



This article is intended for youth ranging from upper elementary grades through early middle school.

The Unusual Journey of OR-93

By K.C. and Aaron Morris

What would happen if you stepped outside your home and kept walking in one direction? Close your eyes and imagine the journey. What sights would you see? Would you walk through cities or towns, over mountains, across rivers, past plains, swamps or lakes? Who would you meet? Would they be friendly or not? How far do you think you would go before you'd want to turn around and head home again?

On January 30, 2021, a two-year-old wolf called OR-93 started a journey just like that. He left his pack in western Oregon and started walking south. He wanted to find a territory of his own and a mate. When an animal leaves the place where it was born for those reasons, scientists call the behavior “dispersal.”

As OR-93 walked, he passed lava beds in northern California. He climbed over snowy mountain passes in the Sierra Nevada mountain range. He traveled along the edge of Yosemite National Park, walked across farmlands and crossed three dangerous California freeways.

Biologists kept track of his journey by downloading the signals, known as “pings,” that OR-93’s GPS tracking collar sent to a satellite while he moved. The signals showed that OR-93 walked quickly, traveling about 16 miles every day. In all, OR-93 walked about 1,000 miles in 10 months before he was hit by a car and killed. By that time, the wolf was about 50 miles north of the huge city of Los Angeles in southern California. He had walked almost the entire length of California!

The journey of OR-93 was very unusual. Right now, only about 20 wolves live in California, and all of these are in northern California. OR-93 was the first wolf in 100 years known to travel into central and southern California.



Wolf OR-93. Austin Smith, Jr. Content Tribes of Warm Springs



Wildlife Crossings

Wild animals need to cross roads to search for food or mates, but doing so is dangerous. Wildlife crossings can help. A wildlife crossing can be an underpass—a tunnel where animals cross under the road—or an overpass, which is like a bridge animals use to cross over the road. Wildlife crossings were first built in Europe in the 1950s. When biologists and conservationists saw how wildlife crossings helped to protect wild animals, they began to be built in other parts of the world, including Canada and the United States. Today, wildlife crossings around the world help many species, from salamanders to elephants, to cross dangerous roads safely.



His journey helped people think about what it might be like for more wolves to live in California in the future.

Some people were happy with the possibility that wolves could be another predator in the state. They believe the wolves would help make wildlands healthier and more balanced. Other people, like farmers and ranchers, were worried by OR-93. They thought that wolves living in California could be dangerous for their livestock, like cattle and sheep. For both of these groups, OR-93's journey suggested that it is important to talk about the future of wolves in California and how to make that future good for both wolves and people.

Even though his life was short, OR-93's long walk will continue to be talked about as decisions are made about how to respond to wolves and their dispersal into new areas. ■

What do you think?

Should a state like California try to make it possible for wolves to make their homes in new areas?

Why or why not?

Wolves in California

Wolves in California have an interesting history. Before European explorers arrived, wolves lived in many parts of the state, from north to south. After the land was settled, laws were passed to allow humans to protect their livestock by killing wolves and coyotes. In 1924, the last wolf in California was trapped and killed. No wolves called California home for more than 80 years.

The laws changed when a wolf called OR-7 traveled from Oregon to northern California in 2011. OR-7 stayed in California for 15 months. Then he went home to Oregon, where he found a mate and had five litters of pups. In 2017, one of OR-7's sons became the first breeding male for a pack of wolves in northern California. Called the Lassen Pack, OR-7's descendants are still there today. Other known wolves in northern California are the Beckwourth Pack and the Whaleback Pack. A single male wolf called OR-103 has been spotted, too. In all, California's wolf population is about two dozen wolves. This number goes up and down a little based on how many wolf pups are born to the packs each spring and how many wolves die each year.

