



ALBERTA'S WAR ON WOLVES, THEN AND NOW

By Dick Dekker

During the winters of 2005-07, crews under contract to Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, shot a total of well over 100 wolves from helicopters in the Little Smoky foothills area northwest of Hinton. Shooting wildlife from aircraft is illegal in Canada, but provincial biologists justify the aerial hunt of the past two winters by claiming that it is intended to halt the decline of woodland caribou. Their specific goal is to protect the remaining herd northwest of Hinton from Canis lupus, the caribou's natural predator. Ironically, a major enemy of our woodland caribou is the Alberta government itself, which has pulled the rug from under the beleaguered ungulate by allowing resource industries to open up its old-growth forest habitat (see WLA June 2007).

To place the current campaign in perspective, the following is a historical review of past wolf control activities in Alberta. Based on professional research literature and the news media, it is also a personal viewpoint inspired by 43 years of first-hand wildlife observations in western Alberta.

Alberta's on-again off-again war on wolves started soon after the arrival of the Europeans, who employed all available lethal means such as guns, traps, and poison. But what sealed the wolf's doom was the simultaneous destruction of its food base: hooved mammals. By the end of the nineteenth century, human greed had robbed western Canada of most of its wildlife that could either be eaten or sold as fur. Superimposed on the relentless hunting pressure was a series of extremely severe winters, which led to the starvation deaths of thousands of cattle as well as the last of Alberta's elk.

A gradual change for the better began with the enactment of game laws and the establishment of national parks. Deer, elk, and moose made a slow comeback, but the return of the wolf was seen with misgivings. During the 1940s, they were trapped or shot on sight, even in Banff and Jasper National Parks.

During 1952-55, the war on wolves was stepped up a notch. The stated reason was that rabies had been identified in a northern Alberta fox. To prevent the feared disease from spreading southward, the province unleashed the most intensive poisoning campaign ever, anytime and anywhere. With the intention of exterminating all wild canids in a wide buffer zone around human settlements, government agents distributed nearly one million units of cyanide and strychnine to trappers and landowners. The number



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of sodium fluoro-acetate (ten-eighty) bait stations increased to 800 in the final year of the campaign. An official tally of the victims was 5,200 wolves, 171,000 coyotes, and 55,000 foxes. Non-target predators and scavengers that ate from the poison baits were decimated as well, including martens, lynxes, bears, eagles, and ravens.

A more respectful era for wildlife dawned during the 1960s. Among the increasingly urban public, nature appreciation grew and embraced all of our warm-blooded fellow creatures, including the formerly despised and persecuted carnivores. Celebrated in magazines, books, and films, the big bad wolf of lore went through a complete metamorphosis and became

as popular and beloved as Bambi.

Attitudes among professional wildlife managers changed as well. Their slogan became "Let it be." In a well-balanced ecosystem, large predators were said to function as agents of health, weeding out the weak and infirm among their prey species. From 1966 onward, western Alberta's wolves were allowed to stage a spontaneous recovery, and they did so with a vengeance because of the abundant prey base. Family packs grew in number and size, repopulating all former range and dispersing into adjacent farmlands. There, the setting of poison baits became a common routine for Fish and Wildlife officers. Hunters, however, had little reason to



B. Genereux

In western Canada, wolves vary in pelage colour from jet black to silver and white. Blacks make up 35 to 70 percent of the population, which suggests that the common name “gray wolf” is a misnomer.

complain. Due to the previous scarcity of predators, coupled with mild winters, hoofed mammals were not hard to find on wilderness lands, and permits were generous.

The armistice in the war on wolves barely lasted a decade. The pendulum of tolerance would soon swing the other way again, prompted by Mother Nature herself. At her seemingly unpredictable whims, wildlife communities are subject to cyclical highs and lows. In the mid-1960s, and particularly in 1973-74, herbivores were hit hard by severe winters. Food-stressed and harassed by expanding numbers of wolves, bears, and cougars, the productivity of elk and moose collapsed. Eventually, they dwindled to a fraction of what they had been a few years earlier.

After many detailed field studies on predation, the theories of provincial wildlife managers came full circle. Too many wolves were killing too many hoofed mammals, they said, in direct competition with human hunters and outfitters. Calls for remedial action became increasingly demanding. For instance, on December 29, 1982, the *Edmonton Journal* ran a story under the headline “Wolf population explosion raises howls for controls.”

