

# Ranching Within Oregon's Wolf Rules

by **KIM HOLT**, field editor



PHOTOS COURTESY OREGON DEPARTMENT OF FISH & WILDLIFE

In Oregon, all wolves in the state are currently listed as endangered, but in the western part of the state, west of highways 395, 78 and 95, wolves remain protected under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). East of that line, the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife (ODFW) manages wolves under what's known as the Oregon Wolf Conservation & Management Plan (see map).

One of the guiding principles for wolf plan development was to "provide relief for livestock producers from expected wolf depredations." Still, to date, ranchers aren't allowed to shoot wolves in Oregon if their livestock are being chased or harassed, even on private lands.

## Legislation and permits

According to the ODFW website: "Because wolves are protected by state and/or federal law, there are restrictions on what private landowners can do. If you

see a wolf near your home or livestock, you are authorized under state and federal law to scare the animal off (by making loud noises for example) as long as your actions do not harm or injure the wolf in any way. Under current law, it is unlawful to kill or harm a wolf attacking livestock, except with a permit."

In every legislative session since 2007, Oregon cattlemen have tried unsuccessfully to get language inserted into the management plan that would allow ranchers to shoot any wolf seen "chasing and harassing" stock.

"That was the language we firmly believed we needed from the beginning," remarks Rod Childers, wolf committee chairman for the Oregon Cattlemen's Association, "but we've never been successful in getting it through. Recognize we live in a state where the majority of our population is on the west side."

He explains that with "caught-in-the-

act permits," "We have to catch a wolf wounding, biting or [having] killed one of our cattle to be able to shoot. If we shoot a wolf, we have to prove or show harm in that time, not because it killed a cow three days ago, for example.

"So the permits are not a very good tool. There have been permits issued over three years now for the Imnaha pack, and there's never been a producer who has caught a wolf in the act of wounding or killing an animal."

He says a large reason why it's difficult to catch wolves in the act is because they are very nocturnal. Northeastern Oregon also has mountains, timber and underbrush.

Childers adds that non-lethal deterrents are required to first be tried and on file before lethal measures and permits will be considered for wolves. Some of these non-lethal methods include bone pile removal; electrical-flagged fences; radio-activated guard devices that pick up signals from GPS-collared wolves; range riders; keeping livestock close to outbuildings and human presence when calving; and increased monitoring. Except for stepped-up monitoring, ranchers haven't found non-lethal methods to be effective or efficient wolf deterrents.

What they have incurred are additional

**Above:** A male pup named OR-11 by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (born spring 2011) from the Walla Walla pack, waking up from anesthesia after being radio-collared on Oct. 25, 2011. It was the second wolf in the pack to be collared.

costs of time and fuel to more frequently check cattle, often out on expansive summer ranges that include timber terrain. There's also the additional stress and economic burden the wolves impart on trying to run a business, not to mention peace of mind.

## Dealing with a pack

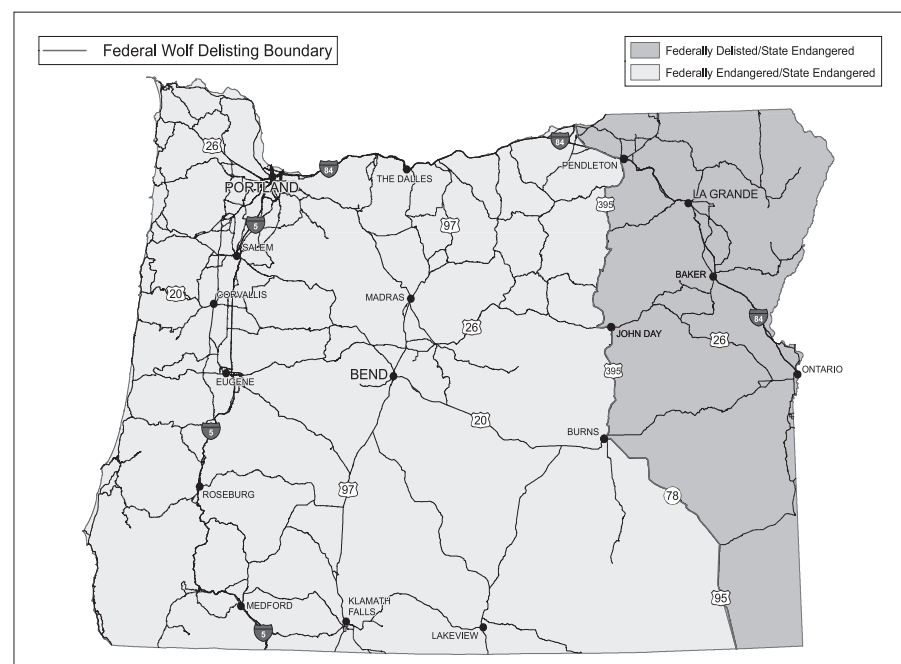
Since May 2010, in Wallowa County, ODFW has confirmed 27 depredations as wolf kills and 10 as probables, all by the Imnaha pack, well-known for its preference for beef. All but one of the confirmed kills occurred on private property.

