

A Look Beyond

New Challenges for Wolf Advocates

by Steve Grooms

A recent front-page newspaper story carried the headline: “Big, bad reputation for Wisconsin wolves.” It described unhappiness in northern Wisconsin about wolf depredation, although managers and angry citizens disagree on how serious the problem is.

The article was surprising because wolves in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan have made headlines in recent years by doing well as they recovered from near extinction. Wolves, previously newsworthy for positive reasons, now are attracting negative media attention.

This has serious implications for fans of wolves.

Until recently, the main challenge for wolf advocates has been to counter ignorance and irrational fear with reassuring scientific information. People still hate and fear wolves irrationally, but that is less of a problem than it once was.

The new challenge for wolf fans is to help the public *maintain* a positive image of wolves. Meeting this challenge will involve different tactics than were effective at debunking old spooky stereotypes. Now that wolf restoration has been so successful, the most daunting challenge is to design management policies that might preserve the public tolerance for wolves, even if those policies involve the death of individuals that habitually attack pets or livestock.

Irrational wolf hatred still exists, in some places worse than in others, and all admirers of wolves must be

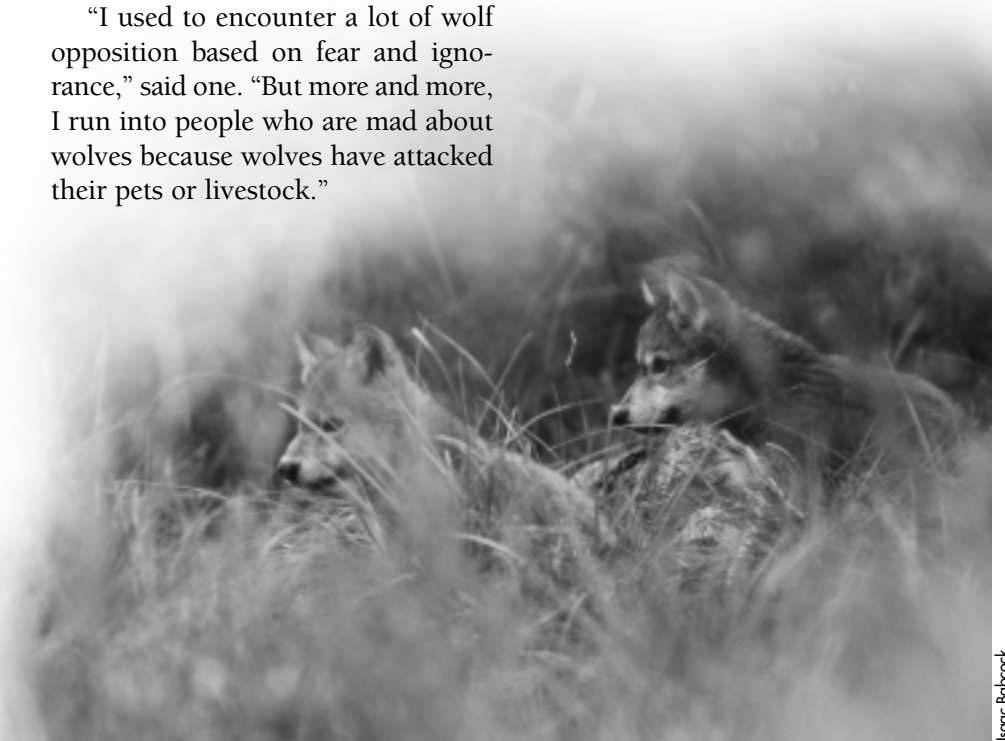
prepared to defend the animals from the sort of hysterical fears that were once so common. At the same time, the greater challenge for wolf advocates now is to help design sensible wolf management plans that promote strong wolf populations in prime habitat while minimizing wolf-human conflicts elsewhere. That might mean endorsing programs that are harsh on wolves outside prime wolf country, which is odious to wolf fans, even if it might be in the best long-term interest of wolves.

I recently spoke to wolf managers in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan. They were concerned about a new trend in public attitudes, a trend that has the potential to reverse the great progress wolves have made.

“I used to encounter a lot of wolf opposition based on fear and ignorance,” said one. “But more and more, I run into people who are mad about wolves because wolves have attacked their pets or livestock.”

Wolf fans who insist on championing wolves exactly as they have done for three decades might not be doing a kindness for wolves. Instead of maximizing wolf numbers, the new challenge for wolf advocates will be to minimize hostility between people and wolves. This approach will greatly help maintain the positive view of wolves we have worked so hard to accomplish. ■

Steve Grooms has just finished totally revising and updating his best-selling book Return of the Wolf. The third edition, published by Nova Vista Publishing, will go on sale in spring 2005.



Isaac Babcock