

# Illegal wolf killings smear image of hunting

Paul A. Smith Milwaukee Journal Sentinel USA TODAY NETWORK – WIS.,  
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It was a crisp January day and a blanket of white covered the landscape in northern Bayfield County.

It's not wilderness, but it is wild country and a good place to find solitude. A friend of mine also likes to go there in winter to hunt coyotes.

On this particular day, as he drove down a remote road toward the shore of Lake Superior, he came upon a sight that immediately signaled another human had been there recently.

A large, black animal lay on the side of the road.

'At first I thought, 'Holy cow, somebody threw a bear down here,'" he said. 'But when I got closer, I saw the long tail. It was a massive wolf.'

Gray wolves come in a variety of colors. This black male was stunning, he said, for its size and thick fur. Its head was as big as a basketball.

My friend, who is a native of northern Wisconsin and has spent six decades hunting, fishing and working in the Badger State, has seen many hundreds of bears, white-tailed deer, coyotes and wolves.

This wolf, he said, was the most impressive wild animal he'd seen in Wisconsin in his life.

There was obviously one big problem: it was dead.

'The eyelids weren't even frozen,' he said. 'I must not have missed the guy who dumped it by much. Big beautiful animal. What a shame.'

The animal was illegally killed with a single bullet through the chest. It was likely killed somewhere nearby, put in a vehicle and driven and dumped on the dead-end road.

My friend did the responsible thing and reported his finding to the Department of Natural Resources.

A conservation warden came out that day, collected evidence and took the animal. An investigation is underway to find the perpetrator.

Winter is stressful on many wildlife species. Wolves, which have evolved to live in the cold and snow, fare better than most but are still vulnerable.

Especially to illegal killings by humans.

Wisconsin researchers Jennifer Stenglein, Timothy Van Deelen and Adrian Wydeven analyzed mortality records of 501 radio-collared wolves in Wisconsin that died from 1979 to 2013. The findings are published in a 2018 paper titled 'Compensatory mortality in a recovering top carnivore: Wolves in Wisconsin.'

Weekly hazards varied throughout the year but the highest mortality rates occurred in winter, the authors found.

Overall mean annual mortality was 9.4% from illegal killing, 5.1% from other human causes and 9.5% from natural and unknown causes

Hazard of illegal kill for wolves peaked in late November and early December aligning with Wisconsin's firearm deer hunting seasons when people are afield with weapons and often have enhanced visibility because of snow and reduced vegetative cover, according to the researchers.

Natural mortality hazard for wolves peaked slightly later in December through February, a time when wolves with disease are more likely to die because of physiological stress associated with snow and cold.

Always controversial, wolves are emerging as the ultimate survivors.

In a shameful, ignorant policy of the past, the native carnivore had been intentionally extirpated from Wisconsin through bounties and poisoning. The last wild wolf was documented in the Badger State in the 1950s.

But thanks to protections since the 1970s, including the Endangered Species Act, wolves increased their numbers and expanded their distribution in the Upper Midwest.

Last year wolves in Wisconsin reached modern-era highs of 1,195 animals and 256 packs, according to DNR estimates.

On Jan. 4 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service delisted wolves, returning management authority to Wisconsin and other states.

The DNR and U.S. Department of Agriculture - Wildlife Services now have the ability to use lethal controls on wolves that cause problems with humans, pets or livestock.

Farmers, too, can now legally kill a wolf in the act of harming their animals.

So far in 2021 there have been five confirmed or probable

wolf depredations in Wisconsin, three on livestock and two on pet dogs, according to DNR records. The incidents resulted in three deaths and two injuries to the animals.

There have also been five cases of verified wolf harassments or threats, including three to livestock, one to a pet dog which was chased and one in which human safety was threatened when a wolf came close to a residence.

The DNR has issued depredation permits to try to remove problem wolves near the farms.

The recent delisting is the seventh change in authority over wolf control in Wisconsin since 1995, Wydeven said.

The whip-saw of changes has seemingly worsened the illegal killing problem.

Wisconsin researchers Erik Olson, Stenglein, Van Deelen and Wydeven collaborated on a 2014 article in Conservation Letters titled 'Pendulum Swings in Wolf Management Led to Conflict, Illegal Kills, and a Legislated Wolf Hunt.'

The swings in wolf status, they write, 'led to inconsistent management authority, declining local support for wolves, and possibly the unintended backlash of more illegal kills and a legislatively mandated wolf hunt.'

The authors suggest consistent and responsible depredation management programs may reduce illegal killing.

It's too early to say if the Jan. 4 delisting, which returned management authority for wolves to the DNR, will help reduce illegal killings.

The amount of open hatred expressed toward wolves by many Wisconsin residents makes it hard to see how it can improve.

'Shoot, shovel and shut-up' may have become a habit hard to break for some.

Radio-collared wolves help researchers determine how widespread the problem is.

In the 2020 Wisconsin DNR wolf report, the cause of death could be determined on 14 radio-collared wolves. Of those, 9 (64%) were illegally killed, 1 (7%) was killed by vehicle collision, 2 (14%) were killed by other wolves, and 2 (14%) died from unknown natural causes.

Winters in Wisconsin have increasingly become the time for poison to be placed in the north woods, too. The targets are thought to be wolves.

Cases of the illegal poisonings have been documented most often when pets ingest the poison placed along trails, get sick or die.

It happened in January when two women took three dogs for an outing near Tomahawk. The dogs got into what appeared to be moldy bread,

according to an account by WJFW Newswatch 12. One dog died and the other two were seriously ill but recovered.

A reward of \$3,000 has been offered in that case.

Other poisoning cases from 2019 and 2020 remain unsolved. Those poisonings took place in Florence, Forest and Marinette counties, all on public land.

Those poisonings killed a yellow Labrador retriever and a German shepherd in April 2020, two of seven dogs killed by poisoning cases in those three counties. Officials investigating the cases have also found dead coyotes, weasels and wolves; necropsies confirmed the wild animals were poisoned.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has offered a \$1,000 reward for those cases.

No arrests have been made.

In fact, despite the high number of illegal wolf killings in Wisconsin, the perpetrators are rarely caught. Conservation wardens conducted only one wolf-related investigation and issued only one citation from April 2019 through April 2020, according to the 2020 wolf report.

The cases of poaching and illegal killing in no way represent the hunting community at large. But they do put a stain on it.

'Ethical behavior is a matter of pride among the vast majority of hunters,' said Bill Brassard of the National Shooting Sports Foundation. 'Deliberately shooting non-game species or game out of season should be punished for the crime it is.'

My friend said the black wolf from Bayfield County will draw attention to the plague of illegal killing as well as ethical and responsible hunting and wildlife management for decades to come.

The DNR plans to have it mounted and put on display at Pattison State Park in Douglas County.

The wolf, he said, weighed 84 pounds.

'That's no way for such an animal to die, that's for sure,' he said. 'No way at all.'

Citizen cooperation is critical in bringing poachers to justice. If you have information regarding natural resource violations, call (800) TIP-WDNR or (800) 847-9367. The hotline is in operation 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

**A Department of Natural Resources conservation warden collects information on an illegally killed gray wolf in late January in Bayfield County. The animal was shot, transported to the site and dumped. *Contributed photo***



A Department of Natural Resources conservation warden collects information

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