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### **Eye on the Environment: Swan Valley Wolf Update**

By Jessica Lund for The Seeley-Swan Pathfinder

Many people have reported seeing wolves in the Swan Valley this winter. Whether or not you have seen or heard a wolf over the course of this past year, you have undoubtedly heard of someone who has. The fact that wolves have been increasing in numbers across northwest Montana is true.

Wolves have long held an emotional power over humans. Whether they strike fear, or excitement in your heart, everyone is entitled to their own opinion about wolves. Many people are led to believe that wolves are viscous man killers that howl at the moon and are driven to frenzy by the smell of blood. Others believe that wolves hunt only the sick and old, and never kill in abundance. Many people are concerned that wolves will decimate entire herds of elk and deer. Whatever your notions of the wolf, there are some facts that are undisputed and agreed upon by researchers, native peoples and folklore...

There are several distinct features to look for when identifying a wolf. Wolves average 2.5 feet in height, are between 5 and 6 feet in length and weigh between 80 and 100 pounds. Wolves have a broad snout and round ears.

The wolf, *canis lupis*, is a born hunter. Its most notorious trait is the long legs, which can easily carry a wolf upwards of 20 miles in a single day. Wolves are capable of following prey for miles before accelerating to speeds of 40 miles/hour in the final chase.

With jaws capable of creating 1,500 pounds/square inch (compared to about 750 pounds/square inch for a German Shepherd) the wolf's mouth is its second most valuable hunting tool.

Wolves can survive on 3.7 pounds of food per day. However, the digestive tract of a wolf is set up for a feast or famine lifestyle, as wolves will regularly go upwards of 10 days without food, only to gorge themselves on 20 pounds of food in a single meal.

Wolves prey on small rodents such as vole, mice, hares, beaver as well as deer, elk, and occasionally moose.

Wolves are noted for their distinct, thick coats ranging from white to grey to black. As most already know, wolves often travel in packs though not typically in large packs of 30 or more as some tales have told. Packs average 4 to 8 in size particularly in the winter months.

One of the most fascinating traits of wolf populations is the social structure and variable communication styles. Pack structure and dynamics shift through the seasons. Packs often split apart, and come back together on a daily basis in order to facilitate travel and hunting. This can create an impression of more wolves being in an area than there are.

Wolves have been known to howl in order to locate one another. Other times, wolves have been recorded howling after a kill, and during times of rest. Wolves are specifically noted for harmonizing while howling.

Wolves typically mate in February and March and birth in mid April. Litters range in size from one to thirteen, with four to six pups being the average. Pups are weaned at five weeks of age. Mortality rates for wolf pups is around 60 percent due to many things including, scarcity of food, disease, fights, and predators such as eagle, lynx, and bear.

Wolves are particularly territorial during the breeding season, and have been known to attack dogs. Biologists suggest keeping dogs close to you when hiking in wolf territory.

Wolves are typically shy and generally avoid interaction with humans. However, like all wild animals they can lose their fear and become habituated to living around humans. Humans do not pose a territorial threat to wolves, and are not considered a food source.

To avoid wolf encounters, there are a few simple tips to follow, similar to that of living with bears. First and foremost is that you should not feed wolves. Feed household pets inside and do not store food outdoors. Don't leave pets unattended outside, as dogs and cats are easy prey for wolves. If you are concerned about outside pets, install motion sensor lights to scare wolves away if they approach too close to the house.

According to Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks wolf management specialist Kent Laudon, wolf numbers have seen a marked increase across the region in the last year. Packs in Northwest Montana have increased in density from 19 last year to 31 confirmed packs this year. Among the newly established packs in Montana, a new pack has officially been identified in the Swan Valley. This new pack consists of 4 wolves of unknown age and gender.

Biologists keep track of wolf populations and habits in a variety of ways. Substantial information is garnered from hunter check stations, as well as lion hunter reports each year. Biologists radio collar as many wolves as possible each year in order to track the distribution and movement of wolves across the landscape. Radio collared wolves provide the base of information on which biologists determine pack ranges and population changes.

Wolves are currently protected by the federal law under the Endangered Species Act. If you believe that you have seen a wolf, please report any sightings to the MT Fish Wildlife and Parks (<http://fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/wolf>), or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at (406) 449-5225.

While I cannot say why there are not more wolves currently living in the Swan Valley, I am thrilled to welcome the new pack to this place I call home. I am sure that the wolf has carefully chosen this place to roam, much as I have. The needs of people and animals are often the same; we both need places with open space. Places where we can provide for our families and live in security and peace with our neighbors.

As Barry Lopez wrote in Of Wolves and Men “what wolves do excites men and precipitates strong emotions.” Undoubtedly, you too will feel strong emotions at the thought of a wolf pack living in your neighborhood. Regardless of your personal opinions I encourage you to be still and listen for the voice of the wolf across the night sky. Maybe you will hear something of the truth, maybe you will hear the haunting sound of a creature born, as you were born, to survive. Maybe you will feel, the power of diversity, the power of relationships, the power of the wild...