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Aug. 31, 2008

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Nevada not yet ready to cry wolf

'Game' animal status won't trigger hunting

By ED VOGEL

REVIEW-JOURNAL CAPITAL BUREAU

CARSON CITY -- Wolves may be headed back to Nevada, but don't grab your hunting rifle.

Although the gray wolf was classified last week by the state as a "game" animal, the Department of Wildlife isn't planning on a wolf hunting season.

There are good reasons for that.

Wolves historically have been a rarity in Nevada; the last confirmed sighting came in 1941. And the gray wolf remains protected under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Assemblyman John Carpenter, R-Elko, said Tuesday during a legislative hearing that he has received calls from constituents in Jarbidge who told him they have seen wolves.

Such sightings could not be confirmed.

He fears the wolves will kill cattle and elk, as they have in Idaho.

The wolves in Idaho are descendents of the 66 Canadian gray wolves that were relocated in Yellowstone National Park and national parks in Idaho in 1995-96.

They have multiplied dramatically, and animal scientists estimated that 1,300 gray wolves now live in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming.

Protected by the Endangered Species Act, those wolves have multiplied beyond the hopes of the most ardent wildlife protectionists.

Carpenter isn't saying who told him they have seen wolves.

Calls to Jarbidge residents and two local businesses could not turn up anyone who has spied one.

An isolated community of about 200, Jarbidge is in a wilderness area in northern Elko County.

The closest known wolves to Nevada in recent years were found near Hammett, Idaho, about 35 miles north of Owyhee, said Kevin Lansford, a wildlife specialist with the Department of Wildlife.

Two were captured there and removed after killing livestock.

"Traveling 40 miles is nothing for a wolf," Lansford said. "So one may have come down, turned around and went back to Idaho."

In recent months, sightings of gray wolves were made in Washington and Oregon, states where wolves vanished in the 1930s.

People often mistake wolves for coyotes or dogs such as Alaskan malamutes, Lansford said.

But a male wolf averages around 140 pounds, much more than a malamute, which might reach 95 pounds.

Eric de Place, a researcher for the nonprofit Sightline Institute in Seattle, which has been tracking wolves in the United States, said he suspects they have returned to Nevada.

"I think it is certainly possible," he said. "We have every reason to believe they have come to Nevada. They are capable of traveling very long distances if there is not that much development."

Except for Alaska, Michigan's Isle Royale and northern Minnesota, wolves were considered nearly extinct in the rest of the United States by the 1930s.

Gray wolves then wandered down from Canada and established a small population in Glacier National Park in Montana in the 1980s.

The closest significant population of wolves to Nevada is in Idaho's Boise and Sawtooth national forests, more than 100 miles north of the Nevada state line.

Despite the lack of evidence that the predators have returned to Nevada, the Legislature's Subcommittee on Regulations approved a regulation last week that makes the gray or timber wolf a "game" animal, just like deer.

Lansford said his department wanted the new classification in case a lot of wolves do journey into Jarbidge or the Ruby Mountains, the only areas in the state where he believes they could survive.

The regulation will allow the Department of Wildlife to manage a wolf population in the state and control pet wolves, which are popular with some residents.

"We needed to have some plan in place," Lansford said. "Having it classified as a game animal gives us flexibility. All of this is a plan for the future."

With the regulation, Lansford said the state also can place minimal requirements on owners of pet wolves.

The Department of Wildlife wants veterinarians to certify pets that resemble wolves truly are wolves and require tattoos to be placed in their ears.

That way, if a pet wolf escapes or is dumped by its owner, animal control officers can determine if it is an actual pet and not a wild animal that wandered into the state.

Lansford said he is not sure how many people have pet wolves, but there are two known wolf breeding businesses in the state, one in Lincoln County, the other in Nye County.

Many companies offer "wolf puppies" for sale on the Internet, but most of these animals are half-wolf, half-dog.

He emphasized that any proposed regulations to control pet wolves would be "vetted" at public hearings at which owners could have their say.

Carpenter opposed the "game" animal designation for the wolf.

He fears "do-gooders" will persuade the Department of Wildlife not to remove or kill wolves that attack livestock.

Carpenter wanted wolves to be given a "predatory" classification so that ranchers could shoot those that hurt their livestock.

Bob Williams, Nevada field supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, emphasized the wolf remains protected under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Recent moves by his agency to remove the wolf in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming from the Endangered Species List were not intended to end wolf protection in the Silver State, he said.

While the symbol of the University of Nevada, Reno athletic teams is the Wolf Pack, Lansford said wolves were rare in Nevada, at least for several hundred years, because of the state's arid climate.

Even in 1900, he said, there were reports of just 12 wolves in the state.

"I don't think wolves ever frequented the Mohave Desert," where Las Vegas lies, Williams added.

"Mexican wolves also live in timber country. They like high elevations, not low arid areas."

The huge increase in the gray wolf population in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming induced the Fish and Wildlife Service on March 28 to remove the gray wolf from the Endangered Species List in those states.

The states created wolf management plans to allow hunting of wolves beginning this fall outside of designated protection areas.

But Earthjustice, representing 11 wildlife and environment organizations, filed a lawsuit charging that delisting and the states' management plans would allow hunters to kill 80 percent of the current wolf population.

U.S. District Judge Donald Molloy in July issued an injunction that overturned the Fish and Wildlife Service's decision to delist the gray wolf.

Appeals are expected.

Even if the wolf is delisted, Lansford isn't convinced it will become a menace to Nevada livestock.

To survive, wolves need high mountain areas covered with timber and a lot of "ungulates," hooved animals like elk and deer on which to feed. Nevada's deer population has dropped to 115,000 about half of the peak in the 1980s.

De Place, however, said research shows that historically wolves did exist throughout

the state, even in arid Southern Nevada.

"The number of wolves always was small, hardly like in Yellowstone today," he said.

De Place said that when wolves cannot find large game, they survive on rats and small animals.

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