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# PREDATOR OR PREY?

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CASTLE

21 COMMENTS


## BEHIND WILDLIFE SERVICES' MONTANA KILL REPORT

Early in September 2012, wolves from the so-called Benchmark pack killed a calf on

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Wolves in the Bob Marshall Wilderness for illustrative purposes only. Photo by Jesse Varnado.

private land near Smith Creek southwest of Augusta, Montana.

The owner contacted Wildlife Services, the innocuously named branch of the United States Department of Agriculture that exists to disburse, relocate or kill (but mostly kill) wild animals deemed to be problems. According to a field report obtained as part of a Freedom of Information request, one of the agency's investigators arrived on the scene and saw wolves feeding on the dead calf. So he shot and killed an adult and a pup.

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks issued the rancher a "shoot on sight" permit in case any of the wolves returned. But, the reports say, the pack managed to kill another calf by October 9.

One of the female wolves in the pack was wearing a radio collar. So when the Wildlife

Services sharpshooter arrived this time, he checked to see where she was.

She was only about a mile away, so he used an electronic wolf call to bring in the pack. The report says several wolves “were heard in response.” Soon after, he shot an adult male.

But the killing was just getting started. FWP authorized Wildlife Services to “remove” up to half the pack and a couple weeks later Wildlife Services staff shot another Benchmark wolf in nearby Blubber Creek. A couple days later, on October 31, they killed three wolf pups.

Email chains between Wildlife Services and FWP suggest they were only planning to kill one more wolf in “the current action.” But on December 15, 2012, a Wildlife Services investigator responded to a call, confirmed that wolves had killed a cow in Smith Creek and decided it had probably killed another nearby.

Before the end of the year, an FWP wolf-management specialist sent this email to federal and state parties of interest: “Due to chronic livestock depredations by the Benchmark pack, Wildlife Services will be attempting to complete a full pack removal control action.”

Officials estimated seven wolves remained in the Benchmark pack, at least three of which were adults. So just after the new year, a Wildlife Services hunter hopped in a helicopter and gunned six of them down in one day.

A single wolf managed to evade hunters for about three weeks before it too was spotted and shot from the air.

By January 22, 2013, the entire Benchmark pack was dead.

## **WILDLIFE SERVICES**

This is an excerpt from an email between Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks' and Wildlife Services' officials after the Benchmark pack was exterminated southwest of Augusta in January 2013.

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That is just the tiniest fraction of the killing Wildlife Services does every year in the United States, mainly in the name of protecting agricultural production, but also to protect property, public health and natural resources. According to the agency's website, its mission is to "provide Federal leadership and expertise to resolve wildlife conflicts to allow people and wildlife to coexist."

But Wildlife Services, which falls under the umbrella of the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years as whistleblowers have gone public with damning accounts about the nature of those "other activities."

What are they saying? That agency personnel indiscriminately kill millions of wild animals every year, accidentally trap or poison thousands of untargeted animals both wild and domesticated, bury mistakes when no one is looking and intentionally make internal operations opaque.

The heat has led to a congressional investigation spearheaded by Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Oregon) and ongoing information campaigns by wildlife-advocacy groups like Predator Defense.

"I'll be blunt," said Predator Defense president Brooks Fahy in a recent phone interview. "It's a criminal enterprise. My dealing with Wildlife Services in the

American west is that you have people that fabricate, who will do and say whatever they have to in order to get away with what they're doing."

Critics are quick to point to the case of a now-infamous Wildlife Services trapper from Wyoming named Jamie P. Olson, who didn't exactly help dispel rumors of agency personnel's cruelty when he posted pictures on his Facebook account in 2012 that showed his hunting dogs attacking a coyote he'd trapped.

A screen capture that made the rounds on the internet in 2012 after Wyoming-based Wildlife Services trapper Jamie P. Olson posted it and a few others like it on his personal Facebook page. In this pictures, Olson's hunting dogs are attacking a coyote that is caught in one of Olson's traps.

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Wildlife Services officials push back against this characterization of a rogue killing agency, pointing to the fact that they do sometimes use nonlethal methods and framing the killing as ugly but necessary work given increasing wildlife and human interactions.

Montana Wildlife Services State Director, John Steuber, wrote in a recent email interview, “Wildlife Services recognizes and respects that some people oppose killing animals; however, responsible wildlife damage management sometimes requires this action.”

So what is the scope of the killing?

