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CDFW photos by Pete Figura

In August, a trail camera captured images of five gray wolf pups in Northern California's remote Siskiyou County. The photos show the pups, estimated at about 5 months old, behaving in a playful manner, rolling and jumping in the high grass.

SHASTA PACK

HISTORIC RETURN AS FIVE GRAY WOLF PUPS AND TWO ADULTS ARE DISCOVERED IN
NORTHERN CALIFORNIA; NEW PACK NOT CONNECTED TO 2011'S LONE OR7

STORY BY ELLIOT OWEN

California Department of Fish and Wildlife officials Karen Kovacs, Pete Figura and Richard Callas sat on a log under a conifer canopy at the edge of a meadow in southeast Siskiyou County. Figura, in the middle, held a viewfinder loaded with images captured by a trail camera set up at the location a week before. Signs of animal presence—large canid tracks and scat, matted grass and a mauled deer leg—provided enough incentive to mount the camera on a nearby tree.

Intent on the viewfinder, the three environmental scientists stationed out of Redding watched the images scroll through something that would forever change the state's wildlife management arena. A small black wolf pup moved into the frame sniffing the ground. It was followed by another, then another until five pups hopped, frolicked and rolled in the same sunlit meadow that the wildlife experts now sat near.

The photographs had been taken in early August. The weight of the moment set in. Kovacs thought about what the new discovery would require of CDFW. Figura considered locations for additional trail cameras. Callas took measure of the historic quality of the data. "These are likely the only photos of wolf pups in California to have ever existed," he said.

The photos of the pups suggest that earlier trail camera images of a single black canid in the same area between August 2014 and July 2015 were likely of an adult parent. A handful of sightings reported by the public within the same time frame supported that conclusion.

It appears clear that the gray wolf has made an irrefutable return to California, something only one other wolf has done over the course of nearly 100 years.

It was in late 2011 that a collared male gray wolf from Oregon, dubbed by Oregon wildlife officials as OR7, had moved into California, a first since the species was systematically removed from the state in the early 20th century.

When OR7 crossed the California-Oregon border, he stepped squarely into the public spotlight. His presence doubled as an alluring message that despite its 39 million residents, California could still interest an apex predator. His nomadic movement through mid-2013 not only covered nearly 2,500 miles between states but ignited the contentious matter of wolf management, a hot-button issue that's followed the gray wolf's westward recolonization of its historic habitat.

It didn't matter that OR7 eventually returned to Oregon. CDFW, the agricultural community,



California Department of Fish and Wildlife environmental scientist Pete Figura aims a trail camera that he hopes will capture more images of the family of gray wolf pups. CDFW trail camera shots taken at an earlier date showed an adult gray wolf. CDFW wolf experts now believe the adult is one of the parents of the five pups.

conservation groups and environmental organizations alike knew it was only a matter of time before the gray wolf would return. To get ahead of the issue, CDFW pooled resources and stakeholders to design a state wolf management plan. Kovacs, CDFW's wildlife program manager for the northern region, took the helm and developed a draft document scheduled for public review by the end of this year.

But Kovacs recalls now that when she and her colleagues stared at the images of the scruffy wolf pups on that mid-August afternoon, she knew the animal had beaten them to the punch.

"Seeing those new pictures that day," Kovacs said, "I was processing how it went from one dispersing wolf—maybe two, which was still not unexpected—to now five pups. It went from one animal to seven animals much faster than anyone anticipated."

Seven wolves, all with similar coarse dark coats, were now anchored in southeast Siskiyou County. They would be called the Shasta Pack.

"It's one of those things I never imagined would be a part of my career," Figura said. "But now there is this native species—a species that was extirpated from California and most of the lower 48 states—recolonizing much of its historic habitat, and we just happen to be a part of it. It's novel and exciting."

PUBLIC RESPONSE

Mention the re-establishment of the gray wolf in any context and the reaction can vacillate between adoration and alarm. It's an animal entrenched in centuries of symbolism and myth, weighted with connotations that range from menacing scourge to glorified totem. And in California's wildlife management realm, obvious tension simmers between the agricultural and environmental communities. Wildlife agencies charged with wolf management responsibilities are tasked with the arduous balancing act of integrating often opposing interests into acceptable guidelines and practices.

"In the case of gray wolves in California," Kovacs said, "the challenge is trying to address the concerns of all parties while staying consistent with CDFW's mission and applicable state and federal laws. CDFW is looking to conserve wolves, but also examine what the consequences of their presence will be and minimize or avoid potential conflicts."

Back in 2011, the arrival of OR7 set in motion the process to inform the public and engage special interest groups. By 2012, CDFW had convened representatives from the agricultural, environmental, conservation and hunting communities to offer suggestions on a state wolf plan. That formal wolf stakeholder working group received word of the Shasta Pack before the general public.

