

Wolf film lures 100 to theater

Written by Lisa Britton March 24, 2010 11:19 am

By LISA BRITTON

Baker City Herald

More than 100 people sought to learn more about wolves Tuesday during a screening of the film “Lords of Nature: Life in a Land of Great Predators.”

The documentary, shown for free at the Eltrym Theater, was brought to Baker City by Northeastern Oregon Ecosystems.

The faces behind that group are “a couple people who wanted to bring the film here,” said Suzanne Fouty, a member of the group. “We’re not affiliated with anybody.”

The one-hour film covers the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park and also features interviews with ranchers in Minnesota and Idaho who try to protect their livestock from wolves.

At Yellowstone, the film follows the work of two scientists from Oregon State University, Bill Ripple and Robert Beschta.

Ripple’s focus was dying aspen trees; Beschta studied the lack of cottonwoods. These trees, the scientists say, can’t reproduce well because elk eat the seedlings.

However, when wolves were brought back to Yellowstone in 1995, the predators began affecting the browsing habits of elk. And it’s not all about killing — fear changes habits and the scientists ascertain that elk avoid streamsides where downed trees could inhibit a quick escape.

Though opinions about wolves may differ, Ripple says one statement is true across the board: “Yellowstone with wolves is dramatically different than without them.”

Then the film heads to a sheep ranch in Minnesota owned by Janet McNally. Her timeline with wolves: she heard the first howl in 1991; lost the first sheep in 1993; and lost 40 lambs in 1999.

She’s changed her ranching practices to keep the wolves at bay — the sheep are kept together with guard dogs and she rotates their grazing pastures on a regular basis.

She hasn't lost any sheep since 1999.

A Minnesota cattle rancher, David Radaich, says he has 10 wolves that roam within a mile of his ranch.

One precaution he uses during calving season is to feed at night because that delays births long enough to get past the darkest part of the night.

When the film ended, the audience had the chance to hear about first-hand experience with wolves.

The panel of experts were: Beschta; Russ Morgan, wolf coordinator with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife; Gary Miller, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service field supervisor; Jesse Timberlake of Defenders of Wildlife; and Keating ranchers Curt Jacobs and Tik Moore, who both lost livestock to a pair of wolves last spring.

The moderator was Mellie Pullman, a Portland State University associate professor and resident of Joseph who works with Northeastern Oregon ranchers in sustainable livestock production.

The first question was asked of Jacobs and Moore — what non-lethal methods were first used to deter the two wolves that killed their livestock?

(Federal agents shot and killed the two wolves in September, after they had returned to Jacobs' ranch.)

Jacobs said they first put up flags to frighten the wolves, but "only a third of the way around my place."

Then ODFW captured one of the wolves and outfitted it with a radio collar, and when the predator came within about a quarter mile of Jacobs' ranch, the collar triggered an alarm on a receiver provided to Jacobs.

But Jacobs said his house is in a canyon, so he had to go up a hill to get the signal for the Radio Activated Guard receiver.

But that had its problems, too.

"The issue in Keating is it's sage grouse country," Moore said.

Some sage grouse also have radio collars, which triggered the alarm. Moore said his cell phone would also cause the box to sound an alarm.

"They're tools, but you have to make sure the other issues are taken care of first," he said.

Jacobs also has six guard dogs on duty — but they have limits.

“They would raise a real ruckus until the wolves got close, then you could hear a pin drop,” he said. “It got really quiet.”

What about relocating, rather than killing, the problem wolves?

Russ Morgan said Oregon’s wolf management plan doesn’t allow moving wolves that are proven to attack livestock.

“In other words, the agency won’t move a problem,” he said.

Jacobs and Moore were asked about the reimbursement they received from Defenders of Wildlife — Moore was paid for one calf (he lost five); Jacobs was compensated for all 32 lambs and one goat he lost.

Moore said livestock owners must prove that wolves were responsible in order to receive compensation.

“But the value of the livestock destroyed — you can’t quantify a 2-month-old calf with a 650-pound yearling,” he said. “Plus the time we spent doctoring the injured animals, the time Curt and I have spent on the road addressing this in Oregon.”

Timberlake, who came from Boise to represent Defenders of Wildlife, explained the compensation program.

“We wanted to acknowledge that producers were losing livestock, their livelihood,” he said.

Then Moore addressed a part in the film that said wolves are responsible for 1 percent of the livestock lost — many more livestock die from disease and attacks by domestic dogs.

“As a rancher, we can control all of those but one. That’s the wolf,” he said.

He said this year he’s moved his calving yard to a more open and visible area to deter the wolves.

And he listens.

“Doesn’t matter if its 25 below or 80 above, our bedroom window is open,” he said. “We sleep with one eye open.”

The issue, he said, is the limits on what ranchers can do to deal with wolves.

“Ranchers as a whole are not 100 percent against the wolves,” Moore said. “They are here to stay. But give us the tools we need to live with them.”

Jacobs echoed that sentiment.

“We need to be able to manage the ones that are trouble,” he said. “We need tools to defend ourselves.”

In closing, Morgan said we haven’t heard the last of wolf problems.

“My belief is depredation will guide the management (plan),” he said. “There will be more depredation in Oregon, I will assure you of that.”

Although Oregon’s wolf population is not known, ODFW biologists have confirmed the presence of at least two packs.

Last month workers captured and attached tracking collars to three wolves from a Wallowa County pack, a project that will help biologists follow the movements of the pack that is the largest in Oregon, comprising an estimated 10 animals.

ODFW workers collared two wolves on Feb. 12, and a third on Feb. 13 in the Imnaha wildlife unit east of Joseph.

ODFW officials had intended to collar wolves from the Imnaha pack since a biologist videotaped that pack on Nov. 12, 2009, said Michelle Dennehy, a spokeswoman for ODFW.

In addition to the Imnaha wolves, ODFW continues to track a wolf pack in the Wenaha wildlife unit northeast of La Grande.

Biologists have yet to collar any wolves from the Wenaha pack.

For more about the film, visit the Web site www.lordsofnature.org.