



WOLVES ON THE RANGE

By Chris Wearmouth, AWA Conservation Specialist

The wolves of Willow Creek, after a century of persecution, are enjoying a wary co-existence with the area's ranchers. But it's one that might be short-lived should human presence increase in the southeast corner of Kananaskis Country. "We've been trying to preserve the wolves and have the cattle too," says Barbara Gardner from her home in southwestern Alberta.

Gardner and her husband, Harvey, operate Bluebird Valley Ranch at the north end of Chain Lakes. She says that having carnivores such as wolves, cougars, and grizzly bears on the landscape can help ranchers control the elk and deer that compete with cattle for grazing. But although area ranchers want to keep wolves on the landscape, they also suffer wolf predation on their cattle.

Ranchers have been in conflict with wolves in southwestern Alberta since the time of settlement. From the beginning of the last century to the 1950s, wolves in Alberta were shot and poisoned, with a bounty on their heads. Their numbers dwindled and they remained scarce until the 1970s, when the widespread use of poison declined. Today, livestock losses to wolves occur mainly where agricultural land meets forest reserve, including the Willow Creek and Pekisko Creek drainages.

In recent years, a pack established itself in these drainages. Although in 2004 Alberta Fish and Wildlife officers killed six members of this pack following recommendations of a local stakeholder group after significant losses to cattle, recent years have also seen an effort to limit predation on cattle through non-lethal means so as to maintain the pack on the landscape.

In 2003 ranchers, including Gardner's husband, Harvey, gathered with conservationists, professional associations, and government personnel to form the Oldman Basin Carnivore Advisory Group. This multi-stakeholder group was created to provide input and



One of the many dangers that Alberta's wolves face is death by collision. This wolf, the leading female of the Bow Valley wolf pack, was killed on the Trans-Canada Highway in August 2008. PHOTO: PETER A. DETTLING/WWW.TERRAMAGICA.CA

advice to Alberta Sustainable Resource Development on managing large carnivores, initially focusing on wolves. During the next few years, ranchers and researchers tried several non-lethal tactics to discourage wolves from preying on cattle. Using telemetry from radio-collared wolves, Willow Creek ranchers were able to determine wolf locations and adapt their management accordingly.

Gardner believes that the group's efforts have been successful; although individual wolves have been culled, they were repeat predators on cattle and were removed in hopes that the rest of the pack would not adopt the behaviour that would necessitate further culls. For now, ranchers in the Willow Creek area seem to be coexisting with their wild canid neighbours.

But this tenuous respite for the Willow Creek wolves could be jeopardized if their home territory is subjugated to increased human presence. Gardner says there is a big problem with motorized recreation displacing wildlife, pushing prey species and therefore wolves closer to the ranches. "With this everybody-can-have-their-recreation-everywhere policy, I don't think there is

any hope," she says. "We're going to lose the wolves because if you're a rancher and wolves are killing your cows and no one is doing anything about it, they're going to get shot."

Another current threat to wolves in the area is Petro-Canada's proposed Sullivan Field development (see p. 15). The Sullivan proposal includes a 51-km trunk pipeline (37 km of which are new) to be built through the territory of the Willow Creek pack, including near the wolves' traditional den site and play areas for pups. In a report prepared for the hearing, wolf researchers Charles Mamo and Timmothy Kaminski state that the wolves will likely abandon these areas and move closer to private land with livestock present, increasing wolf-cattle conflicts.

It could be issues such as these that tip the scales out of favour for the Willow Creek wolves. Gardner recognizes the problems that she and other area ranchers, not to mention the wolves, face should there be an increase in human presence in the pack's territory: "We're going to have way more encounters and it's the wildlife that will end up dead." 🐾