

The wolf's controversial return to California

By Alexandra Ossola, Popular Science

In 2011, a male gray wolf called OR-7 left his pack in Oregon and traversed over 1,200 miles. While this sort of travel isn't atypical for gray wolves, the terrain that OR-7 covered set him apart from the pack; he became the first confirmed wolf in California in almost a century, making him an apple of the public eye.

Since OR-7 broke away from his group – the Imnaha pack in northeast Oregon – his life looks different. OR-7 traveled a small way back North and found a mate in the Cascades of southern Oregon. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) has confirmed that the pair produced at least three pups, although there may be more.

But OR-7's notable route to fatherhood has reawakened a debate in California that is almost as old as the state itself: how to manage the gray wolf. With OR-7's wolf family knocking at California's door, the state must make a plan for how to manage a species that inspires an entire range of emotions within California's population.

"The public is fascinated by the issue of wolves in the West," said Karen Kovacs, Wildlife Program Manager for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW). "People have some perceptions of how wolves are that are oftentimes not compatible with the regulatory authorities of the states that manage [the wolf population]."

As recently as the 1970s, the West had no wolves at all. That's a stark contrast to the 1800s, when settlers found their livestock populations constantly ravaged by wolves. In each state, extermination programs were put in place to ensure

the total eradication of wolves; before 2011, the last confirmed sighting of a wolf in California was in 1924.

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But after a small wolf population reappeared in Montana in the 1980s, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) was inspired to reintroduce an “experimental population” of wolves to Yellowstone National Park. The ecosystem there, it appeared, was out of balance without wolves at the top of the food chain: elk populations were out of control, and overgrazing drastically reduced the amount of vegetation. The flow of rivers had even changed, as barren river banks eroded more easily.

Much of the public was enamored with the idea; a 1985 survey of visitors to Yellowstone National Park showed that three quarters of those polled were in favor of reintroducing wolves. And since then, the praise has only become more frenzied. Videos and op-eds abound singing the wolf’s praise, calling it a keystone species and “an American hero.”

But not everyone was so happy. A small group of dissenters – especially farmers – were very much against the plan, believing their livestock would be targeted by the new predator. An intense public debate ensued, but after a nearly decade-long fight, the U.S. Secretary of Interior signed the decision for the reintroduction of gray wolves to Yellowstone; wolves were then captured in Canada and transported to the national park.

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