

# The Outside Story



## Northeastern Wolves: Then and Now

**By: Susan Shea**

On a moonlit night two hundred years ago, a dog-shaped shadow slipped through the Vermont woods. The large, shaggy canid emerged onto a hilltop pasture, raised its muzzle, and howled – a deep, throaty howl that reverberated through the hills. A chorus of wolves responded.

Wolves were common in the Northeast and most of the U.S. when European settlers arrived. And it didn't take long for the settlers, who were steeped in folklore that portrayed wolves as evil, to wage war. Towns enacted bounties, to which livestock owners were legally bound to contribute, for every dead wolf brought in. In 1657, New Haven, Connecticut, offered five pounds to anyone who

could kill “one great black wolfe of a more than ordinaire bigness which is like to be more feirce and bould than the rest, and so occasions more hurt.”

Although eastern wolves preyed mostly on deer and beaver before European settlers arrived, as the forests were cut and wildlife disappeared, the wolves were forced to rely more on livestock like sheep. Thanks to the abundance of this easier prey, wolf populations may have actually increased for a time.

In addition to livestock protection, some sought to eliminate wolves because they symbolized wilderness. When colonists arrived, “the whole continent was one dismal wilderness, the haunt of wolves and bears and more savage men,” wrote John Adams in 1756. The settlers' energies were devoted to vanquishing the wilderness, using its abundant resources, and creating a pastoral landscape of farms and villages.

All these efforts to eradicate wolves eventually succeeded. The wolf disappeared from most of southern New England by the end of the eighteenth century, but hung on in parts of Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, and the Berkshires until the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. The same process played out nationwide, as wolves were reduced to five percent of their original range in the lower 48 states.

Today, we have a more enlightened view of the role predators play in the landscape. Endangered species protection has allowed wolf populations to recover in the Great Lakes states. Canadian wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone and they naturally recolonized some Rocky Mountain states. Populations in these places are now stable or increasing.

Will wolves ever return to the Northeast? A 2011 report prepared for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concluded that parts of our region, such as northern Maine and the Adirondack Park, have suitable wolf habitat with sufficient prey. However, proposals in the 1990s to reintroduce wolves in Maine were controversial, said Walter Jakubas, mammal group leader with the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. People were concerned that wolves would frequent residential areas where deer densities were high.

According to Jakubas, the movement to reintroduce wolves also lost momentum when genetic analyses of eastern coyotes revealed a significant percentage of wolf genes. Coyotes had interbred with wolves in Canada on their migration from west to east, and it seemed likely that they would hybridize with reintroduced wolves. A survey showed the majority of Maine residents preferred to let wolves come back on their own.

If wolves do come back to our region, that's likely how it will happen. A wolf was killed in the Adirondacks in 2001 and two were shot in northern Vermont in 1998 and 2006. Scientists concluded that all three were wild. Several wolves have been killed in Maine, said Jakubas, but based on their tame behavior, or hair analysis indicating they had fed on corn (probably dogfood) or were of Alaskan origin, they were determined to be captive wolves that had been released. Jakubas has seen intriguing game camera photos of wolf-like animals and large canid tracks and believes Canadian wolves occasionally come into Maine. However, in his opinion, the likelihood of wolves establishing a breeding population there is "not impossible, but very low."

The closest source population of wolves is in Quebec's Laurentide Reserve, 75 miles from the Maine border. Ontario's Algonquin Park, about 200 miles northwest of the Adirondacks, supports

another wolf population. Still, there's a lot working against a southerly migration. The St. Lawrence River, now kept ice-free in winter for ships, presents a major barrier. If an animal were to cross the river, it might not survive the journey through southern Quebec, with its strong tradition of hunting and trapping. Once across the border, liberal coyote hunting seasons in the northeastern states would be another obstacle. Although wolves are protected as a federally endangered species here, hunters could easily mistake them for coyotes.

This is not to say it won't happen, though. If wolves are like their adaptable coyote cousins, which have survived and thrived despite centuries of human persecution, they may yet surprise us.

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