

# Wolves of the World

by Neil Hutt

WOLVES IN THE UNITED STATES

## Michigan to Missouri: The Incredible Journey of Wolf #18

*The movement down the trail would seem relentless if it did not appear so effortless. The wolf's body, from neck to hips, appears to float over the long, almost spindly legs and the flicker of wrists, a bicycling drift through the trees, reminiscent of the movement of water or of shadows.*

—Barry Lopez,  
*Of Wolves and Men*

It is July 1999. Near Ironwood in northwestern Michigan, biologists have caught a young male wolf weighing a hefty 22 pounds. They ear tag the big pup and attach a radio collar lined with foam rubber to ensure a comfortable fit as the pup grows. Jim Hammill, Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) biologist,

hopes the collar will remain intact long enough for researchers to locate the pup's littermates.

The young wolf's collar survives the rigors of puppyhood, and for nine months, Michigan DNR biologists are able to follow his movements. Then they lose track of him. If #18 has struck out on his own, his defection from his natal pack is not unusual, but it is risky. Hunting is difficult for a lone wolf, and if the youngster trespasses on the territory of another wolf pack, he is in danger of being injured or killed. Nevertheless, if food is available and he can

survive, he may be able to find a female disperser, mate, and form a new pack.

Months pass after the disappearance of #18's signal. Then in October 2001, a farmer in northern Missouri returns home from bow hunting. Seeing what he assumes is a coyote near his sheep pen, he nocks an arrow and shoots the animal. After discovering the collar and numbered ear tag, the farmer takes the body to Missouri Conservation Department officials, who verify the animal is indeed an 81-pound gray wolf. It is #18.

A glance at a map reveals the difficulty of #18's incredible journey. Roughly 450 miles as the crow flies lie between his capture site in northwestern Michigan and Grundy County, Missouri. The distance itself is not without precedent. Biologists believe wolves travel farther than any other terrestrial mammal, and many accounts have been verified of wolves dispersing hundreds of miles from their birthplace.

What makes #18's odyssey so remarkable is, in Hammill's words, "the type of terrain and the obstacles this animal had to circum-



vent.” The wolf had to cross the Mississippi River and thread his way across the labyrinth of highways that strangles much of the region. “You have to wonder how many people saw this animal along the way and either kept it to themselves or told people and weren’t believed,” said Michigan DNR biologist Dean Beyer.

Reflecting on #18’s incredible journey, Missouri Conservation Department wildlife research biologist Dave Hamilton conceded that the likelihood of seeing a gray wolf in his state is still small. However, #18’s journey demonstrates yet again that wolves are capable of great feats of endurance. “For years, we believed and told people that there were no wild wolves in Missouri,” Hamilton admitted. “We can’t say that anymore.”

THE WOLVES OF AYLMER LAKE,  
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES,  
CANADA

## Whereabouts of Female and Pups a Mystery

This past August, the International Wolf Center sponsored a trip to Aylmer Lake, a remote destination near the Arctic Circle in Canada’s Northwest Territories. The group posted daily reports and photographs of this fascinating landscape and its wildlife on the Center’s Web site (“Notes from the Field” at [www.wolf.org](http://www.wolf.org)). This online journal provides both a vicarious adventure for wolf fans everywhere and an insight into the patience and persistence required by biological fieldwork.

A similar group making the same trip in August 2000 had been extraordinarily lucky. From a hidden

vantage point behind a boulder spill, the group watched the Aylmer Lake pack’s rendezvous site. They enjoyed the rare sight of 9 adult wolves going about the business of raising 15 pups—playing with them, heading out to hunt, joining together in group howls, and bringing food to the fast-growing youngsters.

The August 2001 group encountered a radically different set of circumstances. Mysteriously, they saw no wolves at the old rendezvous site. While they delighted in spotting the radio-collared breeding male and several yearlings at random locations, they saw no trace of the breeding female and the three-month-old pups on the open tundra, even with the aid of aircraft.

Trip leader Dave Mech and Canadian biologist Dean Cluff were mystified.

