



The return of the wolf: From elimination to recovery

In short, wolves belong here. The East will not be fully renewed until their packs wander its mountains again. That this is even a real possibility is a wonder, nearly a miracle.

–Bill McKibben, author

Wolves once roamed dense forests and wide plains from the Hudson Bay to the Mid-Atlantic states and westward. When Europeans first arrived in North America, an estimated 400,000 wolves called the continent home.

Although wolves were respected by Native Americans, the Massachusetts Bay Colony imposed the first bounty on the animal in 1630. During the next few centuries, government extermination programs and hunting and trapping by individuals became widespread.

By the early 1900s, wolves had been virtually eliminated from the continental United States, with only a small population remaining in northern Minnesota. Today, wolves occupy only about 3% of their historical natural range.

The desire to get rid of wolves is deeply rooted in myths and fairy tales that connect the animal with evil, savagery, deception, and danger. Wolves have also been seen as a threat to livestock and as competition for game animals.

A new view

Thanks to progress in science and public education, the truth about wolves—their complex social structure, shy nature, and key role in the environment—is better understood.

In the last several decades, a new appreciation of wildlife and both government and private efforts to restore endangered species have benefited the wolf. Improved livestock husbandry practices (such as rotating and guarding herds and removing the carcasses of dead animals) and rancher compensation programs have also been important.

But fears remain, making it necessary to improve land conservation, support education efforts, and reduce human-wolf conflict.

Wolves can survive on many types of prey and in diverse habitats, but they need to live where there's enough to eat and protection from being killed by people and traffic. They also need to be able to migrate far and wide in search of food and mates.

Much of the wolf's original home range has been converted to cities, suburbs, and farms, while ranching, logging, and



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energy industry activities occur in many other areas. Roads crisscross the nation. With this in mind, what wolves need most to survive today is human tolerance and acceptance, and a willingness to share the land.

Coming home to the Northeast

In recent years, breeding and reintroduction programs and the U.S. Endangered Species Act have successfully brought wolves back to the Rocky Mountains, Southeast, and Southwest and helped populations to grow in the Great Lakes region.

There is no established population of wolves in the Northeast. But although the region is densely populated

and has many roads, houses, and commercial areas, there are still millions of acres of potential wolf habitat.

A recent comprehensive study shows that there's enough habitat and prey (including deer, moose, and beaver) in northern and central Maine to support a population of about 1000 wolves, while New York's Adirondack/Tug Hill Plateau area could support at least 400. Other studies show that even larger populations could survive and thrive in these areas, as well as in the forests of New Hampshire and Vermont.

If successfully recovered in the region, the wolf would join a long list of species that have returned to the Northeast after being eliminated. Many have come back on their own as forests have regenerated following centuries of agriculture and logging. Others (like the white-tailed deer, beaver, wild turkey, and falcon) have been reintroduced.

Several routes for wolf migration cross the U.S.-Canada border, and it is possible that some wolves will be able to make it to the Northeast on their own. But current development patterns in the northeastern United States and southeastern Canada will likely make a deliberate recovery plan necessary.

The return of the wolf to the Northeast will mark an historic change in how we view this majestic, native species: not as a danger to fight, but as a friend to welcome home.

The Coalition to Restore the Eastern Wolf (CREW) is a group of local, regional, and national organizations working to recover healthy wolf populations in as much of its former range in the northeastern United States and southeastern Canada as is feasible. CREW believes that doing so is critical to improving natural conditions and keeping environments whole throughout the region.

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