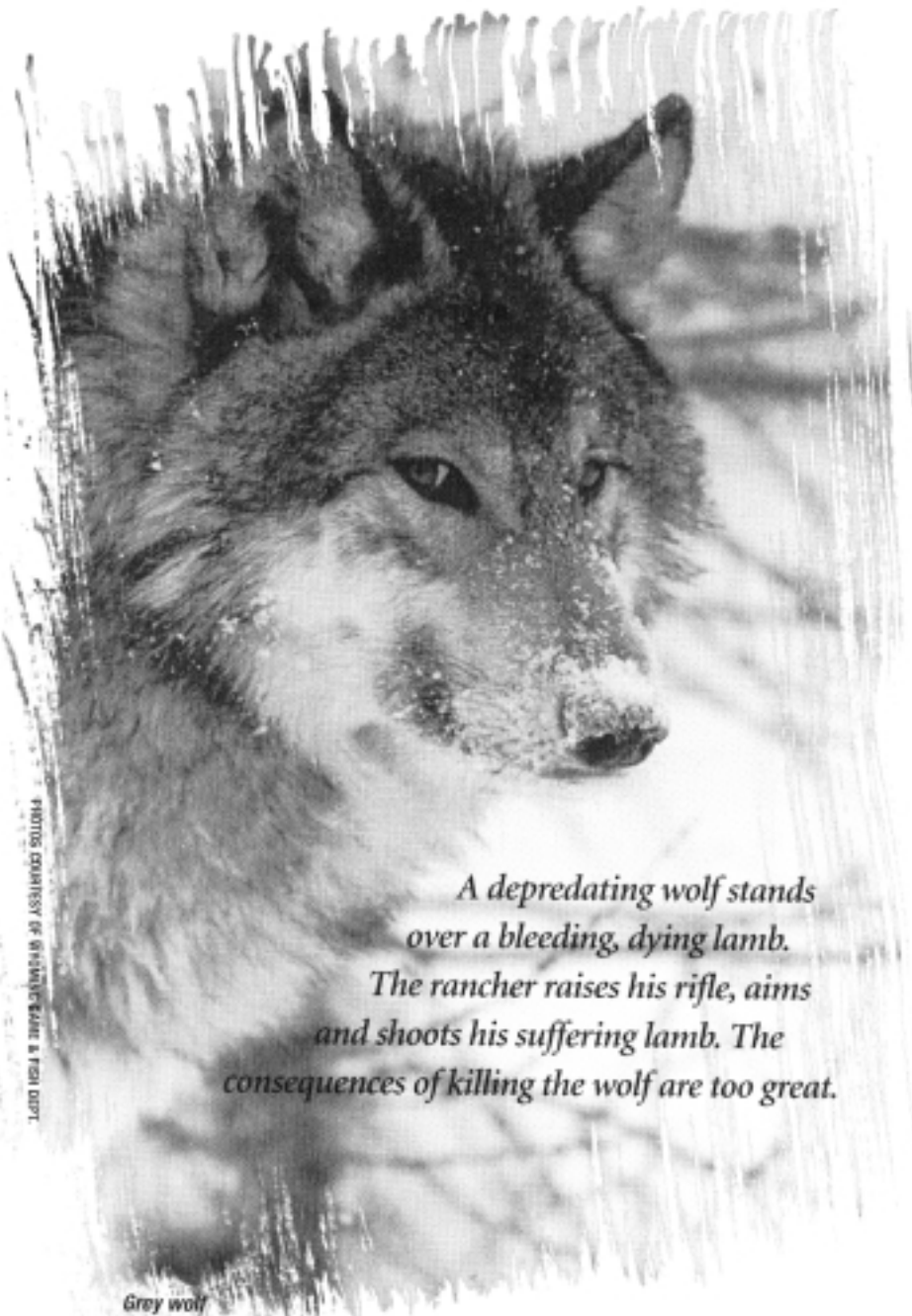


# PREDATOR *or* RANCHER

## *Who's In Control Here?*

BY BARBARA LABARBARA



*A depredating wolf stands  
over a bleeding, dying lamb.  
The rancher raises his rifle, aims  
and shoots his suffering lamb. The  
consequences of killing the wolf are too great.*

Grey wolf

### **Reintroduction of the wolf**

The U.S. Government reintroduced 14 wolves to Yellowstone Park in 1995 and 17 in 1996. Eight of those have been killed — two illegally. The estimated cost for the reintroduction program was \$6.7 million over a seven-year period.

