

Aimee Lyn Eaton



# Collared

*Politics and Personalities in Oregon's Wolf Country*

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**Aimee Lyn Eaton**

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For Mike



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# Introduction

On the last Thursday in April 2012, the Wallowa County Chamber of Commerce hosted a community meeting titled Wolves II: Know the Facts. Perhaps due to the weather, which was cold, blustery, and threatening snow, or perhaps because it was a school night and also calving season, the meeting failed to gather the standing-room-only crowds for which the region and topic have become known. Instead a small group comprising mostly families complete with grandparents and children spread across the back rows of the chamber's business center.

After a flag salute for which all the attendees stood, covered their hearts, and recited the Pledge of Allegiance, Fred Steen moved to the front of the room. He stood with feet shoulder-width apart, hands clasped behind his back, handgun holstered at his side. Steen is not a wildlife biologist. He is not a rancher. He did not have a PowerPoint presentation or any handouts. Yet he talked about wolves and their impact within the county for almost an hour. He was at attention the entire time. He is the Wallowa County sheriff.

"A number of livestock producers were dissatisfied with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife," said Steen. "The cattlemen felt their needs and issues were not being represented and they were upset. I was approached in 2010 by a few different producers and asked to assist with management and issues of potential depredation. After considering the situation, the

sheriff's office decided wolves are a public concern, and this is an issue of keeping the peace."

Following that decision, Steen and his office began to treat any potential wolf activity as criminal. "We set up a method by which when there was a suspected depredation the livestock producer had the option of calling the sheriff, USDA Wildlife Services, or ODFW [Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife]. The goal was to create a specific and directed protocol," said Steen. "We go in and let the evidence take us where it will, and we maintain control of that evidence whatever it may be. We make sure carcasses are properly handled and frozen and retain possible genetic material for the labs to analyze."

Speaking to the group, Steen recalled a phone conversation from early in the month with a woman who suspected a wolf had been on her property and wished to file a police report, a common and encouraged move. She had let her five-year-old son and their malamute out to play in the yard, said Steen. Fifteen minutes later the boy came back into the house visibly shaken and upset, telling his mother there was a monster near the house, and the dog had run off. The woman sat her young son down and showed him a variety of images depicting coyotes, dogs, and wolves in the wild. The boy pointed to an image of a wolf. Steen took the woman's statement and filed it in his office alongside the dozens of other wolf-related reports that had been recorded in the last two years. In the case against wolves, the more documented information the better, said Steen.

Five-year-olds identifying monsters seen at more than fifty yards, dead cows being cordoned off in fields and their remains stuffed in cold storage, samples of potential wolf DNA being sent to university forensic labs: from an outside perspective this can seem like hysteria. From within, however, it is all too common.

For hundreds of years humans have been afraid of wolves. They've feared being attacked in the night, their children being dragged off, their livestock eaten. They've imagined wolves as the devil's dogs, eyes glowing yellow, teeth dripping as they guard the gates of hell. They've told their children



stories of the Big Bad Wolf who ate Grandma, the wolf who will huff and puff and blow the house down, and the wolf in sheep's clothing. The resulting historical manifestation of these caricatures was the widespread hunting and killing of wolves throughout much of Europe during the Middle Ages and in the United States as the New World was populated by Europeans.

There is little doubt that American colonists brought their stigma against wolves with them into the new territories. As wolves killed domestic animals important to human survival, conflict between early settlers and wolves became unavoidable. The first official wolf bounty was set in 1630 in Plymouth Colony. Other bounties followed and within the century, wolves had been exterminated from New England. As settlers expanded westward they furthered their attempts to remove wolves from the landscape; however, the gross number of wolves outpaced the number of successful hunts, and for more than two hundred years wolves continued to roam across undeveloped and developing landscapes. Then in 1913, after pioneers in the western territories had filed numerous and ongoing complaints with the federal government about livestock losses due to animal attacks, Congress delegated all predator control to the US government under the Division of Predator and Rodent Control. The mandate placed wolves officially on the US government's most-wanted list, and federally employed hunters were paid to track, kill, and eradicate the species.

At the time of the ruling's enactment wolves were found throughout Oregon. Packs covered territory to the east and west of the Cascade Range and from the Washington to California borders, but once predator control received official sanction, it took just thirty-three years for every last wolf in the state to be found and killed. The eradication lasted until 1999, when the recovery of wolves in Oregon was prompted by the enactment of the Endangered Species Act and the development of active management programs for wolves within specified regions of the continental United States.

