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The Ojibwe, Wolves and Tribal Biologists

The face of co-existence on tribal lands

By DEBRA MITTS-SMITH

The United States Fish and Wildlife Service removed the gray wolf from the endangered species list on January 4, 2021. Yet the gray wolf remains a protected species on many Native American reservation lands, and according to author Thomas Peacock, a member of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe, protecting the wolf on those lands is not always easy—or even possible.

“Reservations exist alongside public, state and federal lands as well as private property, making up a checkerboard of human legal jurisdictions that wolves unknowingly cross,” he said.

The recent wolf hunt in Wisconsin underscores how difficult protecting wolves can be. For the Ojibwe, also known as Chippewa, the wolf is a sacred animal that remains protected on Ojibwe lands. Within the ceded territories (lands that the Ojibwe relinquished to the United States government while retaining hunting, fishing and harvesting rights) the Ojibwe tribes are allotted a percentage of the allowed wolf harvest. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources set the state quota at 200 wolves; the Ojibwe were allocated 81 tags, reducing the state’s quota to 119. The tribes protected the wolves by not using their allotment of hunting tags. Within three days, however, non-Ojibwe hunters took 216 wolves.

Research on wolves living near humans

Ojibwe bands hire biologists to study and monitor wildlife and environmental issues on reservation lands and within the ceded territories. Wildlife biologist Morgan Swingen works for the Duluth office of the 1854 Treaty Authority, an intertribal agency that oversees and regulates hunting, gathering and fishing rights and resources for the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa and the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa on land the Ojibwe ceded to the U.S.

When Minnesota became a state in 1858, the 1854 Ceded Territory became part of the state of Minnesota. Today, the 1854 Ceded Territory (see page 7) encompasses more than six million acres, from the northeastern tip of Minnesota (known as the Arrowhead) south to Moose Lake and west toward Floodwood and Virginia, Minnesota. Within it are public and private lands that encompass cities (includ-





Tom Peacock

In Thomas Peacock's book, *The Wolf's Trail: An Ojibwe Story, told by Wolves*, the old wolf narrator, *Zhi-shay'* (Uncle), shares stories with the pups in his pack about wolves and the Ojibwe people. *Zhi-shay'* begins by telling the Ojibwe creation story that describes not only how the Creator's love made all living and non-living things, but also lays the foundation for the sacred relationship between *Ma'iingan* (Brother Wolf) and the First Human.

In the story, the Creator sent Brother Wolf to accompany and help the First Human on his journey to walk the earth and name all creations. When they finished the task, the Creator told them that they would now walk along separate paths, but that "whatever happened to one would befall the other; for both there would be times of great happiness and great sadness, of hope and despair." The Creator also warned that both would be hunted to near extinction. Yet, the Creator imparted hope, saying that the difficult times would not last forever.

Through historical accounts, sacred stories and scientific facts, Peacock's book explores the separate but parallel paths of the Ojibwe and the wolf. In Ojibwe tradition, the wolf is sacred; its fate is intertwined with that of the Ojibwe people. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the Ojibwe Nation declined in numbers, experienced loss of land, language and traditions, and suffered betrayal by European settlers and the U.S. government. Similarly, the wolf populations of Wisconsin, Minnesota and Michigan were hunted, trapped, poisoned and otherwise persecuted into population decline.

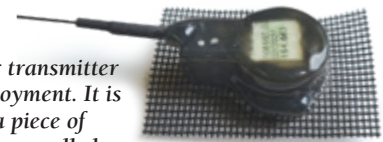
Yet both the Ojibwe and the wolf have proven to be resilient. Revival of Ojibwe language, traditions and knowledge is taking place. The tribe's treaty rights are being honored. At one time, wolves were declared extinct in Wisconsin, and although never extirpated in Minnesota, its numbers were greatly reduced. The wolf's protected status since 1978 has resulted in increased population, as well as a partial return to its former range.

The Ojibwe originated on the eastern seaboard. Around 500 A.D., the Ojibwe began their centuries-long migration west. By 1600, they had settled along the shores of the Great Lakes. Treaties between tribes and European colonial powers, and later with the U.S. federal government, have a long and complicated history. Under the Indian Appropriations Act of 1851, the U.S. government negotiated treaties with the various tribes, establishing reservations (land retained, occupied and governed by a particular tribe) and ceded territories (land relinquished by a tribe to the U.S. government but on which tribal members retained hunting, fishing and gathering rights). Today, Ojibwe bands have reservations in northern Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, North Dakota and Montana, as well as Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, Canada. While the federal government provides some services to the bands, the bands govern their reservations and manage their natural resources.



Photos: Morgan Swingen/1854 Treaty Authority

Above: A litter of nine pups was collared and monitored in 2020. Photo taken when Swingen team first found them in the den.



Right: a hair transmitter prior to deployment. It is attached to a piece of mesh, which we pulled the hair through and then glued. The hair transmitter itself is about 1" x 1.5".

ing Duluth), the Mesabi Iron Range, the Superior National Forest, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, state parks, state forests and county-managed forest lands.

In addition to issuing hunting and fishing licenses, recording harvests and commenting on land management projects, tribal biologist Swingen runs wildlife studies that include several of the wolf packs in the ceded territory. To avoid overlap with other biologists working within the 1854 Ceded Territory, Swingen studies the packs in the areas north of Duluth and south of the Iron Range.