Each year, the national Wildlife Services office releases a report titled “Table G. Animals Taken by Component/Method Type and Fate by Wildlife Services.” The most recent Table G was released in June and showed Wildlife Services killing some 4 million animals nationwide in 2013, up from about 3 million in 2012.

Most of the 4 million animals in 2013 were birds, like invasive European Starlings. But the rather unwieldy 2013 national report—it comes as an unsortable PDF—also showed the agency shooting, trapping and poisoning more than 75,000 coyotes, about 12,000 prairie dogs, 3,700 foxes, 419 black bears and 320 gray/timber wolves, just to name a few.

The report breaks the actions down by state, animal and method, but that’s as detailed as it gets. So you can use the report to find out that Wildlife Services killed 8,726 animals in Montana last year, but the report provides none of the other information curious citizens obviously want to know and which would be simple to include in a spreadsheet: why the specific animals were targeted and killed, where exactly it happened, when, which agent(s) did it and who, if anyone, contacted them to initiate the action.

Only Freedom of Information requests help you start to get a better idea of what happens on the ground in Montana. And even then, a lot of the field reports are extremely sparse or vague. You can learn which county and near which city an action occurred, but in all cases the names and addresses of the private citizens who initiated the publicly funded actions are redacted because FOI officers say privacy trumps the taxpayer’s right to know.

While everyone who owns any amount of livestock in Montana pays per capita fees

that contribute, in part, to Wildlife Services' budget, the redactions make it virtually impossible to figure out which operations public fees are subsidizing most.

## COYOTES

The vast majority of the animals targeted were coyotes, at 6,918. More than 4,000 were shot from helicopters or airplanes, but most of the others were trapped in leg or neck snares or poisoned using so-called M-44 cyanide capsules.

M-44s are spring-loaded devices placed in the ground and covered with a soft, scented material for bait. When animals—some wild, some domestic, even a few unlucky people who have been a little too curious—tug at the material, a dose of cyanide is ejected into their face.

Steuber said, “Field specialists focus management efforts on coyotes that are causing damage to property and livestock, threatening human health and safety and/or damaging natural resources.”

In February, the agency's peak month of actions against coyotes, Wildlife Service agents killed more than 2,800, or more than 100 per day. Those figures include 218 in Valley County, 176 in Big Horn, 135 in Glacier, 94 in Custer, 94 in Pondera, 93 in Lewis and Clark and 77 in Toole.

Several of the former Wildlife Services agents who have gone public in recent years say the killing is much more indiscriminate than officials try to make it sound.

An ex Montana Wildlife Services hunter/trapper named Carter Neimeyer, author of *Wolfer: A Memoir*, confirmed this in a recent phone interview.

“There are two kinds of control,” he said. “There is corrective, which is when there is a pair of coyotes that kill a specific sheep and you go target them. But then Montana has always done preventative control, which is basically preemptively killing coyotes because those coyotes might kill livestock and they've got the green light to do that through (private) landowner agreements and agreements with the U.S. Forest



Service and Bureau of Land Management.”

Neimeyer, who worked for Wildlife Services for 26 years, wasn’t surprised to hear that coyotes were most heavily targeted in February.

“A big part of the program was keeping the helicopter flying all winter,” he said, explaining that they did it in advance of lambing and calving season.

Steuber confirmed that his office maintains an airplane and a helicopter and sometimes uses two helicopters owned by the state or contracts another pilot and airplane. He said his office spent \$53,827 on airplane/helicopter fuel in 2013.

But some scientists, like the University of Montana professor and chief scientist for the Yellowstone Ecological Research Center in Bozeman, Dr. Robert Crabtree, say scientific data suggests the government’s preemptive tactics probably do very little to stop any bona fide cattle and sheep depredation and probably make things worse.

“There is little, if any, scientific basis to justify control (reduction) programs that indiscriminately target adult coyotes,” Crabtree wrote in [a letter to Wildlife Services](#).

The argument is fairly involved but boils down to a simple point: coyotes, like most mammals, have evolved to compensate for periods of high mortality.

Whenever a lot of them die, those that remain produce more and healthier pups. That’s why you can shoot and trap tens of thousands of coyotes a year and see the same amount or more the next. And that pattern isn’t disrupted unless you can kill off more than 70 percent of the population in a given year, which is basically impossible.

Or as Neimeyer put it: “Does it do any good? Probably in the long-term, no. We’ve persecuted them for a hundred years and they’ve expanded.”

FWP’s 2012-2013 seasonal [harvest report](#) for furbearers shows 20,131 coyotes were

taken by hunters and trappers. But it also says that number was about 50 percent higher than the 10-year average.