The war on wolves resumed full blast during the 1980s, beginning in Alaska and Yukon. British Columbia soon followed. The objectives were straightforward: to make more venison and trophies available for human hunters on wilderness lands. However, this time around, government biologists

shied away from using poison baits. Instead, they reverted to a method considered more selective and humane: search and destroy with helicopter gunships, reminiscent of the Vietnam jungle war.

The Power of Public Protest

The imagery of government personnel shotgunning a spooked pack of wolves from the air shocked a largely non-hunting public and sparked a tidal wave of protest in the national and international media. It led to a frenzy of demonstrations in California and tourism boycotts in Alaska. But despite an escalating chorus of protest, led by environmental crusader Paul Watson, regional biologists in British Columbia persisted in shooting wolves. However, in the spring of 1986, they were quite suddenly reined in by their political masters. The stop order followed on the heels of a press release by Friends of the Wolf and their American affiliates, who announced that they were planning a major tourism boycott at Expo 86, to be held in Vancouver that summer.

To calm the turmoil and debate, the University of British Columbia, in partnership with government and private conservation groups, organized a wolf management symposium in May 1988. In a terse presentation, provincial biologist Dr. John Elliott reported that he had personally shot 996 wolves from the air over two winters. Now, barely three years after the carnage, he considered his efforts to have been a waste of time. The wolves were back at their former strength. The total expenditures of the campaign were in the order of \$2,500 to \$3,000 per wolf. Similarly high costs were reported by the equally candid biologists from Alaska.

In Alaska, support for the controversial wolf kills had come mainly from people who were concerned about the shrinking inventory of moose, a subsistence staple in this northern state. However, the Canadian focus was mainly on woodland caribou. A Yukon biologist – in defence of a regional wolf cull – stated that the economic importance of caribou, in pounds of meat, was greater than the monetary value of wolf fur sold.

Another, more convincing argument was raised in B.C., where researchers claimed that local populations of woodland caribou were especially hit hard. The reason was that alpine habitats, formerly the exclusive domain of caribou, were increasingly invaded by moose, which in turn attracted more wolves. Furthermore, predation pressure was believed to be proportionally heavier on caribou than on moose. The only way to save the remaining caribou from extinction, the researchers warned, was to reduce the number of predators. This view soon became the mantra of government wildlife biologists in Alberta.

The Debate Heats Up

The fuse for the current wolf control campaign was lit 20 years ago, when the *Calgary Herald* (November 4, 1986) ran a news item under the headline “Report outlines plan for major wolf kill.” It was based on a leaked and confidential government document titled “Restoration Plan for Woodland Caribou in Alberta.” The report’s author, biologist Janet Edmonds of the Edson Fish and Wildlife Division, wrote that a herd of migratory caribou that summered in the alpine regions of Jasper and Willmore Wilderness Parks had dwindled from an estimated 1,600-1,800 in 1968 to less than 300 in 1986.

The report outlined a number of causes for the decline, but it failed to place the population fluctuation in a historical and realistic perspective. Edmonds did not explain that the high caribou numbers of 1968 were related to the extreme wolf poisoning campaigns of the 1950s. The resulting scarcity of predators in combination with a decade of mild winters had led to a cyclic high in ungulate prey species – not only caribou, but also moose and elk. Furthermore, the down cycle in the 1980s was natural and to be expected given a series of very cold winters and the resurgence of the once decimated wolves.

In 1986, soon after Edmond’s “Caribou Restoration Plan” had been broadcast by the media, the Honourable Don Sparrow – then Alberta’s Minister of Forestry, Lands and Wildlife – began receiving an avalanche of letters condemning the proposed wolf cull.



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biologist had informed the minister that the province's estimated 5,000 wolves were taking down 50,000 hoofed animals annually.

The following year, frustrated by continued government inaction on the wolf issue, AFGA came up with an idea of its own. Based on the most recent data, Alberta's total wolf population was said to be between 3,500 and 5,500, and the average yearly take by registered trappers was 500 wolves. AFGA wanted to boost that number to 1,200. To that end, they would pay trappers a bonus of \$150 per wolf. AFGA's executive director, Lyle Fullerton, said that only a fringe element of society would oppose such a plan. As it happened, one of the first people to turn down AFGA's offer was Minister Fjordbotten himself.

The scheme raised a chorus of protest among the general public, reverberating across Canada and beyond. "Stop the Wolf Bounty" became the slogan of a new Alberta group, Friends of the Wolf. On February 3, 1989, they organized a protest rally and march to the Alberta Legislature, which received considerable press coverage. Members of the Canadian Wolf Defenders, low key and well informed, collected a petition with over 30,000 signatures, which they presented in person to Minister Fjordbotten.

