

Status of the Gray Wolf in the Upper Midwest and Iowa

Historic Status in the Upper Midwest

Several subspecies of gray wolves (*Canis lupus spp.*) inhabited the upper Midwest and were important apex predators of large prey mammals, but also fed opportunistically on smaller species. Gray wolves also preyed on domestic animals especially when Europeans first settled the upper Midwest. From the mid-1800s through early 1900s, gray wolves were subject to intensive eradication efforts. At the same time there was a declining abundance of prey species such as deer due to unregulated shooting. Wolves were extirpated from most of the lower 48 states by the mid-1960s leaving only a small intact population in northern Minnesota. By 1974, gray wolves were protected as an endangered species in all 48 states under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Since then, populations have grown and become established in the western Great Lakes region, which includes a dispersal range into Iowa.

Gray Wolf - Western Great Lakes Distinct Population Segment



Western Great Lakes Gray Wolves

The population of ~1,000 wolves in northern Minnesota grew in the 1980's due

to protection from harvest under the ESA and regional increases in white tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*). Wolf range in Minnesota spread southward to north central and central regions. By 1998, their estimated population was ~2,300, which has remained stable. Dispersing individuals from Minnesota colonized populations in northern Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan currently estimated to have greater than 780 and 680 wolves in each. Dispersing wolves from Minnesota are common in North and South Dakota.

The U.S. Department of Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service administers the ESA and has worked to allow more state rights' management of gray wolves. Delisting in January 2012 allowed Minnesota and Wisconsin a wolf harvest season in the fall/winter 2012-2014 when annual harvest ranged from 117 to 413 wolves in each state. This generated considerable controversy between wildlife professionals and animal rights activists. In December 2014 the Federal court overturned the delisting and this population is now listed as an endangered species and protected by Federal law.

Northern Rocky Mountain Gray Wolves

Wolves were translocated from Canada to several areas in Montana and Idaho in the mid-1990s. The newly colonized populations in Yellowstone National Park (Montana) and central Idaho grew rapidly and today there are ~1,700 wolves in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming.

The U.S. portion of the Rocky Mountain wolf population was delisted from threatened in July 2008 which allowed for

legal harvest under approved state management plans, however an injunction by animal rights activists placed them back on the Threatened List preventing harvest. Court disputes between activist groups, ranchers, and government agencies continued for the next few years. The gray wolf was officially delisted from endangered and threatened on 6 March 2009. Many western states allow wolves to be readily killed if there is concern for the welfare of livestock.

Gray Wolf Status in Iowa

Two subspecies of gray wolves occurred in Iowa, the Great Plains wolf (*Canis lupus nubilus*) which followed bison herds on the plains, and the eastern timber wolf (*Canis lupus lycaon*) which inhabited more wooded areas. The gray wolf is designated as a furbearer under the Iowa Code likely because they were not clearly separated from the coyote in early bounty legislation. As a federally listed endangered species, take is prohibited under the ESA and the Iowa harvest season is closed.

As the Western Great Lakes wolf population grew in the mid-1990s, a few wolves were appearing in west-central Wisconsin and southeast Minnesota, ~75 miles from the Iowa border (Fig. 1). It is very likely major river corridors, especially the Mississippi River, in this tri-state region (MN, WI, IA) serve as travel corridors for wolves. This Driftless region is relatively rugged and there is some habitat conducive to wolves, however most of Iowa is considered unsuitable habitat.

Gray Wolf Reports in Iowa

There have been several reports of wolves since 2004 primarily in eastern and northern counties and a few have been confirmed with tracks, pictures, or sightings by experienced person(s) (Fig. 2). In 2010, two wolf-like animals were taken in Sioux and Guthrie County. In 2014, two female wolves were shot in Buchanan and Jones County. The wolves shot in 2014 weighed close to 70 pounds, neither had whelped, and were estimated to be 2 years old. DNA evidence from one indicated it was from the Western Great Lakes wolf population. It is likely both of these wolves travelled into Iowa from MN, WI, or MI.

Reports from surrounding states also suggest wolves are traveling through Iowa. In 2002, a wolf was shot in Houston County, Minnesota, which is adjacent to Allamakee County in northeast IA. Rodney Rovang, manager of the Effigy Mounds National Monument, has observed occasional wolf tracks over the past decade in Allamakee County. Wolves have been seen or shot in Missouri from 2000-2014, one of which was a radio-collared animal that dispersed 600 miles south from Michigan, and 2-4 wolves were sighted in Illinois in 2014. Dispersing wolves from MN or WI will likely continue to occur in Iowa. However there is not a breeding population at this time and is unlikely given the lack of suitable habitat. Coyotes, large dogs, and gray wolves appear similar at a distance so hunters and reporting individuals need to be careful in their identification. More information on identifying wolves vs coyotes is available on the Iowa DNR's website under 'occasional wildlife visitors'. If you encounter a wolf

please call your area Iowa DNR wildlife
biologist or DNR Law Enforcement Officer.

Sources:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:

Western Great Lakes Wolf Population.

<https://www.fws.gov/midwest/wolf/index.html>

Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Population

[https://www.fws.gov/mountainprairie/es/grayWolf.ph](https://www.fws.gov/mountainprairie/es/grayWolf.php)

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