So, as the report notes, either the relatively stable number of these hunters and trappers suddenly got much better at killing coyotes or else coyote numbers have been increasing.

## **WOLVES**

Wildlife Services may have started the year off by wiping out the Benchmark pack, but that was just the beginning. According to a list received as part of the FOI request, they killed a total of 78 wolves in Montana in 2013.

Here's the county breakdown:

- Lewis and Clark: 14
- Lincoln: 10
- Madison: 10
- Beaverhead: 8
- Lake: 7
- Glacier: 6
- Granite: 5
- Sanders: 5
- Flathead: 4
- Jefferson: 4
- Missoula: 4
- Ravalli: 1

The Vigilante's FOI request also turned up 27 field reports that accounted for only 66 of the 78 wolves killed.

When asked why the reports didn't account for all the wolves, Steuber wrote, "The investigative reports do not require our experts to include information regarding how many predators may need to be or were removed. This information is communicated directly to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks via telephone call. The

primary purpose of the investigative reports is to provide official documentation to livestock producers for reimbursement purposes.”

In other words, Wildlife Services doesn’t write field reports for all the wolves it actually kills. When information about how an action played out does appear in the “action taken” portion of the investigative report, it’s only because the field agent chose to write it in—not because it’s a policy.

Predictably, the amount of information appearing in wolf depredation reports varies according to who filled them out.

For instance, take report 1405. The action took place in Wise River in 2013 on May 1, 2013. Under the heading “Type of Livestock/Property,” the investigator checked “cattle.” But in the section intended for tallying the number of confirmed cattle killed by wolves, he wrote “NA,” or Not Applicable. He also wrote NA in the sections for site description, carcass evidence and “estimated time since predation/damage,” because there had been none. But under “action taken,” he indicated that two wolves had been killed in an aerial hunt that day and concluded by writing “Ending control action per (investigative report) # 1401.”

The FOI officer confirmed in an email that she had turned over all documents received from the Montana office, but the FOI response didn’t include report 1401.

Another of the reports, 2505, referenced report 2504, which also didn’t come with the FOI response.

However, most of the reports indicate that the investigators showed up on the scene, found injured or dead calves or sheep, found bite marks and hemorrhaging consistent with wolf attacks and initiated actions that ranged from setting snares to aerial hunting.

Overall, the field reports turned over by Wildlife Services only account for at most 30 calves being killed by wolves in Montana in 2013 (at most because many of the notes didn’t confirm wolf predation but only said it was probable), seven sheep being

killed, an unknown number of cattle being harassed and a couple being injured in attacks.

But let's assume not everyone who loses cattle to predation contacts Wildlife Services. What percentage of cows are being killed by wolves?

A National Agricultural Statistics Service 2010 report (the last available) specific to cattle and calf predation showed a total of about 1,000 cattle and 4,200 calves being killed by all predators combined, 440 and 853 respectively by wolves. Another NASS report for that same year showed a total of 2.55 million cattle and calves eating their way across Montana ranges. That means half of one percent of all bovines were killed by wolves that year.

By contrast, almost 75,000 of them died of non-predator-related causes, things like respiratory diseases, digestion problems, mastitis or other injuries.

Neimeyer said the disproportionate reaction to wolf predation is nothing new.

“The politics haven't changed a bit. I refer to it in my book as wolf hysteria. The rural public was hypersensitive to talking about wolves being here and there, and, early on (after reintroduction), everything that tipped over and died, they would say, ‘It's wolves.’”

Livestock owners, who can get reimbursed when predators kill their animals, would get mad if, say, field agents decided wolves had simply found an already dying calf and eaten it. Neimeyer said some agents reflexively cite hemorrhaging around a bite mark as evidence that a wolf attacked and killed an animal, but that the hemorrhaging only proves that the animal was still alive when it was bitten. Necropsies, in his experience, usually undermined the attack scenario.

“There was tremendous amount of political pressure put on the investigator of livestock damage and you have to be a very strong-willed person to withstand the criticism that is going to be thrown your direction,” Neimeyer said.

In the short documentary *Exposed: USDA's Secret War on Wildlife*, a former Wyoming Wildlife Services trapper named Rex Shaddox explained it this way: “It created job security for us. It was very explicitly told to me that, if I pissed off my rancher and I made my rancher unhappy, then my livelihood was going to end.”

“So our record-keeping was doctored according to making the rancher happy so we could continue getting our government funding,” he added.