In the Imnaha wolf pack area alone, 90 investigations have been conducted, Childers says. He has been present for 75% of these investigations conducted by ODFW and the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) Wildlife Services (WS).

The credibility and training of ODFW

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**Fig. 1: Federal and state wolf classification in Oregon**



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## Classic signs of wolf presence

Oregon ranchers say these are classic signs they've experienced with the presence of wolves in and around cattle:

- Nervous, bewildered animals
- Corners of pastures, grass/dirt areas by gates torn up
- Displacement of cattle, interrupted grazing distribution
- Calmer cattle becoming aggressive with dogs/horses
- Tight-bagged females — ranchers report that cows won't bawl for their deceased calves
- Birds flying around — can be indicative of dead animals

Wolves are opportunistic predators that kill for both food and sport. Livestock and wildlife attacked by these predators often die through consumption. They'll typically feed on flesh from the back end first, where other times may only seek out an unborn fetus. Coyote and wolf kills differ. Ranchers say coyotes will leave the hide, whereas wolves will eat everything, especially with calves. They have incredible jaw strength, and this makes them the strongest biter of the canids.

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individuals has also come into question. Many believe there's a "conflict of interest" when the individuals who are supposed to make sure the wolf population increases are the same ones who have the final say on a depredation classification, and whether ranchers are compensated for deceased stock.

"There has been disagreement with ODFW in the past, but from 2010 until now there's been a lot of improvement on working and doing the investigations together," Childers says.

This confirmation from ODFW is needed in order for ranchers to receive compensation (full for confirmed, half

for probables and zero for probable-unknowns, only based on market values) and for ODFW to consider authorization for lethal removal in eastern Oregon.

In May 2011, ODFW did lethally remove two wolves from the Imnaha pack. Confirmed depredations warranted the removal of two more wolves from this

pack; however, a court-ordered stay was issued as a result of litigation brought forth by several environmental groups. This stay was extended, and a decision, more than one year in the making, is still undecided.

Coincidentally, after stay of kill was issued, seven more head of stock were killed. One belonged to rancher Todd Nash, who had to put down a suffering 8-year-old cow, still alive, but stripped by wolves of her unborn calf. This cow was in a group of some 40 head, and the male wolf that got a stay of execution in Oregon had been tracked to this site.

Childers, who has been the wolf committee chair for six years, says the Imnaha pack's alpha female, known as B300, is actually a collared wolf that came across the Snake River from Idaho. He says there is speculation whether she walked across one of the dams or actually swam across, but it's documented that "water is no problem for a wolf." B300 settled in with this pack's alpha male and they started having pups.

In 2009, ODFW alerted Wallowa County ranchers that they had a couple of wolves hanging around, maybe two or three. Later that fall, they informed them there were 10, "so things lit up in a hurry," Childers explains.

"There were cattle missing here, probably for a good year that we know of, prior to really getting into the kills. The first thing that happens is you gather cattle in the fall and all of a sudden you have a lot more dry cows than you've ever had before. And you don't find many of those carcasses. A lot of times, on a smaller calf up to 3 to 4 months old, a wolf will eat everything but the hooves. They don't leave a lot out there."

If you suspect wolves Childers says, "You have to do due diligence in monitoring the cow herd. You just really have to beware and pay attention," for example, to tracks on the ground. "And work with your legislature."

He adds, there are 70,000-80,000 wolves in North America, and the U.S Fish & Wildlife's newest numbers in the lower 48 states indicate 7,800.

"This is not an endangered species," he assures.



These tracks were found in the north Keating Wildlife Management Unit, Baker County, in Fall 2007. A wolf's hind foot is smaller in size and generally placed in front of the front foot when trotting.