The first wolf to reenter Oregon was originally part of a population of gray wolves reintroduced into Idaho from Canada by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). After only a few weeks, Oregon decided it was not

ready to take on management of the species and deported the young wolf back to Idaho via helicopter. The move was later discovered to be in violation of the Endangered Species Act, but at the time the understanding of wolf management in the West was still in its infancy. In the years since that first incident, wolves have been allowed to return to Oregon. Yet that allowance has remained a subject of great debate and contention.

The almost innate fear of wolves cultivated during the Middle Ages still exists in many communities, especially those heavily dependent on livestock production like the small ranching towns in the northeast corner of the state. In these areas conflict between wolves and humans arose during the early stages of wolf reestablishment and has yet to abate. Disagreements regarding management coupled with changes to wolves' federal protection status have sparked widespread confusion about who, if anyone, is in charge of wolves within the state. "Liberal environmentalists" have squared off against "conservative ranchers" and both sides have stooped to name-calling and finger-pointing in efforts to get their points across.

Livestock producers have been issued shoot-to-kill permits to protect their livestock, while at the same time Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) officials have had their ability to control problem wolves through lethal measures revoked by the State Court of Appeals. The state's wolf management plan has been continually critiqued, reevaluated, and ignored. Wolves have been removed from federal protection in the only areas of the state they inhabit. They have been fitted with radio collars for tracking purposes, caught in leg traps, tranquilized with darts shot from helicopters, shocked with electric currents, subjected to deterrent hazing measures, and killed outright. Yet still the wolf population grows.

At the close of 2012, state officials counted seven distinct wolf packs in Oregon, totaling at least fifty-three wolves. Most of these animals are rarely seen by humans, but ODFW biologists have seen their prints in the mud and their scat on the trails. They've heard them howling at night and have succeeded in recording the yips of pups and the deeper baritones of adults. In an effort to keep better tabs on the population, state biologists have

attempted to place radio or GPS collars on an animal or two from each known pack. Using information downloaded from the collars, managers have found that wolves generally range over low-elevation private lands during the winter and spring—a time that coincides with cattle being held at home and calving season—and over higher-elevation public lands during the summer, when cattle are put out to graze. The ODFW has shared this information with the ranching community and has incorporated new technologies to alert livestock producers about when wolves are in close proximity to grazing lands. This information sharing has been good for relations but has done little to reduce fear.

Between May 5, 2010, and September 1, 2012, the ODFW confirmed twenty-nine livestock deaths that were attributable to wolves. These weren't simple, clean kills. The carcasses of young calves and postpartum cows were found ripped to shreds on private lands, their bodies half consumed. The loss of these domestic animals represents real economic hardship for ranching families that have long supported their communities, and the trickle-down effect can be seen in the number of small businesses and townspeople who are increasingly vocal in their opposition to wolves.

In the same meeting at which Sheriff Fred Steen spoke about treating livestock depredations as crime scenes, the chamber's executive director, Vicki Searles, said, "You would be hard-pressed to find someone in support of wolves in Wallowa County. There are a few of them out there, but they're closeted. It's the ranchers who support this area, and to come out for wolves is to come out against your neighbors. In a community as tight-knit as Wallowa not many people are willing to do that."

The same cannot be said for many of the areas west of the Cascade Range. In Lane, Marion, and Multnomah counties, where the majority of the state's population lives, support for wolves is much easier to find. Regional conservation groups have mobilized the public around reestablishment of wolves, providing opportunities for schoolchildren to participate in art projects about wolves and creating competitions to give the animals names that are more personable than the letter-number combinations used by

the state. Many of these same groups have banded together to take the state of Oregon to court over its management of wolves, claiming the 2005 wolf conservation and management plan developed by the ODFW in collaboration with numerous different stakeholder groups violates the state's endangered species law and therefore renders the plan void.

"We feel that the problem is the management and the community, not the wolves," says Nick Cady, a lawyer for Cascadia Wildlands, a group based in Eugene, Oregon, that is one of the three involved in the lawsuit. "We are looking to create incentives to encourage responsible ranching so that wolf populations may continue to grow and distribute throughout Oregon."

