



Getting Here

Why reintroduction is the best way to reestablish a self-sustaining wolf population

In January 2020, Colorado Parks and Wildlife confirmed the presence of a pack of at least six gray wolves in Northwestern Colorado—the first confirmed pack in at least 75 years! Although exciting, the appearance of a single wolf pack in Colorado is unlikely to lead to a future with wolves in Colorado.

Recent Wolf History in Colorado

This isn't the first confirmation of a gray wolf in Colorado in recent decades. Since gray wolves were reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho beginning in 1995, there have been five other confirmed sightings of lone wolves making the journey from the Northern Rockies into Colorado. Yet none have led to a lasting population.

In this same time period, gray wolves have successfully expanded their range west from the Northern Rockies, establishing multiple packs in Washington and Oregon and even in northern California. Despite the availability of suitable habitat (Figure 1), what has prevented them from permanently settling to the south in Colorado?

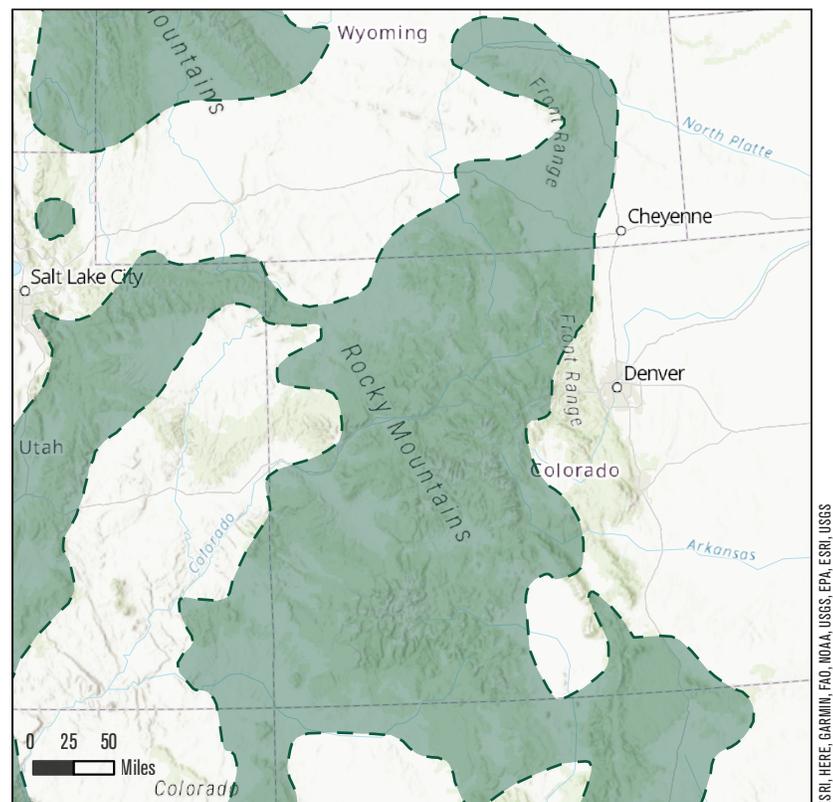
Roadblocks to Recovery

Gray wolves exist in the wild to the north in Wyoming and to the south in New Mexico, 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, a rare subspecies that lives within a designated area in the center of Arizona and New Mexico, must, by law, stay within that area. 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 percent of the state. Within the boundaries of Yellowstone and Grand Teton

Figure 1. Suitable Wolf Habitat in the Southern Rockies



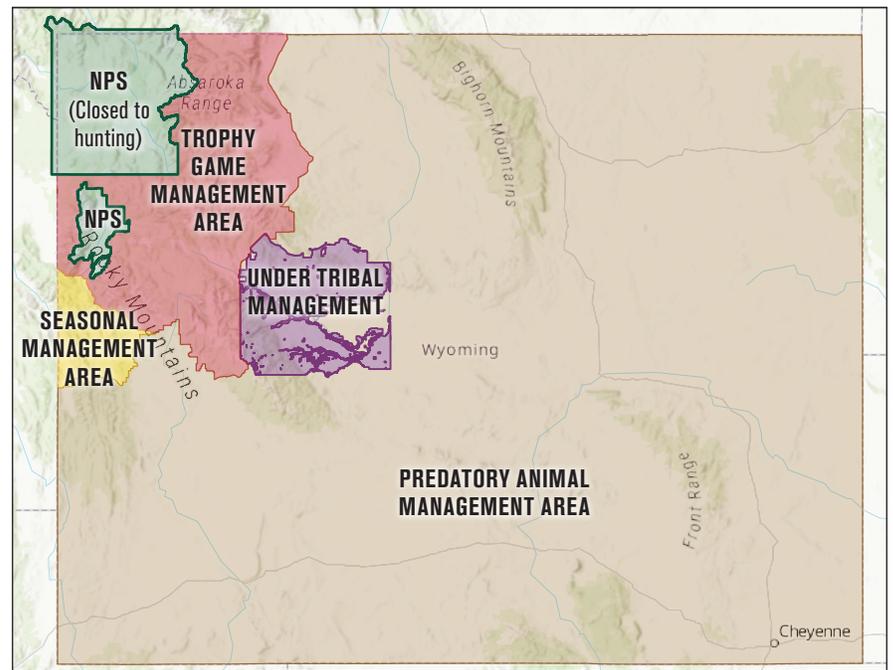
national parks, wolves are fully protected, but outside the parks wolves are managed by the state of Wyoming. Within the designated Trophy Game Management Area (see Figure 2), wolves can be legally hunted with a license, and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department strives to keep the total population at 160 wolves. Throughout the remaining 85% of Wyoming, the state legislature classifies wolves as “predatory animals.” According to this definition, they can be hunted without limit by anyone using any means.

In addition to this state-sanctioned intolerance across most of Wyoming, wolves en route to Colorado’s border must also travel 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, this area has no legal protection for wolves. Utah's longstanding policy is to remove any wolves found traveling through this corridor.

The past 25 years have clearly demonstrated how unlikely it is that wolves can overcome the challenges in their way and successfully return to Colorado on their own in the numbers needed to create a self-sustaining population.

Figure 2. Wyoming's Wolf Management Zones



Establishing Self-Sustaining 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 juveniles are two to three years old, they leave their families to find a mate of their own and start a new pack. During this period they are commonly referred to as “lone wolves,” but they are only alone for as long as it takes to find a mate and start a new family. These lone wolves are looking for new territories to settle. However, unless they discover a mate, they are unlikely to stay and will continue to travel.

A few exceptional lone wolves have survived the journey into Colorado, but without a mate, these animals cannot form packs and reproduce. Reintroducing a small number of wolves is the best way to establish a self-sustaining population and ensure that future wandering lone wolves—including those from this new pack—will have the opportunity to find a mate and start their families in Colorado.



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