The Aylmer Lake pack with five or six pups had been seen at the den site as recently as June. According to a local observer, the radio-collared female showed up occasionally at the den in July and early August. But in mid-August, the female and the pups were nowhere to be found.

After a week of diligent searching, the Center’s group reluctantly left the region, still pondering the female’s whereabouts. Had she left the area and traveled too far for her radio signal to be picked up? That is possible. The pups were old enough to travel provided the mother could hunt and supply them with food. But the research plane ranged long distances in every direction without picking up her signal.

Was the female’s radio collar malfunctioning?

*The Aylmer Lake pack had been seen at the den as recently as June, as had five or six pups.*



Alan Rebore



Caribou is the main prey species of the Alymer Lake pack.



Tristen Rebore

Mech and Cluff considered that unlikely. The collars are durable, and the batteries in the transmitter were relatively fresh. In addition, the breeding male was always observed alone or with the juveniles. Even if the female had remained in the area with a nonfunctioning collar, chances are good that someone would have spotted her or the pups.

Was the mother dead? Mech and Cluff concluded that was possible but also unlikely. Biologists never heard a mortality signal from the transmitter on

her collar, a rapid beep indicating she had not moved for a long time.

Canadian researchers continued the air search in August and September without locating the Alymer Lake female. The flights produced a puzzling observation: low pup numbers seemed to be widespread throughout the region.

Cluff is evaluating several factors that might have hampered the biologists' ability to find pups. The ground was mottled

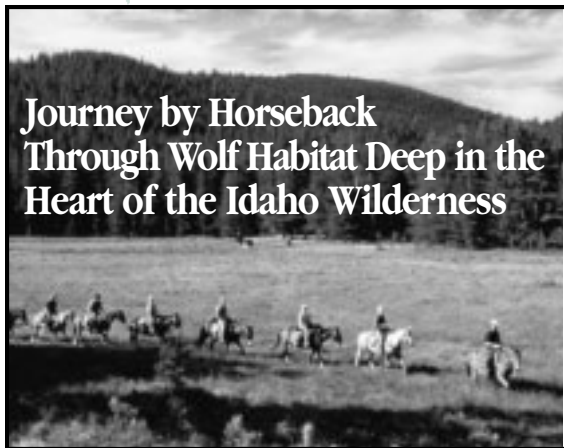
from early snowfall, so observers might have simply failed to spot some wolves that were present.

If, however, pup production or survival was poor throughout Cluff's study area, the question becomes, Why? Since caribou arrived unusually late in the region near many of the area's den sites, some pups may have starved. "Still," said Cluff, "adult wolves are quite mobile, and surely they could still encounter caribou, some of which they could kill for food."

Perhaps next summer will yield a solution to the puzzle when another Center group travels to the Northwest Territories. Until then, the answer to the riddle of the Alymer Lake female and her pups remains locked in the winter darkness and brutal cold enveloping the vast tundra.

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## Wolf Population Declines

**K**urt, Bozcurt, Canavar, Bocu—each of these four local Turkish names means “wolf,” a species whose numbers have been declining in Turkey since the 1980s. Mortality has increased for all the reasons common elsewhere: large-scale habitat degradation, intraspecific competition, decrease in the prey base and direct human persecution.

Emre Can of WWF Turkey (The Turkish Society for the Conservation of Nature) studied wolves in 2000 and 2001, and collected data on distribution, prey, conflicts with humans, and conservation and management practices. He reported an estimated 7,000 to 11,000 wild wolves living mainly in the central portion of the country, a land of forests and steppes where the wolf's major prey are wild boar, roe deer and hare.

The main causes of the wolf's decline in Turkey are hunting and direct persecution by humans. The Turkish government considers the wolf a pest, and although no organized hunts are conducted, local people shoot wolves whenever they encounter them. Trapping has also long been a traditional method for killing wolves. The availability of poison since the 1960s has made this

efficient extermination method widespread as a means of predator control. Even the Ministry of Forestry freely used poison in different regions of Turkey and recommended its use, according to Can. However, at present, poison is not used as widely as it was before the 1980s.

