

Badger State opens first wolf hunting season

Wisconsin groups at odds over season that opened this week

By Ted Gregory and Matthew Walberg, Chicago Tribune reporters
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Dan Trembl was among the 20,272 people who tossed their names in the running to be part of a historic group, Wisconsin's first state-sanctioned wolf hunters.

He missed landing one of the 1,160 licenses in the random drawing. But Trembl, a resident of the northern Wisconsin community of Fifield, remains fervent about the need for the wolf hunting season that opened Monday and yielded four reported kills by Tuesday.

"We need to get them under control," said Trembl, 49, a hunter, hobby farmer and lifelong resident of the area. "In those first two or three seasons, you're going to get rid of the main core of the problem, the ones that have no fear."

The gray wolf is an environmental success story that to some has become a dangerous nuisance.

Almost wiped out of existence decades ago, the resilient animal has rebounded and now generates a wide spectrum of emotion as the biological flash point where hunters, farmers, environmentalists, government administrators and Native Americans converge.

In 1974 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service deemed the wolves endangered, a status that led to a migration of wolves from Minnesota to Wisconsin, said Kurt Thiede, a DNR land division administrator.

The ban on killing wolves worked so well that the population in the western Great Lakes region, which includes eight Midwestern states, totals about 4,400, the Fish and Wildlife Service reports.

For about the past decade, Wisconsin officials fought over whether to reduce the population, an effort that was stymied by litigation. In the meantime, the population kept growing, Thiede said.

Today, Wisconsin's wolf population totals about 850, the state Department of Natural Resources reports. That is more than double the 350 the agency contends is appropriate based on a number of "biological and social factors," Thiede said.

When the Fish and Wildlife Service withdrew the animals from the endangered list earlier this year, Wisconsin enacted a new wolf season. The first hunting season runs through February, although the state can end it early if the numbers killed exceed the quota of 201.

Trembl said he's seen firsthand the growth in the wolf population in Wisconsin.

Packs of the animals have "escorted" Trembl and his hunting dogs from the woods three times in the past four years while he was raccoon hunting at night, he said. About 18 months ago, the Fish and Wildlife Service began euthanizing what ended up being 17 wolves that had killed about five heifers at a nearby dairy farm, he added.

"Right now," Trembl said of the wolves, "they're not human-shy."

But some conservation groups and animal rights advocates continue to oppose wolf hunting. The Humane Society of the United States has notified the Fish and Wildlife Service of its intention to sue the agency if the wolves are not again given endangered species status in Wisconsin.

"We've made our intentions clear," Humane Society President and CEO Wayne Pacelle said Tuesday. "We think the plans that Wisconsin and Minnesota have embarked on are too severe and jeopardize the wolf population."

The law requires critics of removing the wolves from the endangered list to provide 60 days' notice before filing litigation, which Humane Society has done, Pacelle said.

The decision to allow wolves to be hunted has less to do with a desire to protect livestock and property than it does with the desire of hunters to add wolves to their collections, Pacelle said.

"People aren't killing these for food, and there's already an allowance under federal law to kill wolves that endanger livestock or public safety," he said. "This is effectively a trophy hunting and trapping program to kill wolves who are in forested or open area who aren't bothering anyone."

Pacelle called the hunting "the equivalent of a crime control policy predicated on shooting into a crowd. It's nonselective, it's random and it makes no common sense."

The DNR's Thiede said the agency is attempting to balance many interests. Legal protection of wolves has led the state to compensate pet owners and farmers who have lost livestock to the predators. Last year the state paid more than \$300,000 for wolf damage, Thiede said.

Other Midwest states are evaluating what to do with burgeoning wolf populations. In addition to Wisconsin, Minnesota also has a wolf hunting season. Michigan lawmakers are considering one. Alaska, Idaho and Montana also allow wolf hunting and trapping.

But in Illinois, concern about wolf overpopulation is virtually nonexistent.

The Fish and Wildlife Service lists the animals in the state as endangered south of I-80. They are no longer considered endangered north of the interstate, though a spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Service said "there probably aren't any there," either. State law deems it illegal to hunt wolves in that area, too.

Wolf hunting returns to Wisconsin: But how humane will it be?

Wisconsin will open its first wolf-hunting season in decades Monday – a testament to the recovery of the Midwestern population. But native American groups are opposed and controversy still swirls about the use of dogs.

By Richard Mertens, Correspondent / Christian Science Monitor
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[PHOTO] This undated photo shows a gray wolf in a wooded area near Wisconsin Dells, Wis. Jayne Belsky/Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources/AP/File

For Wisconsin hunters, some of whom have bagged just about every animal tracked in the Midwest, from deer to coyotes to bears, Monday morning is a much-anticipated moment. For the first time in half a century, the Badger State will allow wolf hunting again.

The decision has not been without controversy. A judge has issued an injunction against the use of dogs in the hunt, with a hearing on whether the practice is humane set to take place on Dec. 20. Moreover, native American tribes have invoked 19th century treaty rights in an unsuccessful attempt to curtail the hunt.

Yet the opening of the season Monday marks a milestone in decades of efforts to restore wolves in the upper Midwest. Plans for the hunt were set in motion when the federal government dropped Midwestern wolves from the endangered-species list on Jan. 27. Once abundant in Wisconsin, wolves were hunted and trapped to virtual extinction by 1960. Only a few hundred survived in northern Minnesota and on Michigan's Isle Royale.

