



August 20, 2009

Eye on the Environment

Collar and Foll'er: Trapping wolves in the Swan By Adam Lieberg

When we arrived at the trap site, fresh dirt was all that was left in place of the leg-hold trap. The girls, who had been in casual moods as we drove the trapline, immediately switched into work mode. I struggled to find a place to set my hot coffee mug as each of the gals began giving me orders.

My primary jobs were to record data and stay out of their way. With the windows rolled down and the engine of the silver ¾ ton Fish Wildlife and Parks truck off, we listened for noises in the brush. It was silent. We quickly, but very quietly, exited the truck and began combing the scene for evidence. There was some fresh scat, though nothing conclusive.

The tracking was difficult due to the hardpan nature of the ground, though we could see marks etched into the road from the steel drag attached to the end the trap. We bailed off the logging road and into a thicket of bushes. The fact that we still couldn't hear or see anything was a bad sign. The girls were worried about a potential pull out. But, we continued to track the drag trail through the brush.

With bear sprays in hand, we crawled through serviceberry and alder shrubs. Trapping wolves in grizzly country is no walk in the park. We moved slow but deliberate, lots of

stopping and listening. Eventually we heard some rustling in the distant bushes. I could feel the tension, which was already high, rise to another level. We snuck down a game trail leading into the vicinity of the noise.



Photo by Erika Edgley.

As we approached, I threw up my binoculars and scanned the brush. "It's a wolf! Nice work gals, you did it," I whispered.

"Oh, it's far from over," replied Kris Boyd, wolf field technician for Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, as she slowly turned around and headed back towards the truck to gather the processing gear.

Kris Boyd and her field partner Erika Edgley, both slight in stature, don't exactly fit the stereotypical mold you think of when you picture "large carnivore trappers," but once the action starts, it's obvious they mean business.

Both Kris and Erika work for Kent Laudon, FWP wolf management specialist based out of region 1. When I got wind that they were coming down to trap and collar wolves in the Swan, I jumped on the opportunity to tag along.

Over the years, Northwest Connections has provided a lot of information with regards to the whereabouts and movements of wolves in the valley, based on track surveys and reports

from the community. So it was fitting to be able to join FWP in their trapping efforts in the Swan.

But why does FWP go through such efforts to trap and collar wolves? Ask Kent Laudon and you will get a lot of reasons. “First off,” says Laudon, “wildlife populations are inherently difficult to survey.”

In the case of wolves, the fact that they are a pack animal amplifies the information one radio-collared individual can provide. Radio-collaring individuals, followed by subsequent aerial telemetry—also known as “collar and foll’er”—allow managers to count pack numbers and come up with a population estimate.

“There is no other species in the Northwest, whose population is monitored as intensely as wolves,” says Laudon. The closest runner up, no doubt, would be the grizzly bear, which is of no surprise considering both of these species have been listed as threatened or endangered by the federal government.

The gray wolf was officially listed as an endangered species back in 1978; however, it wasn’t until 1985 that the first wolf was radio-collared in Glacier National Park. From then on, radio-collars have become an important management tool to aid in the recovery of wolves.

On May 4th of 2009, the gray wolf was delisted and FWP and the respective Indian Tribes took full legal authority over the management and conservation of the species.

Radio-collars still have their place. With a fair chase wolf-hunting season approved by the FWP Commission for 2009, “radio-collars

will help assess the effects of a hunting season,” says Laudon.

Radio-collars can help with a variety of other management and research issues. For example, collars can help managers take more proactive steps with regards to potential livestock conflicts. There are also a lot of research questions that radio-collars can assist with, including wolf/big game interactions.

Additionally, four GPS radio-collars are being deployed this year for a pack occupancy study. This method essentially creates a grid over the state and uses hunter surveys to assess the probability that a given cell within the grid is occupied by a wolf pack.

The GPS radio-collars provide data that will be used to determine precise home-ranges, which will in turn help determine the size of the cells. This study could very well change the way wolf populations are monitored in the future, eventually reducing the need for radio-collars, at least in terms of monitoring and estimating populations.

Nevertheless, before radio-collars can even be deployed, trappers like Boyd and Edgley must have an idea of where the wolves are. This is where local knowledge from communities plays an important role.

“Reports are a huge tool,” says Laudon. Not only do reports of wolf sightings, sign, and activity help managers know where to concentrate trapping efforts, but it’s an opportunity to open up dialogue between managers and locals. “It goes both ways,” says Laudon, “They (local community members) tell me what they have been seeing, and I tell them what I know, and collectively we all know more.”

When we returned from the truck with all the processing gear to where the wolf was caught, Boyd and Edgley anesthetized the canine and moved it to a shaded spot, away from the rising sun. The wolf was a young female, weighing in at 74 pounds. Boyd fitted her with an Argos GPS radio-collar, while Edgley kept close tabs on the wolf's vitals. After all the processing work was done, we moved away from the wolf and quietly watched from the bushes, as she slowly came to. After a few tries, she got to her feet and moseyed off.

For more information on wolf management in Montana or to fill out an observation report form, please visit FWP's website at <http://fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/wolf>. If you are interested in taking a tracking class to learn how to monitor wolves and other carnivores in the Seeley-Swan, please visit Northwest Connections' website at www.northwestconnections.org.