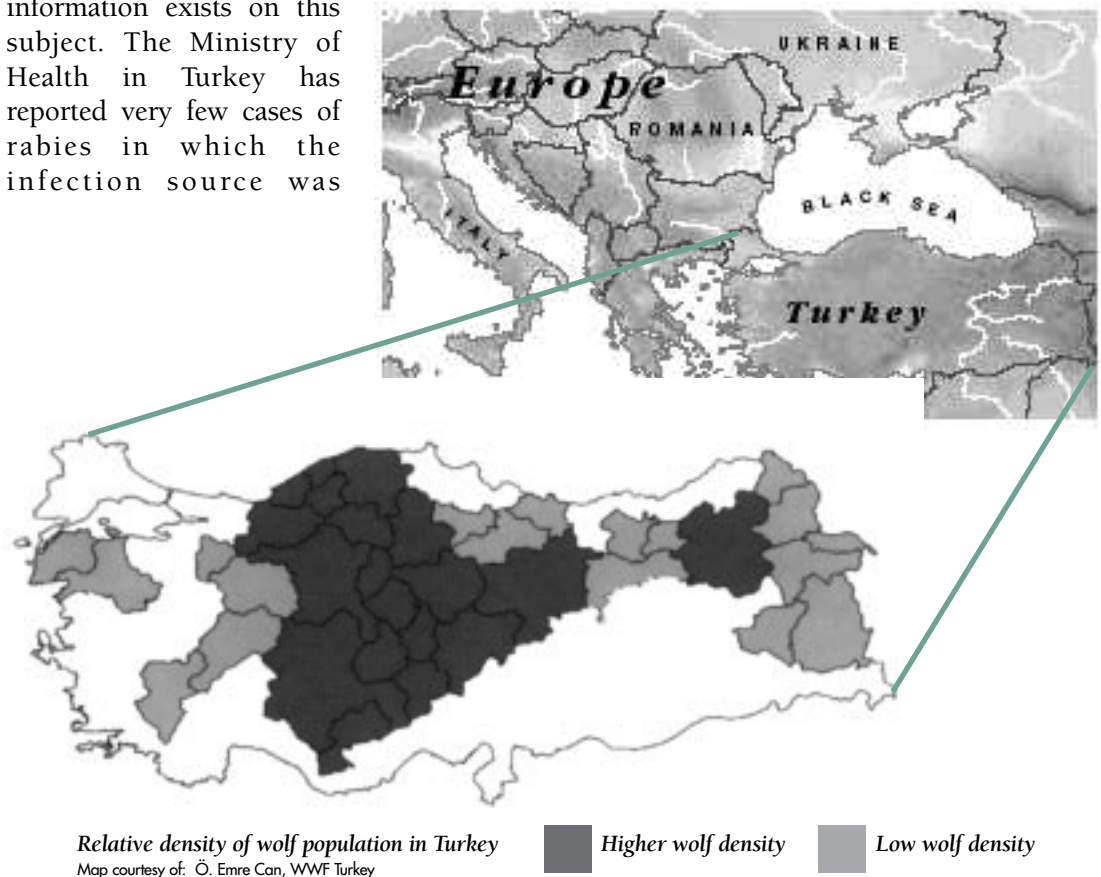
Wolves are hunted for their pelts in Turkey, but livestock depredation, mainly of sheep and cattle, is the main reason wolves are killed. In addition, people living in rural areas fear they will contract rabies from wolves. According to Can's report, little reliable information exists on this subject. The Ministry of Health in Turkey has reported very few cases of rabies in which the infection source was

believed to be wolves. Can observed, however, that statistics were not properly kept, and the real figures were probably higher.

At present, wolves in Turkey are not legally protected. Under the 1937 Turkish Land Hunting Law, the wolf is listed as a pest; it can, therefore, be hunted throughout the year with no limitations. Can said a new hunting proposal is presently before the Turkish parliament. In Can's opinion, however, the proposal is inadequate, and WWF Turkey has suggested specific modifications.