Reg Rothwell, supervisor of biological services, Wyoming Game & Fish Department, says, to date, \$780,000 has been spent on this program. Livestock associations and the Farm Bureau dispute the figure. Their cost estimates range from \$4 million to \$14 million.

The wolf is classified an “experimental, non-essential population,” not a threatened or endangered species. Such status gives a landowner the right to take the animal without being penalized if it’s taking livestock or threatens you.

Wyoming rancher Frank Moore learned, however, that if he found a wounded lamb or calf on his leased government property, he could not shoot the responsible wolf. It can be shot only on private property. The depredation act has to be proven. That is difficult to do.

“It’s not the wolf himself I worry about,” says Bryce Reece, executive director of Wyoming Wool Growers, “it’s the regulation that comes with him. Federal government officials told us that as the wolf moves out of Yellowstone Park, they cannot force us to restrict our predator control activities on private land. However, if we have been notified of a wolf in our area and take him while protecting our livestock from other predators, we will be prosecuted under the Endangered Species Act.”

Notification may be a simple conversation in a coffee shop. For example, if a producer says, “I think I saw an animal that looked like a wolf about five miles from your ranch,” then all ranchers present have been notified.

Reproduction rates currently being seen in reintroduced wolves in Yellowstone Park are high. Game & Fish officials expect to see progeny from them in all parts of Wyoming within 10 years.

Once the wolf is delisted and comes under state management, Rothwell believes it will become a trophy game animal. At that time there would be compensation from Game & Fish for livestock damage.

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Swift fox

### Other predators

Other trophy game animals in Western states include the mountain lion and black and grizzly bears. In Texas mountain lions have no protection.

In California the mountain lion is a specially protected species. Proposition #117 in 1990 eliminated mountain lion hunting. A lion can only be taken after causing depredation or posing a human health and safety threat.

Livestock depredation permits issued by the Game & Fish Department since 1972 in California reflect the growing number of lions:

- 1972 — four permits
- 1982 — 66 permits
- 1992 — 193 permits
- 1993 — 217 permits
- 1994 — 322 permits

In 1994 two people were killed by mountain lions. Others died of rabies after being attacked.

Other predators having an effect on agriculture, wildlife and livestock include coyotes, fox, skunk, raccoons, wild dogs, opossum, mink, black-footed ferret, badger, muskrat, wild boar, razorback hogs, porcupine and beaver. New Mexico jack rabbits are considered a predator due to damage they cause the state's limited forage.

Even though coyote hunting is open year round, ranchers and Game & Fish officials agree the coyote issue is the most frustrating. They cause more damage than any other predators because they do not focus on only one prey. In southern California they have acclimated to urban areas where they create havoc with household pets.

Eagles are a growing concern in west Texas, eastern New Mexico and Wyoming. It's hard to verify eagle damage because there are no tracks and they leave little of the carcass. There is no legal recourse against them because of their endangered status.

Black bear are a hunted game species in California. These animals cause problems not only to livestock but to cabins, campgrounds and beekeepers. Fox, wolf and coyote have their litters in the spring, which is lambing and calving time for most ranchers. With litters to feed, they become more aggressive. Moore recently cleaned out a fox den and found 36 lamb legs.

### Game & Fish predator control

The Game & Fish Commission in California has been supportive of predator control and works well with Animal Damage Control (ADC). In other states, such as Washington and Wyoming, Game &

Fish officials do not believe predator control is important or it should be done on a limited basis and only to depredating animals.