But some of the agency's record-keeping on Montana's wolves is so vague at this point that there might not even be any incentive to doctor reports.

For instance, the records request turned up a handful of reports for actions on Consolidated Salish and Kootenai Tribes land in which no stock was killed or injured. In most cases there are just vague notations like “N/A,” “No loss, cattle damage threat” or “producer saw wolf chasing yearlings.”

Between January and March of 2013, the Wildlife Services documentation shows no cattle killed on CSKT land, but agents snared and released one wolf and killed seven others.

## **BEARS AND MOUNTAIN LIONS**

In 2013, Wildlife Services personnel live-snared a 440-pound grizzly bear in Cut Bank that the investigator said killed two lambs and a calf. FWP relocated to the grizzly to the North Fork of the Flathead.

The agency also killed 14 black bears: four in Cascade County, two in Beaverhead, two in Gallatin, and one each in Carbon, Lewis and Clark, Park, Powell, Stillwater and Yellowstone Counties.

The list shows most were shot, but two were caught in foot snares. However, only eight of the kills were accounted for in investigative reports.

By in large, the reports for bear and mountain lion kills were more detailed than

those for wolves and one of the most comprehensive investigative reports from the whole batch regarded a black bear that was attacking sheep and lambs in Powell County in May 2013.

It appears that, during the night, a large boar crawled under a fence, ate two lambs, killed another, and injured one ewe. The next morning, the owner called Wildlife Services.

When the agent arrived, he and the landowner turned their attention to the injured ewe. A note on the report read, “We sewed it up and doctored it.”

The agent performed a necropsy on the dead lamb. It showed “large bite marks of 2 1/2 inches across the back.”

After finding where the bear had come and gone under the fence, he set out with his dogs to track it.

“We quickly picked up the bear’s scent and had it treed less than a 1/2 mile from the sheep. The bear was dispatched,” the report read. “I checked the bear’s stomach contents and it was full of lamb. The wool was quite evident and this is what happened to the 2 missing lambs.”

The agent contacted the local FWP warden, who told him to dispose of the carcass on site.

Another of that agent’s reports was similarly detailed, making it easy for an outsider to see the rationale behind the targeting of the bear. That case occurred in Lewis and Clark County in July of last year.

A small black bear attacked a herd of sheep bedded down on a ridge, attacking eight lambs and one sheep “over a fairly large area, one here, one there.” Three were still alive when the agent arrived and “had to be put down.”

“I found 1 small black bear track 6” in length,” the report reads. “All other tracks had

been wiped out by the sheep. We also picked this bear up on the game camera the following night, but I didn't catch him."

From the necropsy: "The bite marks of the bear measured 2 1/4 inches in diameter. All the sheep had been bit on the neck, and some of them were bitten on the back. Two had been swatted on the side leaving a large hemorrhage. Two of the sheep had their udders eaten, but none were heavily fed on."

The agent set a culvert trap and a pair of foot snares but missed the bear the first night. He and another agent caught and killed the bear a couple days later.

They pulled one of its teeth and matched it to the bite marks on one of the dead sheep and disposed of the carcass on site.

Other reports weren't so detailed, but showed that other bears were killed for destroying beehives, and killing lamas, goats, sheep and lambs. In some cases, agents sat up with night-vision goggles in order to shoot the bears when they returned.

Wildlife Services killed 15 cougars in 2013: five in Lake County, three in Flathead, two in Stillwater, two in Sanders and one each in Lewis and Clark, Carbon, Powell Counties. Only seven of the 15 were accounted for in reports.

In most of the reports, lions had killed sheep, but there was one instance in Flathead County where a lion killed a horse and one in St. Ignatius where a lion killed a rancher's dog by biting its neck.

That report said a tribal warden put the dog's body in the back of a vehicle by the house and that the lion followed the drag marks and paced around the vehicle looking for a way in. Wildlife Services set foothold snares and trapped and killed the lion within two days.

In another instance, a woman was walking a puppy down a gravel driveway in Red Lodge and a trail camera captured video of a lion charging at her and veering off just

a few feet away.

An FWP warden contacted Wildlife Services to help capture the lion. They set some neck snares around the carcass of a road-killed deer and snared a large female lion a few days later.

The notes show the lion had “considerable leg damage from previous injury not capture-related.”