According to the Central Hunting Commission and to Forest Law, hunting is forbidden in national parks, production forests, protected forests and game breeding areas. While it is illegal to hunt wolves in these areas, the areas are generally too small to be adequate refuges for wolves.

Can reported that Turkey is preparing for a country-wide survey involving 1,500 local forestry offices. The results will be analyzed and compared to the current information available on numbers and distribution of wolves in Turkey.



## Survival of Wolves Still Uncertain

In summer 2000, Russian biologist Nikita Ovsyanikov discovered the tracks of two wolves on Wrangel Island, the 5,000-square-mile arctic wildlife reserve located off the northeastern coast of Siberia. Although Wrangel Island's terrestrial and marine ecosystems contain an extraordinary concentration of wildlife, the wolf has been missing for 30 years since being extirpated by the Soviet government to protect the musk oxen and reindeer.

Since money to protect Russia's nature reserves has recently all but disappeared, Ovsyanikov has looked for sponsors to fund his research and to reintroduce wolves to Wrangel Island. Thus, he was elated when

in summer 2000, a pioneering ecotourism group organized by International Wolf Center board member Paul Schurke and his wife, Susan, discovered the tracks of two wolves. Ovsyanikov hoped a breeding pair had migrated across the 100 miles of sea ice from the Siberian mainland to Wrangel. If the pair produced pups, perhaps wolves could recover on their own. Researchers would then be able to divert money earmarked for wolf reintroduction to other critical needs of this ecologically sensitive area (*International Wolf*, Summer 2001).



In December 2000, fresh wolf tracks were discovered on the island near a herd of reindeer. Then in April 2001, personnel at a field research station found one wolf track.

Ovsyanikov returned to Wrangel Island in summer 2001, hoping to discover a breeding pair with offspring. However, neither he nor anyone else found any evidence that wolves might be present. Ovsyanikov was disappointed but not discouraged. He noted that

during his stay on Wrangel he was unable to travel around the island in search of wolves as much as he would have liked. Also, the main herds of reindeer were concentrated a considerable distance from the field station.

Ovsyanikov said his lack of success in finding wolf tracks could mean one of several things. One wolf may have died, and the other may have left the island. It is also possible that neither wolf survived. Rabies is common



To protect the musk oxen and reindeer, the Soviet government extirpated the wolves on Wrangel Island 30 years ago.

# As A Matter Of Fact

among arctic foxes, and the wolves may have contracted the disease. Perhaps, Ovsyanikov speculated, both wolves left the island; however, he considered that unlikely.

Ovsyanikov still holds out hope that both wolves survived and produced pups in spring 2001. Maybe, he said, they hid during summer from places visited by humans. Reindeer were heavily concentrated on the remote western portion of Wrangel, a region Ovsyanikov called Nameless Mountains. It is also possible the wolves raised their pups in eastern Wrangel Island, where large herds of reindeer moved in spring 2001.

"I think if wolves are on the island, they will show

themselves, or at least signs of their presence, during the next spring," Ovsyanikov said. "If we don't find any tracks during the next spring-summer season, then we may say for sure that wolves disappeared from the island."

If that disappointing possibility becomes a reality, Ovsyanikov will revisit the plan to reintroduce wolves to Wrangel Island. "But this action will require adequate funding," he said. That may prove to be the most daunting impediment of all to the return of the wolf to this arctic Eden. ■

*Neil Hutt is an educator and International Wolf Center board member who lives in Purcellville, Virginia.*



Lynn and Donna Rogers

## What is the average litter size of the wolf?

Litter sizes vary, but an average litter size for gray wolves is six, and for red wolves is four to five. If natural prey is not readily available, several pups may die. A wolf pack normally has only one litter of pups each spring, but in areas of high prey abundance more than one female in each pack may give birth. ■

## New Question

**How many states in the U.S. currently have known breeding packs of wolves?**

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TODAY!

Nikita Ovsyanikov