But even before that, CDFW contacted officials with Siskiyou County and landowners within a 10-mile radius of the wolf pups' site. The area is a checkerboard of public-private lands used for livestock grazing.



In July 2015, top, a California Department of Fish and Wildlife trailcam captured an adult canid in Siskiyou County. Middle photo, a month later another trailcam caught an adult wolf in another part of the county. Bottom photo, measuring a wolf track in soil.

“The largest landowner running cattle up there was not happy to hear about the pups,” Kovacs said.

Patrick Griffin, Siskiyou County’s agricultural commissioner, was among the first local officials to receive word. A livestock producer himself, Griffin said anyone would be hard-pressed to find a rancher enthused about wolves near their animals. The harm to livestock a wolf pack can cause can get very real, very quickly.

“I wouldn’t expect any livestock producer to say, ‘Gee, I’m glad the wolves are back,’” Griffin said. “That isn’t going to happen. Livestock producers may not be happy that they’re here, but I think ranchers have evolved from 150 years ago. They understand there are regulations and constraints around how to deal with wolves.”

As uneasy as Siskiyou County’s agricultural community is about the Shasta Pack, a national conservation organization is thrilled.

The group Defenders of Wildlife has been a part of the wolf stakeholder working group from the beginning. The California chapter is in Sacramento but the national organization, which formed in 1947, has offices in at least half a dozen states between Florida and Alaska. The group’s mission statement promotes the protection of native animals and plants in their natural habitat.

“We’ve been given a chance to restore this iconic species to the California landscape,” said Defenders’ California representative Pamela Flick. “For a wolf pack to be established here is so exciting for us from a conservation and wolf recovery perspective. We feel the presence of the Shasta Pack indicates that gray wolves are back in California for good. And we’re ready to welcome them home to their historical habitat.”



Photographs © Elliot Owen



Mount Shasta, top photo, as seen from Highway 97 in southeast Siskiyou County, is the approximate area where the wolf pack was photographed by trailcams. A CDFW environmental scientist, bottom photo, creates a lure by applying a scent to a hair snare and positioning the snare at a confirmed rendezvous site used by the Shasta Pack. Ideally, a wolf will catch the scent and roll on the snare, which will collect fur DNA. Such a genetic footprint from the animal will enable CDFW specialists to identify the pack’s origins.

POLARIZING POWER

As with any collaborative process dealing with a controversial issue, there are areas where stakeholder interests collide. Often though, Kovacs said, a great deal of ground is gained once misconceptions over each other’s experiences and intentions are replaced with situational realities.

“You get an incredible polarization between publics when you talk about wolves,” Kovacs said. “In part, that has to do with the amount of misinformation out there.”

Flick, who describes her work with Defenders as being centered on building partnerships, said she’s a proponent of finding common ground then working towards a collective goal.

“One thing that surprises the livestock community,” Flick said, “is that the conservation community has a goal of making sure no wolves are killed and that no livestock are killed either. We want the other stakeholders to understand that our goal is that neither species is harmed. If livestock are killed, there’s more pressure to legally control wolves. Putting those preconceived notions aside and learning about each other is important.”

Griffin said as much as some environmental and conservation organizations appear receptive to a livestock producer’s experience, they sometimes undercut the value of ranching, both as a cultural tradition and wildlife management tool.

“There are some groups that are interested but still feel the priority is wildlife,” Griffin said. “Maybe they think livestock doesn’t belong on public land. Not everyone’s like that, but many people don’t understand the value of utilizing renewable resources. That’s what ranchers are doing. Some have been doing it in Siskiyou County for 160 years. Cattle grazing has benefits; it decreases

fire hazard, controls invasive species and preserves open space.”

THE CASE OF CALIFORNIA

After facing near-extinction during the 1970s, the gray wolf has since become wildlife recovery’s come-back kid. Reintroduced into the northern Rockies in 1995, it’s taken just two decades for the canine species to sprawl across Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Washington and Oregon with a current population of approximately 1,800 animals, according to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services.

Although the gray wolf is federally listed under the Endangered Species Act and is likely on its way to state listing in California, with official designation currently pending, the animal was federally delisted within the northern Rockies in 2011 when that area’s recovery goals were reached.

Wolf management falls under state jurisdiction in Montana, Idaho, eastern Washington, eastern Oregon and north central Utah—all areas that allow lethal take of a wolf once the landowner or legal tenant has applied for and received a depredation permit. It is also legal to sport hunt wolves in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming as part of those states’ management strategies.