After they were placed under state protection in 1957 and federal protection in 1974, however, wolf populations enjoyed a remarkable resurgence. Biologists believe there are now about 850 wolves in Wisconsin, with packs roaming mostly the northern third of the state, and an estimated 3,600 more in Minnesota and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. There are nearly three times more wolves in the Midwest than in the Rocky Mountain states.

Minnesota also plans to allow the hunting of wolves this fall starting Nov. 3, and Michigan's Legislature is considering a hunt. Montana and Idaho already have wolf-hunting seasons, and Wyoming will begin its own this fall.

This return of wolves to Wisconsin has brought them increasingly into conflict with farmers and hunters of other game. As packs have spread south into more populated agricultural areas, they have preyed on livestock and even on family pets. Hunters also blame wolves for reducing the size of the deer herd.

"They're as thick as hair on a dog," says Al Lobner, a hunter from the central Wisconsin town of Milladore, adding that "our ecosystem is out of whack."

Wisconsin's hunt will be modest. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has set a limit of 201 wolves to be taken during a season that begins a half hour before dawn tomorrow and lasts until the end of February. And yet competition for the opportunity to pursue a wolf has been keen. The state received more than 20,000 applications for just 1,160 permits, some from as far away as Florida, Texas,

and California. In Minnesota, wildlife officials have set a quota of 400 wolves and awarded 6,000 permits.

State rules allow hunters to take wolves in a variety of ways, including luring them with bait, or snaring them with steel leg traps and cable traps. The state had planned to allow hunters to start using dogs beginning Nov. 26, when the deer season ends. But Dane County Judge Peter Anderson issued a temporary injunction against the use of dogs on Aug. 31, after humane societies and environmental groups sued.

These groups maintain that wolves are likely to turn on hunting dogs, injuring or killing them, unless the dogs are leashed. State records show that since 1985 wolves have killed 192 dogs that were being used to hunt other animals.

“We all agree that there can be an appropriate wolf hunt,” says Jodi Habush Sinykin, a lawyer representing the hunt’s critics. “The important consideration is that it must take into account sound science and proper management.”

Dogs are not allowed for wolf hunting elsewhere in the United States. But many hunters in Wisconsin use dogs in pursuit of other game, especially bears. Mr. Lobner, an official with the Wisconsin Bear Hunters Association, says he hopes to use his trained coonhounds to track wolves. He discounts the possibility that the dogs could get hurt.

“We’ve on occasion been hunting bears and coyotes, and when you run into a wolf, it just runs,” he says.

Kurt Thiede, DNR lands division administrator, has issued a statement in support of the use of dogs: “We ... have learned from other states that harvesting a wolf can be difficult. The use of dogs is a key way to increase hunter success. We will continue to work with the court to remove the injunction on the use of dogs....”

Some people with long experience in the Wisconsin woods suggest that few wolf hunters and trappers are likely to succeed in capturing so elusive a quarry – especially without dogs to help. Dave Louis, a trapper in Rice Lake, Wis., recently held a class for new trappers and was surprised to find that eight of the beginners had wolf permits.

“I didn’t want to dishearten them,” he says, “but this is not something where you can go up to your cottage on Friday night and trap a wolf.”

Meanwhile, many native American groups in Wisconsin disapprove of the hunt altogether. The wolf enjoys an exalted place in tribes’ cultural and religious traditions, says Chris McGeshick, a member of the Sokaogon Chippewa Community and its representative on an intertribal commission that oversees treaty rights. “Essentially it’s your brother,” he says. “We’re just not going to shoot our brother.”

The state has reserved a third of its quota for native Americans, but the state’s tribes say they will not use it. Mr. McGeshick says members of his community are “outraged” about the hunt. “They can’t believe that there’s nothing we can say or do to get the state to change its mind,” he says.

An intertribal organization representing Ojibwe tribes with reservations in Wisconsin have turned to treaties dating to 1847 to try to stop any taking of wolves in the northern part of the state. The state has denied their request, although reservations will be off-limits to hunters. On Friday the tribes sent a letter to the state outlining their concern about a rule that allows wolves to be killed if they are a danger to livestock; 67 have been killed this year

McGeshick says the wolf has acquired heightened significance for tribes because its fate has so closely mirrored their own. "As the wolf disappeared ... we were diminishing, being put on reservations," he says. "Now that they are coming back, we as tribal communities are getting stronger."

The debate over the hunt in Wisconsin has been heated both on and off reservations. "It might as well be Packer and Bears fans here," says Jim Zorn, executive secretary of the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission, a group based in Odanah, Wis. "There's no common ground."

The Wisconsin DNR estimates that the state had between 3,000 and 5,000 wolves in the 19th century and could support 700 to 1,000 today. But it notes that "this level may not be socially tolerated" and has set a goal of 350 outside the state's reservations – fewer than half the present population.

David Mech, a wolf expert with the US Geological Survey office in St. Paul, Minn., says that wolves are likely to continue expanding in the Midwest, although it becomes more difficult for them as they reach more populated areas. He doubts that Wisconsin's hunt will curtail their numbers.

"The total number of wolves taken will easily be made up for by the reproduction next spring," he says.