"ADC helps take the pressure off Game & Fish by capturing and killing animals that are harming people," says John Steuber, USDA-ADC California. "We are so populated that the Game & Fish Department is inundated with human health and livestock issues it is not equipped to handle."

Wyoming Game & Fish contributed \$20,000 to the University of Wyoming for development of an immuno contraceptive for coyotes. They also give \$50,000 annually to the Department of

Agriculture predator research program and \$50,000 for on-the-ground control. In the last few years, research dollars have gone toward counting swift fox.

"We need to keep the swift fox off the endangered species list," says Hank Uden, Wyoming Agriculture Department. "If that species gets listed, it would be devastating to our livestock producers."

Research has proved predator control is intense and expensive. Rothwell says he does not believe that a blanket predator control program is cost-effective. Weather and sickness should be considered instead of generally blaming predators for livestock losses.

"We are not in the business of annihilating predators," says John Boughman, director, Wyoming Game & Fish Department. "But in situations where they cause problems and we can effectively do something, we will try."

Wyoming's official predatory policy reads:

*The Wyoming Game & Fish Commission recognizes the role of predator species in naturally functioning ecosystems. The commission also acknowledges that management of predators may be necessary and appropriate when circumstances such as weather, loss of habitat, over-population of predators, diminishing numbers of prey*

species, and other situations occur to cause adverse effects on wildlife populations.

*The Wyoming Game and Fish Commission is committed to cooperating with other agencies involved with predator management and participating in management efforts which benefit wildlife.*

### Ranchers and predators

When wildlife numbers are down, domestic animals share the brunt of predation. According to the USDA, more than half of U.S. farmers and ranchers experience economic loss from animal damage. Sheep producers report predation as their first or second biggest problem.

"If you think about it, predators don't know where their next meal is coming from," says Rothwell. "So they take whatever is easy for them. In part, livestock losses depend on the operator, the location and husbandry practices."

In the United States in 1995, 21,200 head of cattle were reported lost to predators with 7,650 of those being taken by coyotes. Coyotes took 61,700 of the 96,200 calves destroyed by predators.

Wyoming sheep producers lost 66,000 sheep and lambs to predators in 1995.

Coyotes were the main predator, taking 73 percent of the total predator losses and 40 percent of all losses. Interestingly, old age was the leading non-predator cause of death in sheep.

The above is verified damage. Steuber says that verified damage is a low percent of actual damage.

"It's more cost-effective for a sheep producer to do coyote control than it is for us," says Boughman. "It's less economically visible to control coyotes for wildlife than it is for producers."

Reece states that sheep producers in Wyoming are spending \$5 per ewe per year in predator control, plus what they pay in predator fees. In most years there is not that much profit.

What is the future of the rancher in relationship to the predator? "The predator has a good chance to win," is Moore's response.

### ADC tools, rules and regulations

Animal Damage Control (ADC) is a government agency whose sole purpose is to solve problems created when wildlife species cause damage to agricultural, urban or natural resources. Because of animal

rights activists and environmental concerns, this agency is seeing ever-increasing rules and regulations.

Control techniques used by ADC include padded and regular steel leg hold traps. Steel traps have to be checked daily in California and every 72 hours in Wyoming. Neck snares are checked daily. M44 sodium cyanide devices cannot be used on government land. Aerial hunting is limited to steel shots. Hunting is regulated and unregulated on specific species. Compound 1080 (sodium floral acetate) collars are heavily regulated and cannot be used on government land.

A new tool livestock producers are using is guard dogs. Generally they are white in color and hard to detect in sheep herds. These dogs usually go out as a pup and grow up protective of their herd.

Game & Fish officials use selective predator control after problems occur. ADC prefers preventive control. Activists want to introduce more predators and eliminate all control.

That leaves ranchers asking the question, "Why don't our calves and our neighbors' lambs have the same right to life as government wolves?"

**AJ**