Swingen's study area borders the urban area of Duluth. In 2007, the 1854 Treaty Authority began studying wolves in this urban-rural interface. Swingen continues to monitor wolf packs in that area, examining their survival rates and how they use the semi-urban habitat.

Another one of Swingen's studies focuses on wolf pup mortality causes and survival rates to help states and tribes make informed wolf-management decisions. Swingen shares her data on wolf pups with Jerrold Belant from the



Left: A pup collar before it is deployed.

Above: Wolf pup with a collar on.



Boundary of 1854
Ceded Territory

State University of New York's College of Environmental Science and Forestry, who is developing an integrated population model of wolves in the Great Lakes Region.

Swingen explained some of the challenges of studying wolf pups. To monitor pups she uses expandable, flexible collars that increase in size as the pups grow. When the pups reach a certain size, the collars drop off. "Unfortunately, some collars drop off sooner than expected because wolf pups chew on each other's collars," she said. "In early May 2020, we collared 18 pups about four weeks old, but by July most had lost their collars."

In May 2021, Swingen piloted a new method of monitoring. Instead of collaring the pups, she attached a transmitter to each pup's fur which, in theory, should have remained attached until the pup shed for the first time—in spring 2022. But Swingen admits that so far, researchers haven't had much success with the "hair transmitters." They're currently considering a more robust collar.

Co-existence

Mike Schrage is the wildlife biologist for the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. Located 20 miles west of Duluth, along the southern edge of the boreal forest, the Band's reservation encompasses 150 square miles of deciduous and coniferous forests. Schrage points out, however, that this landscape is not the remote wilderness the public often associates with wolves and other large predators. "It's not classic wolf country, and although it is heavily forested, it is not wilderness. There are small farms, rural homes, small towns, railroads, highways and utility corridors. Yet, even this close to humans and human activities, the area supports a robust wolf population, suggesting how easily wolves can live in close proximity to people."

At least three wolf packs live on the Fond du Lac Reservation, while

territories of two other packs overlap the reservation, and lone wolves are continually moving through it. Pack sizes range from two to 13 wolves. Schrage points out that, "The majority of these are young wolves that will disperse. There is no large prey such as moose, bison or elk that are necessary to support the large packs you get in Yellowstone." Instead, the main prey animals are white-tail deer and—during ice-free months—the beaver.

He adds that, "Research shows our statewide wolf numbers rise and fall with populations of their primary prey—white-tailed deer. But wolves are flexible predators and can take snowshoe hare, ruffed grouse and a variety of other things to supplement their diets as necessary. I regularly get reports of wolves in the fall during bear season visiting bait stations and eating the

"Even this close to human activities, the area supports a robust wolf population, suggesting how easily wolves can live in close proximity to people."

— Mike Schrage, wildlife biologist for the Fond du Lac band of Lake Superior Chippewa.

apples, oats and candies intended for the bears.”

“Wolves have been known to cut across farmland and pass near people’s homes. They are usually safe as long as they don’t get too bold, and they stay away from domestic animals,” Schrage says. “In the winter, one can sometimes see wolves out on the frozen lakes, and last summer one pack was

frequently sighted on a certain road—but for the most part, the wolves tend to elude humans.”

One exception, however, is the collared wolf that regularly crosses the runway at the Cloquet Airport, usually after dark. Schrage admits that he is not sure what the wolf is doing there. “Is the airport a shortcut on his travel path? Or is he hunting mice and rabbits in the mowed grass there?”

Schrage uses trail cameras to help make wolves visible and reveal their interactions with other predators. “Wolves and coyotes are not supposed to get along, but here, as long as they are not at the prey site at the same time, they overlap. Ravens often harass a lone wolf at a carcass to the point where it gives up and leaves, and once a large bobcat was seen to drive a lone wolf away from a deer carcass. But if there are multiple wolves eating on a carcass, ravens and bobcats leave them alone.”

“Interestingly,” Schrage added, “While ravens can drive a lone wolf to distraction, they don’t mess around with bobcats at all!”

Schrage’s early studies monitored numbers of wolves and packs, their movements and their fates. More recently he has focused on three wolf packs whose terri-

tories have been impacted by the construction of the Line 3 pipeline—a tar sands pipeline currently under construction in northern Minnesota. He is specifically interested in seeing if the construction displaces wolves and how quickly wolves return when construction is completed.

Swingen and Schrage collaborate with each other, and with state and federal agencies such as the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Collaboration takes many forms, from sharing equipment, expertise and experience to contributing data for larger studies. For instance, Schrage helps Swingen catch and collar wolf pups for her pup study. Both Schrage and Swingen report on pack sizes and provide other data for the Minnesota DNR’s annual report on wolf population and territories.

Swingen and Schrage are just two of the wildlife biologists working for the Ojibwe people, and as wolf populations increase and extend their range, research like theirs on wolves living in proximity to humans provides insights not only on wolves in human environments, but perhaps also on the peaceful co-existence of humans, wolves and other wildlife. ■

Additional Resources:

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Debra Mitts-Smith researches and writes about the wolf in literature and art. Her book, *Picturing the Wolf in Children’s Literature*, was published by Routledge in 2010. She is currently working on a cultural history of the wolf.



Biologists like Mike Schrage use trail cams to help estimate pack counts. Occasionally, the trail cams capture scenes such as these.

