

# INTERNATIONAL WOLF

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Carol Weller

# Wood River Wolf Project

## Helps Idaho Sheep and Wolves Share the Landscape

By AVERY SHAWLER



Phoebe Bean

It is late June in the Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon, and a herder and a band of sheep have bedded down for the night after a long, hot day. At 2 a.m., the herder is jarred awake; one of his dogs barks in distress. The herder jumps out of his sleeping bag in the sheep wagon, grabs his high-beam spotlight and air horn, and runs toward the noise. He sees his dog and a gray wolf facing off. The dog is barking at the wolf, and then the wolf jumps on the dog. The herder shines the spotlight on the snarling pair and deploys the air horn. The wolf freezes in terror before it darts away into the night, as fast and as far from that air horn as it can go.

The wolf got a good scare in that scenario—but that's much better than being injured or killed by a gunshot. The wolf was given another chance at life—and if it's smart, it will stay away from those sheep.

A few days before this wolf encounter, the herder had participated in a Nonlethal Coexistence Training workshop in the Blue Mountains, where he was given nonlethal tools along with proper training to use the tools effectively. That training, initiated by local sheep ranchers, could not have been better timed.

Last winter the ranchers obtained permits to graze sheep in a new allotment of U.S. Forest Service land in the Blue Mountains,



Lauren Hemmelly

knowing that it is a place of heavy wolf activity. Not wanting to resort to lethal control, a ranch manager called Brian Bean at Lava Lake Land & Livestock, a ranching operation in Central Idaho, and asked about using nonlethal tools. Bean is one of the founders of the Wood River Wolf Project (WRWP), a collaborative promoting the coexistence of livestock and wolves by using nonlethal tools and techniques to prevent wolf depredation on sheep.

At Bean's suggestion, the ranch manager talked with me, in my role as WRWP coordinator, and with Suzanne Stone, the Senior Representative for the Northwest Program for Defenders of Wildlife. Together, Suzanne and the manager organized the Nonlethal Coexistence Training workshop, bringing together ranchers, sheep herders, and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. The WRWP sent Claudio Oriheula, one of Lava Lake's seasoned camp-tenders, who has used nonlethal tools for many years, and Reid Hensen, a Spanish-fluent Lava Lake intern to translate for workshop participants. Oregon's newly formed Blue Mountain Wolf Project collaborative is following a model created in 2008 by the WRWP in central Idaho to address predator-livestock conflicts in a new way.

## Wood River Wolf Project History and Background

By the 1930s, gray wolves had been eliminated from the lower 48 states, excepting Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan. But in 1974 wolves gained protection under the Endangered Species Act, and were reintroduced in the West in the mid-1990s. Sheep ranchers in Idaho began to experience wolf depredation on

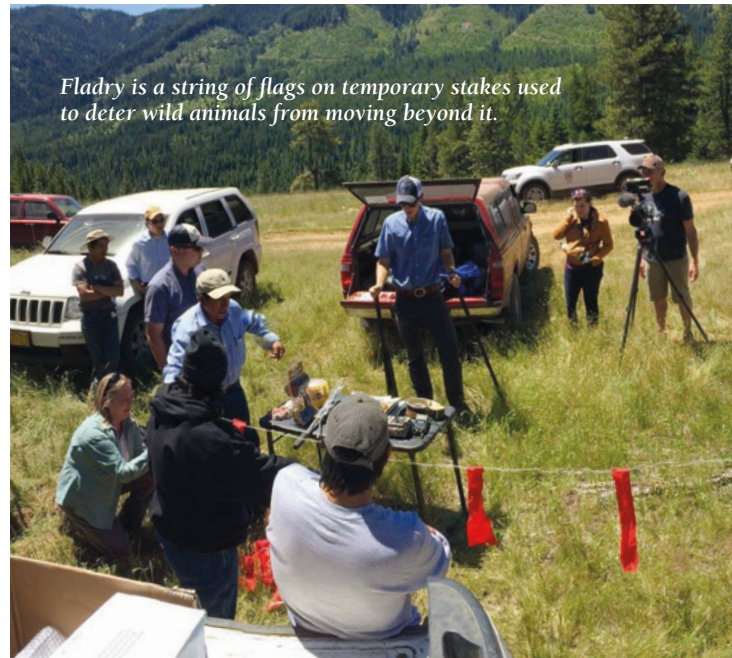
flocks as early as 2002. In 2007, the wolves of Sun Valley's famous Phantom Hill pack began killing sheep in significant numbers along Idaho's "sheep driveway" that runs from the Snake River Plain to the Sawtooth Valley—a situation that would normally result in some or all of the pack members being killed. But Blaine County, Defenders of Wildlife, the U.S Forest Service and local sheep operators worked together to adopt policies supporting the use of nonlethal tools—and the Wood River Wolf Project was born.