The majority of Oregonians want to protect wolves, says Cady, and that's tentatively true. Ten years before wolves began to reestablish populations in the state, a 1999 poll of five hundred randomly selected Oregonians that was commissioned by the Oregon Natural Desert Association (ONDA) and paid for by ONDA, Defenders of Wildlife, the Oregon Natural Resources Council, and the Predator Defense Institute found that 70 percent of Oregonians supported the return of wolves to Oregon. What the poll didn't ask, and what Cady doesn't say, is at what cost?

The majority of Oregonians, including Cady, have never been out to Wallowa County. They haven't met the ranchers or attended the community meetings where fear of wolves seems to run as wild as the wolves themselves. Wolf sign has not been found on their property, and they haven't had to absorb the monetary loss that comes with the death of a livestock animal. This lack of intimacy isn't by itself a failing, but just as a misunderstanding of conservation goals and ethics may impact how ranching communities perceive those wishing to protect wolves, it has the potential to result in misinterpretations and unjust conclusions that may negatively impact overall recovery efforts.

While the population of wolves in Oregon may never realize the numbers seen in Idaho and Montana, where the estimated number of wolves has crept to 746 and 566, respectively, there is little doubt that wolves will gain a hold here. In Oregon the wolf population is currently only slightly greater

than the number of students in many urban classrooms, yet scientific models and agency predictions suggest the population will experience continued growth, with dispersal occurring across the state. This may be frightening on both sides of the debate. Those opposed to wolves see their continued growth as a pathway to potential economic ruin and loss of their livelihood and way of life. Those in favor fear the persecution and murder of wolves, and a continued loss of wildness.

When it comes down to it, when all the rhetoric is washed away and all the opinions and fears temporarily swept under the rug, wolves are wild animals, like mountain lions and bears, bobcats and coyotes. Just as the humans involved in the wolf debate deserve to be seen as individuals, not stereotypes, so do the wolves. They are not the boogeyman, or storybook monsters aiming to prey upon the young and old. They aren't cuddly pets or religious icons. They are *Canis lupus*. Wolves.

# Wolves in Oregon

“There will likely be something going on this week. Come on out.”

Famous last words.

It's 5:45 a.m. on the second to last Wednesday in May 2012, and I'm sitting in the parking lot of the Starbucks in La Grande, Oregon, waiting on a text message from the state's wolf coordinator, Russ Morgan. Morgan had invited me to make the seven-hour drive out from the Willamette Valley to the northeast corner of state this week because Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) researchers were actively trapping for wolves, and I'd asked to tag along during a radio-collaring operation. This is my third day of waiting, and after a couple of cold nights sleeping in the back of the truck, I'm impatient.

The message finally comes in at 8:15. It's two words: No wolves. I shake my head and crawl into the bed of the truck to try to get a little more sleep. Don't these animals know I'm trying to work?

No. No, they don't.

A week later, the ODFW has yet to trap a wolf. Instead of continuing to wait, Morgan has offered to take me into the field on an exploratory mission. I meet him at the eastern Oregon field office and begin loading backpacks and cameras into a white state-owned four-wheel-drive truck that we're taking for the day. Morgan places a box of gallon-sized Ziploc bags and an antenna

that looks like the bunny ears that once sat on almost every television in America into the backseat of the truck. I raise my eyebrows at the Ziplocs, but the bunny ears are no surprise.

Two months earlier Morgan had captured a male wolf from Oregon's Wenaha pack and fitted him with a radio collar and GPS locator. The wolf, named OR-12 because he was the twelfth wolf to be collared in Oregon, had then been released and the ODFW had used data downloaded from the collar to track his movements. After information was gathered for a month, a digital map of the Wenaha territory showed that OR-12 had been daily leaving and returning to a single origin point. On Morgan's computer screen the wolf's pattern resembled an asterisk. Morgan suspected the center of the star might be the den site for the Wenaha pack. Our plan was to head into the field to find out if his suspicion was correct.

By using the antennae to track OR-12's radio collar from the field, Morgan would be able to determine roughly where OR-12 was in relation to us, and to the suspected den site. The Ziplocs are for collecting scat samples. I ask about the necessity of the gallon size, and it's Morgan's turn to raise his eyebrows. His expression seems to say, "Oh, just you wait." Morgan took his current position with the ODFW in 2007, as wolves were first coming into the state from Idaho and establishing territories in Union and Wallowa Counties. He's been dealing with wolf shit ever since; the scat samples are just the simplest form.

