

Wolves nearly erased by European settlers make comeback in America

By Oliver Milman, The Guardian, 06.02.16



Once, half a million wolves roamed across America. For Native Americans, they were a magic animal with special powers.

Then the Europeans arrived. They hated the wolf, who frightened them and killed their cattle. The new white Americans set out to kill as many wolves as they could.

The American gray wolf came close to dying out altogether. At one point, only one small pack remained.

Things began to get better for wolves in the 1960s. The government made it against the law to hunt wolves without permission.

Over time, wolves started to return. Last year, 1,904 wolves were counted in the western states. Another 3,600 were counted in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Reintroducing Wolves In Yellowstone National Park

Twenty years ago, Yellowstone National Park decided to try to bring wolves back to its land. No wolves had lived there for 60 years.

Between 1995 and 1997, 41 wolves were reintroduced to the park.

At the time, many people were against the plan. They worried that people would be attacked and killed. None of the things they feared have happened, though. No one has even been bitten.

Today, Yellowstone has 100 wolves in 10 packs.

Their return is good news for wolves, but it is also good news for the park. Like other big hunters, wolves help keep nature in balance.

An Important Predator For The Land

Years ago, the land that is now Yellowstone had many wolves. They hunted elk, a large kind of deer.

After the wolves were killed off, no animal was left to hunt the elk. Soon, there were too many elk. The elk eliminated many of the park's trees, which was bad for beavers and birds. Animals that ate the remains of elk killed by wolves also suffered.

The return of wolves changed everything. Soon, there were no longer too many elk. Trees began growing back. Then, birds and beavers returned.

Doug Smith is in charge of watching over Yellowstone's wolves. He hopes wolves will be able to return to many other places.

The way Americans feel about wolves can be a problem, he said. "Some people just hate them."

Seeing Wolves In A New Light

Smith has worked hard to make Americans see wolves in a better way.

Some of the Yellowstone wolves became famous. They helped make people feel a little warmer toward wolves.

A wolf called No. 9 gave birth to eight pups, the park's first litter. She was soon known as the founding mother of Yellowstone.

A wolf named Casanova was known for getting female wolves from other packs to mate with him. Another wolf was known for her hunting skills. She was mourned when she was shot outside the park in 2012.

"Fifty years ago, everyone hated wolves," Smith said. Now, only around half the people in the country do. "It's getting better. We are arriving at the idea that we can live with them," he said.

Wolves like to steer clear of people. For that reason, attacks are rare.

Who's Afraid Of The Big Bad Wolf?

Still, many of us continue to be afraid of wolves. In New Mexico, many people are strongly against plans to reintroduce them there.

Caren Cowan does want wolves back in New Mexico. Wolves are a danger to families, pets and cattle, she said.

Many Americans still feel strongly that wolves should be wiped out. For a number of years, the killing of wolves has been on the rise.

"People will never fully accept wolves," Smith said. The most we can hope for is that they will learn to put up with them, he said.

Still, wolves are back, even if they do continue to face dangers. Their return is certainly something to be happy about.