

Life and behaviour of wolve

Sandra Benson - Deputy Senior Wolf Handler (UKWCT)

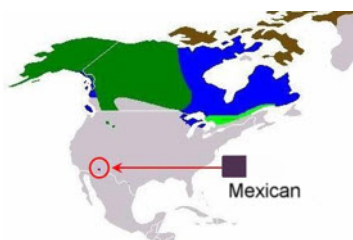


Photo: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The Mexican wolf or lobo as it is known in Mexico, is one of the smallest subspecies of the grey wolf, and is also the southernmost in its range, which overlaps with the red wolf (*canis rufus*). Sadly both of these animals have come perilously close to extinction. This subspecies of the grey wolf is believed to be the rarest mammal in North America and one of the most endangered in the world.

Historial Range

It was originally found in the foothills and mountainous areas of central and north Mexico (3,000 - 12,000 feet), the Sonora and Chihuahua deserts, and into South East Arizona, South New Mexico and South West Texas. This area is mostly dry, chaparral



scrub, although the higher elevations are forested with spruce and fir. The Mexican wolf will cross these desert areas but not live in them.

Physical Characteristics

Adult Mexican wolves range in weight from 65 - 85 lbs (27 - 37 kilos), are approximately 4.5 - 5.5 feet from nose tip to end of the tail, and on average are 28 - 32 inches to shoulder.

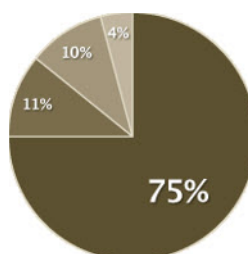
Their coat varies in colour from reddish brown to buff and white, with red and white faces. The coat is shorter and more adapted to warmer climates, and their ears are more pointed than the rest of the grey wolves, making them look more similar to their cousin the coyote.

Diet

As with all wolves, their main prey is ungulates, Coues white tailed deer, javelina, antelope, pronghorn and elk, as well as smaller mammals like rabbits. Wolves are opportunistic and can and do sometimes kill livestock. At the turn of the 20th century, reduction of their natural prey caused wolves to begin attacking domestic livestock, and this led to government agencies and private individuals endorsing eradication of the wolf.

Intensive monitoring shows that elk are the most common prey. The chart below gives the estimated diet of wolves in the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area based on diet analysis:

- Elk: 75%
- Small Mammals/Unknown: 11%
- Deer: 10%
- Livestock: 4%



Pack Size

The Mexican grey wolf lives in small packs usually consisting of a breeding pair and their offspring from the previous year. The pack size is smaller than most northern grey wolves as the prey is smaller in size. The adults usually mate for life and breeding takes place once a year between January and March, with a gestation period of 63 - 65 days, resulting in an average of four to six cubs which are born underground. They are born deaf, blind and defenceless.

Social Life

All wolves are social creatures and the Mexican wolf is the same, with the regular hierarchy from the alpha breeding pair to the omega at the bottom of the pack. Packs rarely encounter each other because of their intricate boundaries formed through scent marking and communication through howling. The pack hunts together and helps raise the young.

Downward turn of the Mexican Wolf

Between 1915 and 1926 Government federal wolf agents working in the Predatory Animal and Rodent Control Programme eliminated almost all of the wolf population in the Southwest.

By the 1940s there were a few Mexican wolves in remote parts of Arizona and New Mexico.

In the 1950s wolf control programmes began to decimate any hope of viable breeding populations, plus development of a deadly new poison, Compound 1080, in 1952, brought the Mexican wolf to near extinction in the Southwest.

Realisation

In 1976 the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) listed *Canis lupus baileyi* as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act of 1973; and in 1977 they hired a wolf trapper, Roy McBride, to live-trap as many Mexican wolves as he could find. He came back with five wolves from the Durango region of Mexico, and one was a pregnant female.

Mexican wolves in zoos at this time were from two bloodlines - Aragon (in Mexico City) and Ghost Ranch (in the US) and these five new wolves were desperately needed to strengthen and add diversity.

During 1979 the Mexican wolf was listed in Appendix II (strictly protected species) of the Bern Convention on Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats.

Kingdom:	Animalia
Phylum:	Chordata
Class:	Mammalia
Order:	Carnivora
Family:	Canidae
Genus:	Canis
Species:	Grey wolf (<i>Canis lupus</i>)
Sub Species:	Maxican wolf (<i>Canis lupus baileyi</i>)
Conservation Status:	Critically endangered (UICN 3.1)

es: *the mexican wolf*

Between 1915 and 1926 Government federal wolf agents working in the Predatory Animal and Rodent Control Programme eliminated almost all of the wolf population in the Southwest.

