

GEOGRAPHY

GRAY WOLVES IN NORTH AMERICA

The gray wolf originally ranged from coast to coast across North America . But wherever Europeans settled , wolf extermination followed . A relentless war against these animals was waged with rifles , traps , and poisons for more than 300 years .

For many years government agencies paid cash bounties for wolf carcasses , and federal hunters tracked down any rumor of survivors . Erased from most of the East long before the end of the 1800s , gray wolves were gone from the West by the 1930s . By the 1960s the only ones alive south of Canada were a handful living deep in Mexico's Sierra Madre , a score on Isle Royale out in Lake Superior , and 300 to 700 in northernmost Minnesota . In 1967 experts declared that the species was facing extinction south of Canada .

Why were humans and wolves in conflict ? The primary reason is the competition that existed between humans and wolves . As the wolves' natural prey was wiped out , they turned to eating what they could find - domestic livestock . To protect their land and livelihood , ranchers reached for their rifles . Wolves were soon gone .

In 1974 the gray wolf won protection under the Endangered Species Act . In the 1980s , nearly half a century after the last known citing of a gray wolf in the continental United States , a few Canadian wolves rambled over the border and colonized a portion of Glacier National Park . After sanctioning the slaughter of wolves for decades , federal agencies in 1995 launched an ambitious project to restore the animals in parts of their former range .

The plan involved airlifting wolves from Canada into Yellowstone National Park and the Frank Church Wilderness , as well as protecting wolves moving into Montana on their own . Though successful (there are some 90 wolves in Yellowstone , 70 in Idaho ,and 75 in Montana) , the program faces continued challenges by those who still oppose wolves living alongside humans .

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