

Life and Behaviour of Wolves: Co-existence in the Northern Rockies

Haswell, P.M.; Haswell, P.

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Life and behaviour of wolves: Co-existence in the Northern Rockies

During the summer of 2011 Pete Haswell ventured stateside to work as a wolf field technician for Defenders of Wildlife on the Wood River Valley Co-existence Project in Idaho.

This project was unlike any other I have worked on before. It's the largest co-existence project in the US and began in 2007 when wolves moved into Blaine County. This area is known as a sheep super-highway and has some 10,000 sheep grazing on the public forests every summer. It also has plenty of private ranches and cattle producers. It was clear this area was to become a high conflict zone once wolves continued to disperse and settle in their former historic range after their re-introduction to the North West in 1995.

The project concentrates its efforts on working with the number one cause for wolf decline and extirpation – people! It is important to understand the ecology of an animal and its requirements for survival.

However, the most pressing threat for the survival of a stable wolf population in the Rockies, as in many areas, is the acceptance of local people. The wolf is particularly vulnerable after its delisting from the Endangered Species Act earlier this year. Hunting seasons, loopholes permitting inadvertent baiting of wolves by black bear hunters, federal lethal control orders, competition with game hunters and retaliation killings for livestock predation are just some of the problems faced by wolves and conservationists.

It is well known that education and outreach pave the way for understanding, compromise and change in attitude towards a tolerance of predators. Wolves were extirpated from the North West by the 1930s and ranchers have not had long to adjust to their reintroduction. It's important to remember that livestock farmers' livelihoods can come under threat and the loss of just a few animals can have high impact. Although compensation is available, tensions still run high. Now the state has taken over the operation of the compensation scheme that Defenders began, there are problems with a lack of proper documentation and inaccurate kill assessments. Unfortunately this leaves the

wolf as a scapegoat for scavenging animals lost from natural causes or kills

The life of a rancher out in the west is tough.

by other predators such as coyotes. This seemingly aids political agendas regarding wolves in the state and results in strong lethal control response. Due to the work of Defenders and other similar groups, the tides are, however, gradually turning.

The life of a rancher out in the west is tough. The terrain is rugged, winters cold and summers arid and scorching. Add to this the weight loss and stress placed upon livestock by the presence of predators and the risk of loss through depredation, it's easy to understand why ranchers struggle to tolerate wolves in their landscape, with husbandry practices adapted to generations without their presence. This is where the Wood River Co-existence Project is leading the way, setting an example of how co-existence is possible.

As well as educational and outreach work with both the ranching community and public, the project's main focus is taking the costs and stresses of livestock loss away from ranchers, by helping provide for and inform them about livestock protection.

One of the main tools in preventing predation is simply to keep the wolves and sheep separate. Don't put the livestock in high risk zones and don't attract wolves by leaving carcasses near the herds (you might be surprised that this still happens). We looked at previous pre-dation events and tracked



wolves where possible to figure out numbers, locations, habitat use and activity. This could pre-empt any possible conflicts, keep the sheep away from the wolves and know when herds were at risk and apply protection. To keep track of unfolding events I created an interactive map containing all of the livestock grazing-routes on public lands and information we had on local wolf populations. It's so useful to know where your wolves are and keep tabs on which livestock are likely to run into trouble and how it can potentially be avoided. Local tip-offs and telemetry are useful tools and it's important to try and have a collar on at least one pack member.

I was lucky enough this summer to lock gazes from only 20 metres away with one of the

We don't have all the answers to livestock protection yet.

famed phantom hill wolves one night. We also discovered a new pack complete with pups at the start of the summer which caused a big hubbub. Having howling bouts with these wolves throughout the summer was a special thing. It was great to know they were out there. I tried my utmost to keep them out of trouble and work with the ranchers they might affect. Many of the ranchers are coming around to the idea that wolves are better to have in the area than coyotes as they are easier to work with and predate sheep a lot less.