In California, however, because of the wolf’s status as a protected species, ranchers have no mechanism for relief in the form of wolf depredation at this time.

“The draft wolf plan will address some of those issues,” Kovacs said, “but we have to stay within state and federal laws. We outline the tools available to producers — non-injurious harassment tactics like use of air horns, shooting in the air, short chases on foot or horseback for up to half a mile, and so on. We also address compensation as a future option for wolf depredation. Should state and federal laws change at any point, we’ve also outlined lethal control as a possible option.”

Russ Morgan, wolf coordinator for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, is no stranger to the in-and-outs of wolf management. He’s worked closely with Kovacs, serving as an invaluable resource throughout California’s plan formulation.

“One of the advantages we have now,” Morgan said, “is the ability to use other states’ plans and adapt them to our areas. California’s plan looks a lot like ours; ours is very much patterned after Montana’s. We know that everywhere wolves occur, there’s a common landscape of things to deal with—depredation, livestock, wolf-human conflict. California is addressing those same questions now.”

In light of the Shasta Pack, CDFW is updating the draft plan in hopes of expediting the next public review process.

SHASTA PACK’S FUTURE

CDFW is currently trying to collect DNA from either scat or hair to determine the origin of the Shasta Pack adults. By now the five pups are approximately 5 months old. They’re likely joining parents on hunting excursions although participating in the actual kills will come later. Each day, their ability to cover longer and longer distances grows.

In Oregon, studies have shown that six out of 10 pups survive to the end of their first year. Further research has shown that in areas being newly colonized by wolves, their numbers expand faster. At this point, there isn’t enough information available on the California pups to determine their chances of survival.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if there are fewer than five pups,” Morgan said. “But there could easily be the same number. I think the prognosis is pretty good.”

Conjectures aside, anyone who knows the nature of the gray wolf understands the animal’s unfailing ability to surprise. Speculations will always be just that. “We can’t really predict,” Morgan said. “It’s the animals themselves that’ll show us where they’re going to be successful. We’ll have to wait and see.”

What is fact, though, is that California is now officially home to the gray wolf. 🐺

Elliot Owen is a Bay Area freelance writer and photographer. Her diverse body of work is informed by her interests in environmental and social justice issues, and art and advocacy initiatives. This is her first story in *Outdoor California*.

LIVESTOCK PRODUCERS LEFT UNSETTLED OVER POSSIBLE WOLF RESETTLEMENT

By Elliot Owen

In Western states with healthy wolf populations, studies by an Oregon researcher show livestock producers face tangible as well as intangible costs related to the effects of wolf presence. Therefore cost is a contentious element that must be addressed within wolf management strategies by members of the California wolf stakeholder working group.

While most Western states (California aside) have state-facilitated compensation programs

to offset livestock losses caused by wolves, those same programs don't account for the hidden costs incurred just by having wolves around.

When OR7, the collared wolf from Oregon, first crossed the state line into Siskiyou County in 2011, county officials brought in experts to facilitate workshops with ranchers in preparation for wolf recolonization. John Williams, an Oregon State University extension agent in Oregon's Wal-lowa County, was one of them.

Williams, who is also an associate professor in the OSU Department of Animal and Rangeland Sciences, has years of experience researching the effects wolves have on ranching operations. In 2010, he released a report based on findings gathered in a region of Idaho with healthy wolf populations. He estimated that the presence of wolves could cost ranchers an additional \$260.90 per head of cattle each year.

"That's assuming wolves are a part of your life 365 days per year," Williams said. "A guy who owns 100 head of cows is going to lose about \$26,090 annually—and that's a 5-year-old number that's only gone up by now."

Williams' research showed ranchers lose slightly more than \$67 per head for reduced conception rates, \$55 per head for weight loss, \$21 per head for reduced weaning rates and more than \$92 per head in added management expenses.

"There's another loss that wasn't in our study," Williams added. "That's the loss ranchers experience from emotional stress."

Williams said during his research he found that ranchers experience what he called depression at the loss of animals. While not included in his finished report, he found the anecdotal information compelling.

"They tell me it's a feeling of having lost control of their destiny," Williams said, "that they can't protect their cattle for the first time in their lives; that they're turning their animals out knowing some of them will be killed."

California ranchers have thought about these hidden costs since OR7's visit and now the discovery of the Shasta Pack, said Patrick Griffin, Siskiyou County's agricultural commissioner. The area where the Shasta Pack is present is open range, which renders useless the more traditional ways to protect livestock.

"The options the producers in that area are facing are going to cost them money," said Griffin, who is also a livestock producer. "You can increase human presence, but these areas are so big; how are you going to know where you need to be to prevent depredation? All that increased management decreases production." 🐾

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