The minister shrugged off the wolf worries with an indulgent smile. At the time, his department had more important business at hand. Alberta was signing away the cutting rights to thousands of square miles of boreal forest, with ominous but unmentioned implications for all of its wild denizens, including wolves.

As it turned out, the AFGA scheme fizzled. Due to a shortage of donations for the bounty proposal, the bonus was reduced from \$150 to \$100 per wolf and the target lowered to a maximum of 50 payments.

Public Interest Peaks

The flames of public indignation over the never-ending wolf complaints were fanned on January 18, 1990, when the *Edmonton Journal* ran the headline "Alberta ponders killing up to 1,200 wolves to free up game for hunters." Journalist Don Thomas based

Caribou track in Willmore Wilderness. If left alone, large predators like wolves and their ungulate prey work out a numerical adjustment. Their ecologies are intertwined in a dynamic equilibrium, driven by a combination of factors, including habitat, weather conditions, and disease. Hunting by humans is superimposed on the wildlife equation and may lead to conflicts that can be difficult to resolve.

On December 4, 1986, the Sierra Club of Canada organized a protest meeting at the Calgary Auditorium. The star attraction was famous author Farley Mowat. After his hard-hitting presentation, the supportive audience of more than 1,000 was shown the film *Never Cry Wolf*.

The meeting received wide coverage on provincial and national television, which contributed to the government's early capitulation. The controversy ended as abruptly as it had begun. On January 9, 1987, the minister announced that the wolf kill was not going ahead and had only been a last resort. In a newspaper interview, Don Sparrow expressed his personal dislike for the plan: "Shooting wolves from a helicopter is too much like shooting fish in a barrel." A departmental spokesman was quick to point out that the minister's remarks were only "hypothetical."

Nevertheless, the wolf controversy did not die. In March 1988, the University of Alberta invited the notorious activist Paul Watson to speak at a public meeting in Edmonton. Formerly with the crew of Greenpeace's *Rainbow Warrior*, Watson was now captain of the *Sea Shepherd*, and his current topic was the fight for whales, dolphins, and baby

seals. However, a year or two earlier, he had played a pivotal role in halting the infamous government wolf kills in British Columbia. Following Watson's address, John Stelfox, a senior Alberta biologist who had personally poisoned wolves in the 1950s and 1960s, bluntly told the speaker that he was not welcome in this province. Notwithstanding, throughout the mostly hostile, two-hour question period, Captain Watson remained courteous, and his replies often earned him the applause of the public. Later that evening, at an informal get-together with local members of the Canadian Wolf Defenders, this "environmental guerrilla," as the press labelled him, proved to be a very gentle soul.

The Wolf as Competitor

Behind the scenes, demands for wolf control remained strong in hunting circles. At its 1988 annual convention, the 17,000-member Alberta Fish and Game Association (AFGA) passed a resolution urging the government to cull wolves in the foothills, with the ultimate goal of enhancing elk populations. In response, LeRoy Fjordbotten – the new minister of Forestry, Lands and Wildlife – hinted that wolf control might be given over to private interests. A government

his information on a leaked government document titled “Draft Management Plan for Wolves.” The plan mentioned the intended use of aerial gunning to eliminate wolves near Grande Cache and along the boundaries of Banff and Jasper National Parks.

On February 8, 1990, to expose the long-festering issue to public scrutiny, I organized an open forum and panel discussion at the Alberta Provincial Museum. Local members of Canadian Wolf Defenders distributed posters throughout the city and the meeting drew the largest crowd ever to gather at the museum. The 400-seat auditorium was filled to capacity. In addition, an estimated 150 people had to follow the proceedings in the foyer via closed-circuit television. Many others were turned back at the door or unable to enter the parking lot. The six panel members included two senior zoologists from the University of Alberta, the executive director of AFGA, the Deputy Minister of Alberta Wildlife, and the president of the Alberta Federation of Naturalists. I represented the Canadian Wolf Defenders on the panel. The moderator was Garnet Anthony, a well-known CBC radio personality as well as a knowledgeable conservationist.

After a brief introduction, the floor was open to the public lining up at the microphones. Their comments and questions were lively, informative, and often humorous. Ranging from computer programmers to crusty old trappers, from articulate politicians to bright-voiced schoolchildren, the audience comprised a wide spectrum of Albertans. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most passionate voice protesting government wolf kills and pleading for more protection of our wildlands came from a young member of AFGA. The meeting ended with a showing of the film *Following the Tundra Wolf*, narrated by Robert Redford.

Why No Public Protest Today?

