

F&G: Wolves not causing most elk losses

By Laura Lundquist - Times-News writer | Posted: Saturday, July 31, 2010 1:20 am

Wolves have long been blamed for elk deaths in Idaho. But research is showing the predators have gotten a bum rap.

In its August newsletter, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game summarized recent elk studies and found only a minority of elk populations are declining and wolves are culprits in few.

A third of elk populations are increasing even though wolves have been in Idaho since 1995. Though statewide numbers have dropped some, claims that wolves are wholly responsible for declining elk populations aren't holding up.

Craig White of Fish and Game said the agency's wildlife division conducted elk studies in 11 of the 29 state elk management areas between 2005 and 2008. The sample included five of the six areas in the state with declining populations. White said biologists tried to collar approximately 30 female elk in each area, but didn't provide exact numbers.

"We selected areas we thought would be representative for a snapshot of what was happening across the state," White said.

Biologists found that wolves killed significant numbers of collared elk in only one area, the Lolo zone along U.S. Highway 12 in north Idaho. Over the three years, the report claims wolves killed 20 percent of the Lolo sample, or about six elk. Three-quarters of the collared elk survived, less than Fish and Game's survival goal of 88 percent.

White said deteriorating habitat in the Lolo zone has contributed to declining elk numbers since at least 1988, before wolves entered the picture. The population dropped by 40 percent during the severe winter of 1996-97 alone. Bears and cougars also kill many elk. Just across the border, Montana biologists are starting a similar collaring study in Ravalli County, where one factor of elk decline may be high human population growth.

The report said wolves caused the highest number of deaths in two other areas with declining populations. But in the Smoky Mountain zone west of Ketchum, where wolves were said to have killed 5 percent of about 30 collared elk, other predators and hunters together killed 7 percent. The Sawtooth zone, west of Stanley, had similar results.

Conversely, the report showed that hunters were the biggest cause of elk kills in two other areas with declining populations: the Pioneer zone east of Ketchum, and Island Park near Rexburg. In the Island Park zone, hunters killed 17 percent of collared elk while wolves killed none.

White said Fish and Game ran a shorter study starting in 2008, collaring 6-month-old calves in just the Lolo and Sawtooth zones. In both areas, wolves killed around a third of the calves. But in the Sawtooth area, only one-third of calves survived, meaning other factors were also to blame.

The conclusion that wolves don't have a greater effect on elk runs counter to the expectations of many. In July 2009, an informal Fish and Game survey of 2,500 out-of-state hunters found that three in 10 didn't plan to visit Idaho because of the perceived effect of wolves on elk populations.

In the late '90s, even ecologists like Scott Creel of Montana State University expected wolves to kill a lot of elk. But after eight years studying the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem where wolves are numerous, he's learned that other factors are more likely to reduce elk populations.

Before wolves were reintroduced, elk populations were larger and elk stayed in the open, which is what hunters got used to, Creel said. Now, he said, elk may be acting like they did before wolves were eliminated.

Given time, Creel said, he thinks both populations would stabilize. He noted population sizes are only considered "good" or "bad" based upon arbitrary ideas of what the size should be.

"No predator has ever eliminated its food," Creel said. "Change is always the most dramatic at the beginning, then population numbers settle."

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