Since the inception of the WRWP in 2008, no wolves have been lethally removed in the project area. In recent years, wolves have been less active than they were in the earlier years of the project. As WRWP project coordinator, I hope this is partially due to the success of the WRWP's nonlethal tools and techniques, "teaching" the wolves—and in turn, their offspring—that sheep in that area are not easy prey.

Other deterrents to wolf activity in the area include heavy recreational use and a hunting season established in 2011, after the wolf was delisted so, conceivably, increased wolf harvesting in this more accessible area could also have helped reduce sheep losses. In any event, a combination of factors has resulted in fewer instances of wolf-livestock interaction—a fact borne out by extensive WRWP monitoring that includes camera-trap surveys and howl surveys.

## Band Kits

Even though wolf activity has decreased in the project area, the WRWP



Fladry is a string of flags on temporary stakes used to deter wild animals from moving beyond it.



Avery Showler



Avery Showler

remains vigilant and constantly prepared for increased wolf activity near the sheep. Last year we created and piloted our Band Kit system: a bag with all the tools sheep herders need to protect their sheep band (band flocks are those with large numbers of sheep—often 1,000 to 1,500 ewes) from wolves and other predators. Herders are trained, and thereby empowered, to protect their sheep from predators without having to use lethal means.

Herder interviews reveal that they especially like using the Foxlights (computerized lights that randomly blink to simulate humans on patrol) and



U.S. Forest Service



Andrew Kane

sheep, increasing human presence—the most effective defense against predators.

## Scientific Backing

How effective are these non-lethal tools and techniques? In February 2017, the internationally recognized *Journal of Mammalogy* published a study conducted over the first seven years of the WRWP. Results showed that sheep losses to wolves in the project area were 90 percent lower than in the rest of Idaho. Sheep losses to wolves in areas adjacent to the project area were 3.5 percent higher than within the project area where nonlethal tools were used. Further, no wolves were lethally controlled in the project area, and sheep depredation losses to wolves were just 0.02 percent of the total sheep present—the lowest rate among sheep-grazing areas in Idaho's wolf range.

## Outreach Efforts

It is exciting to be celebrating year 10 of the Wood River Wolf Project. It's even more exciting to see other communities using us as an example and a resource for promoting predator-livestock coexistence. The WRWP has given presentations at several workshops, symposiums and conferences, and members have spoken before the House Committee on Natural Resources. Our website shares

starter pistols. Our field manager, Kris Thoreson, frequently checks in with herders to make sure they have everything they need and ask if they've noticed any predator activity. The herders are the first line of defense against predators, and they really appreciate having these extra tools and support from our staff to help them do their jobs effectively. In times of heightened wolf activity, the WRWP recruits volunteers to camp with the

information on our Band Kit and protocols. Instructional videos in English and Spanish, created with help from Andrew Kane at Backcountry Image, will appear on our website soon. The WRWP's goal is to expand our outreach and educational efforts to other communities dealing with livestock predation issues, addressing not only wolves, but coyotes and bears, and refining tools and techniques to address predation on cattle.

## How Can You Help?

Ranching is part of the cultural landscape of the West, and an important livelihood for practitioners and communities. The WRWP collaborative includes conservationists, ranchers, government agencies and the public in an attempt to demonstrate that wildlife and livestock *can* co-exist. It is an example of creative problem-solving rather than polarizing rhetoric—and offers a model that extends beyond the issue of sheep and wolves.

If you want to stay updated on the Wood River Wolf Project, sign up for our newsletter at [www.woodriverwolfproject.org](http://www.woodriverwolfproject.org). You can also find us on Facebook and Instagram. Donations are much needed and greatly appreciated. Please contact our project coordinator, Greg Hill ([greg@woodriverwolfproject.org](mailto:greg@woodriverwolfproject.org)), for more information. ■

*Avery Shawler has served as the WRWP's Project Coordinator for two years and is beginning her Ph.D. program in the Department of Environmental Science, Policy, and Management at UC Berkeley this fall, where she will study predator-livestock conflict in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.*



Avery Shawler