

## **Ranchers' Guide to Wolf Depredation**

Because of expanding populations of naturally occurring wolves and due to re-introductions of wolves in the 1990s, ranchers in most western states are increasingly concerned about wolf depredation of livestock. As wolf populations continue to increase, it will be difficult for experts to make prompt site visits when a suspected wolf depredation has occurred. This publication provides basic information on identifying wolf depredation, and includes steps for verifying suspected wolf depredation.



If a rancher suspects wolf depredation, the top priority should be to preserve evidence so that an accurate determination of the cause of livestock death can be made by appropriate USDA-APHIS, Wildlife Services personnel. In addition to knowing how to preserve the evidence, ranchers also must learn how to make preliminary judgments on whether to call Wildlife Services. Even if a rancher presently has no wolves near his or her property, it is not uncommon for adult wolves to wander over 1,000 square miles in a six-month period. Wolves in the West will continue to expand their range.

[Click here for the Wolf Depredation Brochure.](#)

### **Cattle**

Wolves attack and kill large domestic animals by lunging and biting at the shoulders and sides. A trail of blood and patches of hair are often evident. In the U.S., most wolf attacks are in the shoulder and flank area. Individual wolves and small packs sometimes concentrate on the flank and hind legs. The prey is often left to become weak and stiff. Wolves begin to feed when the prey is knocked over or falls from weakness. The bite usually causes damage deep in the underlying tissues. Cattle severely injured by wolves

appear dazed and exhibit a characteristic spread-eagle stance. They are reluctant to move because of the deep pain. Wolves usually feed on cattle at the kill site. Parts are sometimes carried off. Bones are often chewed and broken. Wolves prefer to feed on the viscera and hind legs of domestic prey. However, preferential feeding patterns are not obvious on prey killed by packs.

### **Sheep**

Wolves do not usually select for size or age on sheep. Multiple kills often occur. Bites to the head, neck, back, flanks and hindquarters are common. Injuries may include a crushed skull, severed spine, disembowelment and massive tissue damage. Wolves will also kill sheep by attacking the throat, similar to the manner in which a coyote kills sheep. Wolves, however, will damage the underlying tissue much more.

## **Wolf Sign**

Wolf tracks are almost twice the size of coyote tracks. Because track sizes of domestic dogs vary widely, it may be difficult to differentiate a wolf track from a large dog track. Mountain lion tracks leave no claw mark and the heel of a lion has three lobes. The stride of a wolf (distance between imprints of the same foot) is 18 to 26 inches. In deep snow, members of a wolf pack will commonly follow in the exact footprints of the pack leader. Wolf scat (droppings) is usually larger than that of a coyote. Scat one inch or larger in diameter is probably from wolves. Scat smaller than one inch may be from a wolf or coyote, because there is overlap. Wolves do not cover a carcass. Grizzly and black bears do, and mountain lions almost always cover their kill. Bears and mountain lions do not break and scatter bones. Wolf kills are often evidenced by chewed bones that are disarticulated and dragged for some distance.

## **If You Suspect Wolf Depredation**

The most important aspect of proving that a wolf killed livestock is preserving the evidence. As soon as possible after finding a suspected kill, you should do the following:

1. Carefully look for tracks or droppings. WATCH WHERE YOU STEP! Tracks may be hard to see and only visible on thin dust areas. Preserve tracks and droppings by placing cans or buckets over them.
2. Being careful where you step, place a tarp or plastic cover over the livestock carcass. This will keep scavengers off the kill.
3. Record the evidence with pictures or videotape. Also, take pictures or videos during official examinations. Take plenty of notes.
4. Call your state ADC office as soon as possible. This organization is now named USDA-APHIS, Wildlife Services. Their job is to help ranchers protect livestock from predators.

## **Protect Yourself**

Laws related to shooting wolves vary between states. It is your responsibility to know what you can legally do to protect your livestock. At the present time: "In the experimental population areas of Montana (southeast of Hwy 12 at the Montana/Idaho border, south of I-90 from Missoula and southeast/south of I-15 and the Missouri River from at Great Falls) and in Idaho (south I-90), wolves that are attacking (in the act of physically biting, chasing or harassing) livestock (hoofed domestic ungulates and herding/guarding animals) and dogs can be legally shot by private landowners. Public land grazing permittees may only shoot a wolf that is attacking their livestock or their livestock herding/guarding animals on their active allotment. Any shooting of a wolf must be reported within 24 hours, the site must remain undisturbed, and physical evidence of such killing, wounding or physical attacking must be present upon law enforcement investigation. No private citizen in Montana or Idaho outside of the experimental population areas may legally attempt to harm, injure or kill a wolf.

In Wyoming, private landowners may only legally shoot a wolf that is in the act of physically biting, grasping and killing their cattle, sheep, horses or mules on their private land. Any shooting of a wolf must be reported within 24 hours, the site must remain undisturbed, and physical evidence of such killing or wounding must be present upon law enforcement investigation.

Since 1995 about 20 wolves have been legally killed by private land owners under these types of regulations. None of those investigations resulted in further legal action. However, because wolves are protected under the Endangered Species Act, there is up to a \$100,000 fine and possible one year imprisonment for illegally killing a wolf.” —Ed Bangs, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

### **State Wildlife Services Offices**

- Montana Wildlife Services, State Director, 406-657-6464
- Idaho Wildlife Services, State Director, 208-378-5077
- Wyoming Wildlife Services, State Director, 307-261-5336

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