Start of the Recovery Plan

In 1979 the (USFWS) created a Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan and Team. This was intended to establish a captive breeding programme with a goal to establish self sustaining populations in the wild, in its original range in the mountains of South Arizona and New Mexico. Although little seemed to be happening quickly, advocacy and educational programmes were being prepared by various groups.

In 1980 the Wild Canid Survival and Research Centre started working with the recovery programme and received its first breeding pair of Mexican wolves from the Rio Grande Zoo in Albuquerque, New Mexico.



Photo: Wild Canid Survival and Research Center

In 1982 the Recovery Plan was signed by US and Mexican officials, but progress was slow and by 1986 several wolf groups began increasing pressure on the USFWS by asking which three states were going to produce suitable land for the reintroduction.

Texas felt that there was nowhere on their land that was suitable. Arizona proposed 15 suitable sites and New Mexico offered White Sands, an area used by the army as a missile practise range. In 1987 an army commander said no and it looked like the reintroduction plan had failed.

Wolf advocates regrouped to form the Mexican Wolf Coalition, which sued the US Department of Interior and the Department of Defence. Key players were: Defenders of Wildlife, the Sierra Club, and PAWS (Preserve Arizona's Wolves), who raised thousands of dollars and provided public information.

The army and UFWFS changed their minds again

In 1991 the International Union for Conservation of Nature, urged that the Mexican Recovery programme should be given priority over all other wolf projects and captive wolves were paired for maximum breeding potential. Most of this work was done in zoos, none of which were federally owned, operated or supported.

By 1993 only 53 were in captivity, in 14 zoos' breeding programmes. It was felt 200 - 300 were needed to safeguard the subspecies from extinction and to provide stock for future reintroduction.

In March 1998 the USFWS, the Arizona Game and Fish Department and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, began the first reintroduction release of eleven Mexican wolves - three adult males, three adult females, three female cubs and yearlings and two male cubs. Sadly it was not a story with a happy ending. The wolves were not born to this environment. The Blue Range site has

many roads crossing it, and cattle men still held permits to drive cattle on the land. In addition they were released on land that was open to public hunting. Within a year none had survived.

Undaunted the release continued with three more released into the Apache Sitgreaves National Forest in March 1999, and the following summer another 19 were released.

In June 2001 a panel of researchers headed by Canadian Paul Paquer produced an 80 page report which was part of the Recovery Plan. It recommended:

1. Wolf managers should be free to release wolves direct to Arizona's side of the site
2. Ranchers with cattle should remove any dead cow carcasses

In May 2004 the New Mexico Game Commission finally endorsed the wolf restoration.

In spite of continued shooting, wolf numbers are rising. In 2004 there were between 50 - 60 in the wild of which half were wild-born, and also approximately 250 in captive breeding programmes. For a list of the breeding programmes/zoos, see website: http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/mexicanwolf/cap_manage.shtml

A population count by the Interagency Field Team in winter of 2006 - 2007 estimated 60 wolves in the recovery area.

In June 2008 this same team relocated a pair of Mexican wolves into the recovery site at Gila Wilderness. The adult female (1028) and male (1008) came from Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge breeding programme.

Tragically the killing continues. In July the Arizona Republic reported that of nine wolves that died in 2008, at least three were killed illegally. The USFWS identified three female and possibly a male were shot; each was an alpha.

This still occurred after a government census of wolf population in January 2008 found only 52 wolves and just three breeding pairs. In addition, wolves can be legally shot if involved in three or more livestock depredation incidents in a year, but this must be confirmed as wolf kill.

Greta Anderson of the Western Watersheds Project in Tucson writes:

"The public strongly support the restoration but it is not resonating with the government".

Michael Robinson of the Centre for Biological Diversity in New Mexico agrees, "The USFWS should pledge that for every wolf illegally killed, two more will be released in its place". He also feels ranchers can do a better job of preventing conflict through removing dead cows.

Terry Johnson, an endangered species specialist for the Arizona Game and Fish Dept chairs the Adaptive Management Oversight Committee made up of six agencies who meet quarterly, their last meeting on the 30th July.

He feels it is time to put wolf recovery back on track with a rethink of strategy.

The battle to keep the Mexican wolf in the wild continues, and it will not be an easy one to win, but *Canis lupus baileyi* has many supporters who are determined the Mexican wolf is here to stay.

Information sourced from:

www.mexicanwolfeis.org
www.wildcanidcenter.org
www.fws.gov/southwest/es/mexicanwolf/
Return of the wolf - Steve Grooms

Editor's note - Sandra has volunteered at the UKWCT for many years and is a Deputy Senior Handler. She also organises the weekday volunteer rota and along with other vital roles edits "Howls and Growls", the volunteers' newsletter.