One report showed agents set out neck snares on CSKT tribal land to catch a wolf. There had been no reported damage to livestock, and the snares didn’t catch a wolf. What they caught were two lions. One was dead. The other was alive and they released it. But the agency’s statistical list shows all the lions killed were intentional targets—which simply isn’t true, according to the field report.

## **OTHER ANIMALS AND STATS**

What other animals were killed? Badgers, deer, doves, ducks, geese, gulls, hares, larks, marmots, partridges, pigeons, black-tailed prairie dogs, raccoons, ravens, turkey vultures, striped skunks, a couple porcupines (one unintentionally), a weasel, a feral dog, a rough-legged hawk.

A few species stand out:

- Richardson’s ground squirrels: 638, all in Cascade County, most of which were shot, 2 of which were snared.
- European starlings: 257, the vast majority in Beaverhead County and a handful in Cascade.
- Red foxes: 217 of which were caught in neck snares or foothold traps, 128 of which were caught in Garfield County, 23 of which were killed by M-44 cyanide capsules in counties across the state.

It is also worth noting that 3,241 total animals were shot from helicopters, 1,009 from airplanes.



Meanwhile, 962 total animals were killed by neck snare, 577 with M-44s and 284 by foothold trap.

Which counties saw the highest overall numbers of Wildlife Services kills in 2013?

- Cascade: 946, mostly ground squirrels
- Blaine: 757, mostly coyotes
- Beaverhead: 606, mostly coyotes and starlings
- Big Horn: 560, mostly coyotes but also 124 rock pigeons
- Valley: 430, all coyotes
- Custer: 403, mostly coyotes
- Garfield: 503, mostly coyotes but a significant number of red foxes
- Prairie: 335, almost all coyotes and 5 foxes
- Toole: 239, all coyotes, more than 50 percent of which were via M-44 cyanide
- Lewis and Clark: 233, mostly coyotes but a significant number of wolves
- Pondera: 215, all coyotes
- Madison: 211, mostly coyotes
- Meagher: 186, mostly coyotes
- Lake: 129, mostly ravens
- Gallatin: 125, mostly coyotes

## THE MONEY

Wildlife Services is funded through a combination of federal money, a portion of per capita state livestock fees and through its “cooperators” program, which is money given to them directly by various organizations and interested parties.

A list of cooperators obtained through the FOI request showed the following cooperators among those giving in 2013:

- Malstrom Airforce Base in Great Falls: \$177,170.79
- Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation: \$25,000
- National Park Service (for Bighorn Canyon): \$4,773.24
- Bureau of Reclamation: \$2,677.80
- City of Billings: \$2,156.13

- Flathead Municipality: \$1,966.42
- Bert Mooney Airport: \$1,078.00

Fourteen other private cooperator's names were redacted in the FOI response under the auspice that releasing their names was an invasion of privacy.

Malstrom Public Affairs Officer Joshua Aycock said he didn't have information about the money but would track it down. He did not give a response by press time.

According to a Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation's Vice President of Lands and Conservation, Blake Henning, the foundation gave even more—\$51,000—to Wildlife Services in 2012.

"All that has been basically for wolf management and implementation, mostly collaring," he said.

The investigative reports Wildlife Services turned over suggest only a tiny fraction of the Montana office's responses to wolves actually result in collaring and releasing.

When asked what he might tell people who support elk conservation programs but also find Wildlife Services' methods to be troubling, Henning said, "I know some people don't like them and don't like their means and their tactics, but it's a federal agency ... and our belief is, where their activities are sanctioned by Fish, Wildlife and Parks—our state wolf-management plan in this case—some of those actions they take are needed out there."

Not everyone in Montana conservation circles agrees. Some want to see the agency completely defunded so long as that money is being used for lethal predator control.

"There is no reason taxpayers should continue to pay for killing predators," said Mike Garrity, director of Alliance for the Wild Rockies. "It is very ineffective, has lots of unintended consequences and costs hundreds of millions of dollars every year. Predators are an important part of a healthy ecosystem. It is time we realize this and that public lands belong to all Americans, not just ranchers."

But Brooks Fahy of Predator Defense, the organization leading the charge in the fight to defund Wildlife Services, said despite the increasing pressure from outside, despite damning exposés in the news, scientific data challenging the validity of much of the agency’s tactics and congressional attempts to expose what’s going on behind the agency’s curtain, he’s not confident anything will ever change.

“I call it the Teflon Agency, because no matter what we dig up and no matter how bad it is, they’ll escape,” Fahy said. “I’ve been after this agency for 38 years and in that time it has actually gotten worse.”

## **COMMENTS**