During the winter of 2005-06, twenty years after the start of the caribou controversy, the Alberta government unexpectedly went into action, ordering its hired staff to shoot wolves from the air in the hill country northwest of Hinton. On March 5, 2006, the *Edmonton*

Journal included a feature story by Ed Struzik, “Alberta’s war on wolves,” in which he interviewed half a dozen independent wildlife experts. All of them condemned the wolf cull as futile and a waste of time, money, and animal lives. Like similar campaigns in other jurisdictions, once the killing ended, the wolves were predicted to bounce back to larger numbers than before.

It’s perplexing that – quite different from 20 years ago – the public has been silent on the issue. Why? Have we become immune to the wanton killing of animals on wilderness lands, like we have become inured to the killing of innocent citizens on foreign soil, as long as we believe that the war is just?

Propaganda experts advise that to get public opinion on side, in politics and advertising, a lie can be repeated until it is taken for the truth. The oft-stated rationale behind the current wolf kill is that the woodland caribou is on the road to extinction unless we protect it from its archenemy, the wolf. Therefore, so says the Alberta Fish and Wildlife Division, the predators need to be controlled.

But wait a minute! The fact is that Alberta’s wolves have never been completely out of control. Hunters bag them at every opportunity, and trappers “harvest” them for their valuable pelt. In our foothill forests, some wolf packs are hit hard by secretive capture methods. A common practice is to dump the carcasses of traffic-killed deer and moose at bait stations hidden in the bush. After the wolves have become habituated to a free meal at these sites, the local trapper closes off all narrow access trails with metal snares. This has resulted in the capture of entire family packs, milling about in confusion until all members are choking to death. Such hidden tragedies take place each winter near the boundaries of Jasper National Park, unbeknownst to the general public and sanctioned by the government departments that supply the carcasses. Rumour has it that some trappers have even had the gall to ask park staff for their road kills.

In My Opinion

In its wisdom, the Alberta government closed the hunting season on woodland caribou in 1980. Although

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Wolf tracks near Upper Kananaskis Lake.

poaching, road accidents, aboriginal and Metis hunting, and hunter error in animal identification contribute to caribou deaths, the most important and largely indirect peril confronting the caribou is the fragmentation of its winter habitat. Timber clearcuts, coupled with increasing human access on roads and trails built by the petroleum and forest industries, are the main causes of habitat degradation. It is in this critical realm that governments can do much to mitigate negative impacts on caribou and other wildlife.

In the past 30 years, the commercial deforestation of our foothills and boreal north has spread and intensified, bringing tears to the eyes of all who love wild nature. Where will the destruction end? Will it result in irreparable damage to the ecosystem? No doubt certain species will be lost, but perhaps there is hope for partial recovery or even some gains. Through responsible management, the clearcut and scarified ground left could behind become a future paradise for deer, elk, and moose, as well as their predators.

To boreal zoologists the reclusive woodland caribou is affectionately known as “the grey ghost of the northwoods.” As to its current predicament, one of Mother Nature’s edicts is that life is ever evolving. Animals that are unable to adapt to a

changing habitat will be replaced by other species. Ever since the last ice age, long before humans entered the equation, the southern limit of caribou range has been shifting farther north. This trend might well speed up if global climate warming continues. The woodland caribou’s official designation as a threatened species requires that government agencies take measures to limit further losses. One immediate consequence has been that costly aerial research has been stepped up with most of the money ending up in the pockets of aircraft companies. Stan Boutin, one of Alberta’s foremost large mammal biologists, was recently quoted in the *Edmonton Journal* as wondering aloud, “I don’t know if there is any point in spending millions of dollars ... trying to save the Little Smoky caribou herd when the chances of success are minimal.”

In the final analysis, all we – as defenders of wild lands – can do, is to continue pressing for protection of caribou habitat. At the same time, we

must be pragmatic enough to accept the fact that some remnant herds may be on the way out. Others will no doubt manage to survive. It is good to remember that the grey ghost has been around for eons, and all it needs from us is to be left alone.

For more information, see the author’s 1997 book, Wolves of the Rocky Mountains, from Jasper to Yellowstone (Surrey, B.C.: Hancock House).

Dick Dekker, a naturalist born in Holland, immigrated to Canada in 1959 in search of true wilderness. He has written 10 books as well as numerous articles and research papers. From 1960 onwards, he has been an outspoken defender of wolves and habitat conservation.

AWA recently received unconfirmed reports that the Alberta government is planning a substantial wolf cull east of Banff National Park this winter. Aerial shooting is the preferred method, although poisoning, complete with its risk of incidental deaths of other wildlife, could be used instead.