

A wolf hunt blew past its kill quota in February. Another hunt is coming this fall.

Wisconsin, increasingly divided between rural and urban views, faces hard, contentious questions of how big its remaining wolf population should be

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CHEQUAMEGON-NICOLET NATIONAL FOREST, Wis. — The howl that Adrian Wydeven sent into the moonless summer night sounded like what a wolf might make, a descending run of low tones, impressively loud and sustained.

The answer that came back from the dark forest was far more authentic, however. It started as a single note, deep and mournful, that rose in volume and complexity as at least one other wolf joined in, their melody lines crossing, inadvertently forming ominous chords as they passed.

“It feels like you are having a conversation with them,” Wydeven whispered as he stood on a lonely fire road. “They are mostly saying, ‘Get out of here! We don’t want you here!’ ”

The retired wildlife biologist was listening for something elusive in those cries from the woods: insights into whether the packs roaming Wisconsin had produced any pups after a furious February hunt at the peak of their breeding season, just weeks after the Trump administration removed their Endangered Species Act protections.

The voices that responded all sounded mature. Wydeven heard none of the higher-pitched howls that would have indicated this wolf pack, invisible but audible amid miles of tamarack and black spruce, was now raising any young.

He wrote on his data sheet: “Wolf 2+ adults. Pups no?”

Wydeven is among the scientists and wildlife managers seeking to understand how many of the animals remain after the state’s rushed February hunt, when participants blew past a quota of 119 wolves and killed 218 in just 63 hours.

Another hunt is coming this fall, as mandated by the state legislature, and its quota will be based on estimates of the surviving population. Because it has been so problematic assessing how breeding was disrupted in February, coming up with those estimates is proving difficult and controversial, as is most everything with Wisconsin’s gray wolves.

The February hunt was just one of the rancorous twists in the big carnivore’s return to a state increasingly divided between its urban and rural areas and roiled by politics that often distrust environmental laws and the government officials who make them. It also brought into sharp relief the ongoing conflicts with wolves and the feelings among many people that they should be gone.

Topographically, Wisconsin is ideal for *Canis lupus*. Receding glaciers left behind a patchwork of rolling uplands and expansive wetlands, a harsh landscape that defied all early attempts at farming. After the region was mostly logged off in the 19th century, vast tracts of prime wolf habitat came into public hands. By the 1950s, bounties and hunting had all but eliminated the animals here.

Yet once wolves were protected under the Endangered Species Act in 1974, they slowly made their way back into the state from neighboring Minnesota. Their numbers have generally been on an upward trajectory since 1980.

Before February, the state estimated that 1,136 wolves were living in rural northern Wisconsin. In that conservative stronghold, which went overwhelmingly for Donald Trump in the past two presidential elections, they are far from embraced.

In a 2014 survey, nearly a third of respondents who live near wolves said they would prefer as few of them as possible. Among deer hunters, who often claim wolves reduce herds, almost two-thirds said they wanted fewer wolves.

On a Facebook page for Wisconsin wolf hunters, one typical comment reads: “The only good wolf is a dead wolf.”

“It goes back a long time, at least in European culture,” said Randy Johnson, the large carnivore specialist with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. “Look at ‘Little Red Riding Hood.’ It is just ingrained in our culture that wolves are associated with negatives.

“The reality is that they are only just another big predator,” Johnson continued. “We have 24,000 bears and 1,100 wolves, and yet, everybody has a wolf story.”

Most of the wolves’ diet here consists of deer, according to research, although they primarily target the young and old. Yet deer aren’t all wolves eat. State records of attacks on domestic animals last year show that they killed 26 cattle, 32 sheep, seven goats, two alpacas, a potbellied pig and 28 dogs — most of them hounds out hunting bear.

Such attacks drive a tolerance or even enthusiasm for wolf hunting.

