

Coyote hunting contest draws complaints from environmental groups



Plans for a one-day coyote hunting contest near Crandon in northeastern Wisconsin are coming under fire from some environmental groups who are raising concerns that federally protected wolves might be killed in the process.

The hunt will offer prize money for the largest, smallest and most coyotes killed. It's one of a number of such competitions that hunters and the Department of Natural Resources say have been taking place for years.

Saturday's event, run out of a tavern in Argonne on the edge of the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, caught the attention of representatives of the [Friends of the Wisconsin Wolf](#), Sierra Club, Humane Society of the United States and the Center for Biological Diversity and other groups who criticized the contest element of the hunts.

"Killing for prize or trophy is not an adequate reason for hunting," said Melissa Smith, executive director of Friends of the Wisconsin Wolf. "It's unjustified and

unsportsmanlike."

The groups also said they were worried that gray wolves could be shot or mauled by dogs that are often used in such hunts.

"I am worried that this just increases the risk of someone violating the endangered species law," Smith said.

Saturday's event has categories for hunters who use hounds and those who use calls to attract coyotes.

It is illegal to kill wolves in Wisconsin, although there were wolf hunting seasons in 2012, 2013 and 2014 that were used as a means to control the state's growing wolf population.

A federal judge in December 2014 [struck down a decision](#) by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to remove gray wolves from the endangered species list in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Michigan — a ruling that also ended legalized hunts.

In November 2015, 26 scientists, including Dave Mech of the University of Minnesota and former DNR biologist Adrian Wydeven, now with the Timber Wolf Alliance, wrote the U.S. Interior Department and [argued that wolf populations in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin had recovered](#) and should be removed from the protected list.

Defenders of coyote hunting and coyote hunting contests emphasized the practice is legal — hunters can shoot the animals throughout the year and there is no bag limit. Some advocates say killing coyotes also is beneficial for the deer population and reduces livestock depredation.

Coyote hunting supporters said opponents might be raising the issue now, but the hunts have been part of Wisconsin rural life for years.

"This is something that these guys would be normally doing anyway," said Patrick Quaintance, a coyote hunter and president of the Wisconsin Association of Sporting Dogs.

Quaintance, a retired conservation warden with the DNR, said the threat to wolves is overblown.

"No wolves are going to be shot. Nobody wants that," said Quaintance, who said a coyote killing contest is also being held this weekend near Washburn in Bayfield County.

The DNR says that it can be [difficult at a distance to tell the difference between a wolf and a coyote](#). Wolves are larger and bulkier than coyotes. Wolves weigh 50 to 100 pounds. Coyotes weigh 25 to 45 pounds.

Predator killing contests have come under criticism elsewhere, including several western states. In December 2014, the California Fish and Game Commission [banned killing contests](#) for predator animals, such as coyotes, fox and bobcat.

California officials acted on a petition from [Project Coyote](#), a Larkspur, Calif.-based organization that has worked with other groups to try to stop the practice in Arizona, Nevada, Idaho, Oregon and New Mexico.

Camilla H. Fox, executive director of Project Coyote, predicted that other states will eventually follow California.

"This is very different from killing deer to put meat on the table," Fox said. "This is gratuitous killing."

In its petition in California, Project Coyote used written testimony by more than two dozen academics and conservationists, including [Adrian Treves](#), an associate professor of environmental studies and founder of the carnivore coexistence lab at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Treves also serves on the science advisory board of Project Coyote.

In their testimony, the scientists and conservationists said that "indiscriminate killing is ineffective" in controlling livestock losses because "only some, often few, individual predators participate in depredation." They also said such contests are not a reliable method of regulating deer populations.

"There is not a lot of scientific justification for it," Treves said. Deer populations, for example, are much more influenced by food supply and climate conditions in the winter, he said.

Quaintance, who killed six coyotes last year, said groups opposing coyote contests are rife with supporters who oppose hunting on ethical grounds and are ignorant of the culture of hunting and the bond between hunter and hunting dog.

"No hunter I know of wants to watch an animal die inhumanely," he said. "We try to dispatch them as quickly as possible."

When he hunts coyotes with hound dogs, his goal is not to kill coyotes but to run his dogs and listen to their barking and baying in the course of a chase. "You can tell exactly what he is doing with his bark," said Quaintance, who retired from the DNR in December 2012.

[David Walz](#), a DNR conservation warden supervisor, said wardens will be working in the Crandon area on Saturday and will keep tabs on the contest. He said hunters have killed wolves during the gun-deer season, thinking that the wolves were coyotes.

The state fine for unintentional killing of a wolf or other endangered species is up to \$4,143, plus one-year revocation of all hunting licenses. If the killing is intentional, the fine is up to \$5,500 and/or up to nine months jail, plus a three-year revocation of hunting licenses, according to the DNR.

Walz said he is not aware of wolves being shot during coyote hunting contests.

"The vast majority follow the law," Walz said. "Like anything, you have the 1% out there."