As well as keeping wolves and sheep apart, our intentions are to prevent livestock becoming viewed as a profitable food source. Without protection sheep are very vulnerable. The application of scare devices, guard dogs, fladry, human presence and overnight guards make livestock a difficult

prey to obtain. Removing or fencing off livestock carcasses with fladry results in little or no energetic gain for predators. These factors condition the wolves to the fact that livestock are an unprofitable prey source, they are difficult to obtain and food gain is minimal.

This summer was another successful run with only five sheep lost to wolves from the total 10,000. The area where these animals were lost had pretty severe terrain and no radio-collared wolves, so it was tough to know what was going on. The attack came completely out of the blue as wolf activity had not been noted in the area prior to the attack. The reaction of

the producer was exactly the kind for which we aim. He didn't call for lethal control but instead called us for advice and

to assess what non-lethal tools could be applied. He brought in an overnight guard and added extra guard dogs. We developed a plan for him to incorporate turbo-fladry when his lambs had been weaned and moved on.

Turbo-fladry is just one of the advancements in livestock protection that has come about from combining new technology to an old issue. By electrifying a fladry fence with the use of a portable solar charger, overnight penning has become possible to keep animals safe without the need to bring them back to farmsteads every evening. This portable system fits nicely with the shepherds and guard dogs, who also travel through the rugged terrain with the grazing bands.

We don't have all the answers to livestock protection yet and we

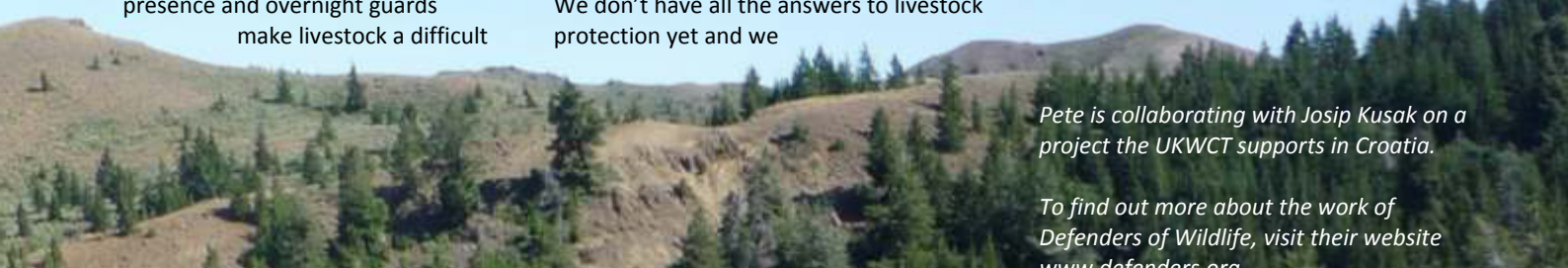
still struggle with protecting cattle; we lost three yearlings from a local wolf pack due to their claimed predation of a young calf. It's hard to protect unattended animals that graze over huge distances. The introduction of longhorn cattle better adapted to protecting young, and the implementation of programmes using range riders to check on stock and add human presence to herds, are having some success for Defenders in Oregon.

It's hard to get people to work with you sometimes, especially those who hold extreme views. Even against such odds co-existence programmes offer an opportunity for assistance and collaboration with those who suffer from the presence of predators. By providing services, equipment and knowledge, the project takes the pressure off livestock producers and helps to reduce conflict. People need time to adjust to the presence of wolves on the landscape again but with programmes such as this one, compensation schemes and educational outreach, the process is being helped on its way. The situation is tough out in the North West with a great deal of opposition and legislation changes potentially hampering one of the world's greatest reintroduction success stories. Wolves in the Northern Rockies are, however, here to stay – they have a foothold and with the fantastic work of projects such as this one I have no doubt of their continued survival.

*Pete Haswell
BSc Hons Environmental Science
(Biodiversity and Conservation)*

Pete is collaborating with Josip Kusak on a project the UKWCT supports in Croatia.

To find out more about the work of Defenders of Wildlife, visit their website www.defenders.org



*Main picture: Pete howls to the wolves
Left: Sheep in a fladry night corral
Below: A wolf-tracker's kit*



Photo: Dr Brad