Under a 2011 state law, a wolf hunt must be held whenever it is not prohibited by federal or state protections. The Obama administration had taken the wolf off the government’s endangered species list for several years before a court ordered it to reverse course. When the Trump administration delisted it again last fall, despite many biologists calling

the move premature, Wisconsin officials announced plans for a hunt in November 2021. But a hunter sued, winning a court order that it take place immediately.

Eleven days after an appeal was denied, the shooting started.

The killing unfolded so quickly that officials couldn't stop it fast enough to keep the quota from being exceeded by 80 percent. One hunting advocate applauded how many wolves were "harvested." One researcher called it a "slaughter."

Everything was on the hunters' side. The first two mornings of the hunt dawned with fresh-fallen snow, ideal for tracking. Wolves were in the peak of their breeding season, so they were active on the trails, marking their territories.

Perhaps most important, hunters were allowed to use packs of up to six dogs, which would not be allowed in a fall hunt because of its overlap with deer season. Many also used snowmobiles or ATVs, increasing their efficiency as they worked the woods day and night.

The group Hunter Nation quickly trumpeted the final tally and highlighted the hunt's "positive economic impact" — almost \$500,000 from the permit fees plus "the additional revenue spent on supplies, gas, food, and lodging ... in mostly rural communities who've been struggling during the pandemic."

The indirect toll on the wolves has been difficult to gauge.

"The question is, what is the impact on reproduction?" Johnson said. "Will it be impacted more than a normal season, when other things can impact them?"

An accurate answer is especially important now. By early August, a Wolf Harvest Advisory Committee — composed of wolf advocates, hunters, biologists and the state's tribal members — will present a proposed quota for the November hunt. Another committee is working to revise the long-term species management plan by spring.

Wisconsin uses statistical modeling to estimate the population, basing it primarily on winter tracking surveys and data from GPS collars that are part of the longest-running statewide tracking program in the country. But officials don't have enough data past February to make a post-hunt calculation.

A recent study concluded that up to a third of Wisconsin's wolf population potentially has been eliminated, which would put the current count at no more than 695 wolves. The study cited past research that found legalized wolf hunting also drives "cryptic poaching," meaning illegal, covert killing.

Lead author Adrian Treves, a professor of environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, argues that without a more precise number the hunt quota should be set as low as is possible.

"A quota of one would comply with the statute [mandating a hunt] and acknowledge that we have no clue how successfully the wolves reproduced this year," Treves said. "Because the hunt happened during the mating season, we would need good data on how many packs produced pups, and that is data we do not have."

Hunting advocates want the quota set considerably higher and based on a new goal for the population overall.

"We don't have a problem with wolves. We think they belong on the landscape of Wisconsin," said Dan Trawicki of Safari Club International. "The issue is, how many wolves?"

One data set to be excluded from the official 2021 estimate is the outcome of "howl surveys," where humans mimic wolves and the wary packs answer, sometimes revealing pups' higher-pitched voices. One of the only ways to measure breeding success, the surveys in past years identified pups in nearly three of every four packs.

The effort is so time-consuming, however, that the state is no longer incorporating their findings. That means they can only provide anecdotal insights into breeding success.

"This year will be the most important for the howl surveys, to see how many packs have pups," said Wydeven, who long led the state's wolf program until his 2015 retirement and still sits on the advisory committee. "I have a feeling [the total] will be down."

The surveys are conducted by academic researchers and conservation groups. Howlers typically start at dusk and end hours later, following desolate fire roads that circumscribe an area known to contain wolves. They do a series of 15 prescribed calls at certain intervals, listening for answers and recording results.

Wydeven spent more than three hours in the forest during his outing in early July, the beginning of a months-long period when wolf pups are leaving their dens and their vocalizations can be discerned from those of adults in a pack.

He stopped more than a dozen times to call into impenetrable woods in a remote corner of public land. By the time he quit after midnight, he had elicited responses from wolves three times. None were from pups.

Biden administration moves to bring back endangered species protections undone under Trump

Hunting is 'slowly dying off,' and that has created a crisis for the nation's many endangered species
