

Listen to the howl

Mexican gray wolf reintroduced in the Southwest

By John Linehan and Brooke Wardrop
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The howl of the Mexican gray wolf has not been heard in more than 30 years in the forests and fields of the Southwest. Once common throughout western Texas, southern New Mexico, central Arizona and northern Mexico, the Mexican gray wolf, the rarest and most genetically distinct subspecies of the North American gray wolf, was completely eliminated from the wild, surviving in only small captive populations.

Thanks to successful conservation programs throughout the past 27 years, a brighter future has been procured for these wolves, and their howl is beginning to be heard once again.

In a unique partnership between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, state agencies, several zoos accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and other partners, Zoo New England is participating in a reintroduction program to release captive-reared Mexican gray wolves in remote parts of Arizona and New Mexico.



Zoo New England began participating in the Mexican Wolf Species Survival Plan (SSP) in 1998. The SSP is a consortium of institutions working together to breed captive Mexican wolves for reintroduction and recovery in the Southwest. Last year, a pair at Stone Zoo in Stoneham produced eight pups, all of which are thriving. The SSP has now reached its captive population goals, and soon Zoo New England will be translocating some members of its pack to other zoos.

In captivity, close bonds between wolves and keepers are avoided because of the reintroduction program. Their survival ultimately depends on active avoidance of human contact. The animals cannot become reliant on people for food. While in captivity, the wolves do not lose their natural instincts, but hunting skills need to be honed before being released into the wild. Wolves that are slated for release are sent to large pre-release centers with native prey. Typically, these wolves and their offspring are released into the wild together as a pack.

In 1976, the Mexican gray wolf was listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Today, there are approximately 300 Mexican gray wolves in existence. Most were born in zoos and wildlife sanctuaries in the US and Mexico, and more are

being born in the wild each year. The recovery of these animals has been given the highest priority.

Based on experience gained from other wolf recovery programs, scientists are optimistic about the program's eventual success. Captive-reared wolves have learned to survive after release and successfully form groups, reproduce and raise their pups. They are also forming new pairs on their own, indicating a healthy wolf population.

There are still challenges. At the 2006 Mexican Gray Wolf SSP Annual meeting held in Alpine, Ariz., the heart of the wolf release area, attendees discussed the opposition to the reintroduction program by some area residents, particularly ranchers concerned that the program will increase predation on livestock and family pets.

The task of locating the radio-collared wolves is daunting. Biologists track the wolves in rugged, often steep, terrain. U.S. Fish and Wildlife agents must deal with wolves that leave the approved recovery areas, which do not have fenced boundaries. Sometimes it is possible to recapture and return the animals to the recovery area, but lethal removal is sometimes necessary to ensure the species' survival in the wild.

The Mexican gray wolf's role in the ecosystem is filled by no other predators. Black bears and cougars roam these areas of the Southwest, but they don't fill the wolf's niche. Elk are a major source of food for the Mexican gray wolf. As the wolves disappeared, some areas suffered from an overabundance of elk, which led to environmental degradation. Keeping a balance between elk and wolves is crucial to the environmental health of those areas.

Mexican gray wolves weigh between 50-80 pounds and are about 5-feet long with a relatively large head. The coat is often mottled or patchy and varies from gray and black to brown and buff. They have complex social behavior, living in tightly organized packs and communicating through howling vocalizations, body posturing and scent marking. These animals work effectively together to adapt to most environments where there is prey, which includes deer, jackrabbit, mice and peccary.

As a critical predator, wolves have a profound effect on the ecosystem. When an ecosystem is out of balance there are a host of negative effects. Returning the wolves to their natural habitat helps to restore the environmental health of these areas.

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