into that experience."

Smith echoes those sentiments. He has worked with volunteers from all walks of life, including journalists, social workers, and others with no biological or field training. If you want to work with wolves, can interact well in a group dynamic and can learn on the job, he'll be happy to talk to you.

"You never know where your next ringer is coming from," Smith said. "We're always looking for that next great person."

Go to this article online at *www.wildlifejournals.org* to access a nationwide list of places involving volunteers in their wildlife science and management work, specifically with wolves. The volunteer programs include those found within federal, state, and tribal agencies as well as private organizations.

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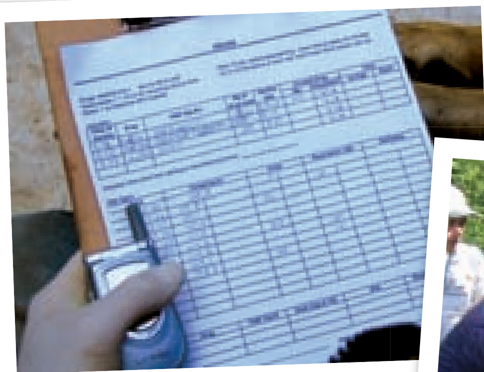
On Day Seven of my volunteering stint, as we drove into the mountains on a cold June morning, my half-awake brain perked up as we neared the area where Laudon and Boyd had set three traps. The receiver in our truck was popping and clicking to a rhythm that could only indicate one thing—one of the traps had been disturbed.

We got out of the truck near the trap location. We moved as silently as possible and spoke very little, and if we did it was in hushed voices. Meanwhile, I was trying not to swallow my tongue with excitement, help where needed and see if I couldn't catch a glimpse of what was in the trap. Sure enough, it was a wolf—a beautiful, darkly mottled male weighing about 105 pounds. While we prepared our gear, he watched us with wary eyes, straining at the leg-hold and trying to escape.

Kris Boyd moved within swiping range of our wolf and deftly jabbed him on the butt with an anesthetic. After the drugs took affect, pushing the animal into a gentle sleep, Laudon and Boyd started the process of placing a radio collar on the wolf, while the rest of us helped monitor the wolf's temperature, pulse and breathing. We also poured cool water on the wolf's underbelly to keep him cool.



Part of our jobs as volunteers was entering all the data, which included giving this wolf a number for tracking purposes—NW199M. Meanwhile, Laudon and Boyd secured the radio collar and checked to make sure the transmitter was functioning, took blood samples, gave the wolf a shot of penicillin, measured his teeth, weighed him, and prepared him for release.

The rest of us stood back while Laudon and Boyd administered the wake-up drug. Laudon had warned me it would be quick and that I should pay close attention, but I looked down at the wrong time to check my camera's battery power and when I looked up the wolf had leaped to its feet, turned and half-ran, half-wobbled up the side of the hill away from us. I had missed my photo op, but I didn't care.

The next day we took a receiver and drove around the foothills and ridges near the area where Laudon had captured our wolf, but we never heard a signal from the radio collar. Days after I returned home, I wondered what had happened to our wolf and hoped it was okay.

A few weeks later, I received an email from Laudon. Part of Montana's management efforts include tracking wolves via pilots flying over the range, listening for transmitter signals from radio collars. Reading his email, I saw a single entry far down on the list of flight data: "Ksanka (east of Eureka): NW199M was located in the Sinclair Creek drainage."

Eleven words, but it was all I needed to feel like I had, in some small way, helped do my part as a wolf volunteer, and the smile on my face was proof enough that my summer trip was a resounding success. ■

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