Trained as a field biologist, Morgan is one of a handful of state and federal employees nationwide who are on the front lines of wolf management. The job is rare because wolves are rare, and the men and women who work to manage wolves seem to be either idealists or gluttons for punishment. Maybe both.

In the cab of the truck Morgan tells me that of all the wolf program managers in the West, not a single one has lasted in their position for more than ten years. "It's thankless and it never stops," says Morgan. "It impacts your entire life. Health, relationships, all of it. Many of the western managers have had their marriages fall apart, largely due to the stress of the work. It follows you home." If history is a bellwether for the future, Morgan is about

halfway through his tenure as a state wolf manager. In the driver's seat of the truck he is slumped slightly forward with his arms crossed over the top of the steering wheel. His mustache and beard are flecked with gray, and despite his apparent overall health he seems to have a weariness that goes beyond not getting enough sleep.

There are other predatory species in the West. There are other animals that make humans nervous, or that need special conservation strategies. Mountain lion, grizzly, salmon, spotted owl. They've all brought conflict, but it's nothing compared to what is happening with wolves, said Morgan, dragging a hand down his face. Wolves have been idolized and demonized with almost no middle ground. The result has been huge swings in both wolf populations and management philosophies. According to Morgan, managing wolves should not be excessively different from managing other wild animals—they all simply follow what their biology tells them to do. However, the human conflict and emotion surrounding wolves is increasingly unpredictable and constantly shifting with current events and politics. "Wolves have brought about a level of emotion and involvement from people outside wildlife management that is incomparable to what I've seen with any other animal," said Morgan.

The United States has a torrid history of wolf management. After European settlement, wolves were managed under the jurisdiction of the federal Predator Control Act, which sought their widespread extermination largely through poison and gunshot. With these methods, the last wolf in Oregon was killed in 1946 for a twenty-dollar bounty. The passage of the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1973 and the subsequent listing of the gray wolf as endangered throughout the contiguous United States and Mexico<sup>1</sup> brought an end to the kill-based management style but left large questions about how predator management should occur in the West. In 1980, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) signed the Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan, which recommended reintroducing gray wolves in central Idaho and Yellowstone National Park. The recommendation was a required part of the USFWS's compliance efforts with ESA recovery mandates for wolves,



yet it took fifteen years for the initial stages of the plan to be implemented in the form of the relocation of sixty-six gray wolves from southwestern Canada to the States—thirty-one to Yellowstone and thirty-five to Idaho.

Carter Niemeyer was one of the government trappers involved in the original capture and relocation measures. Working with a team of biologists and “ornery” trappers living in Alberta, Canada, Niemeyer located more than seventeen different wolf packs that he considered capable of absorbing the removal of individuals for reintroduction purposes without ill effect. “Our goal was to capture wolves from several different packs so that the reintroduced population would be genetically diverse,” said Niemeyer, who has worked with both federal and state agencies to manage wolves in the West. “By trapping animals from different territories that weren’t closely related we hoped to provide the best opportunity for success within the reintroduced population.”

Niemeyer’s time spent tracking and culling individual animals from the different packs seems to have paid off. In the seventeen years since reintroduction in the northern Rocky Mountain recovery area, which includes Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, the easternmost portions of Washington and Oregon, and a small part of north-central Utah, those 66 wolves have increased their numbers to more than 1,174, comprising 287 packs and 109 breeding pairs.<sup>2</sup> The majority of these wolf packs have remained in Montana and Idaho near the areas where they were originally introduced. However, territory expansion and other biological tendencies have resulted in wolves moving into Oregon and Washington.

The process by which wolves leave their natal packs and either join other packs or establish new territory elsewhere is called dispersal. It’s a common occurrence in wolf populations and is counted on in state and federal recovery plans as a mechanism for the natural reestablishment of wolves across geographic territories. According to renowned wolf biologist David Mech, most wolves disperse from their natal packs at the onset of sexual maturity. Any wolf born into a pack and not taking over a breeding position will eventually leave it, usually between and eleven and twenty-four months

of age. "Each wolf pack can be viewed as a 'dispersal pump' that converts prey into young wolves and spews them far and wide over the landscape," wrote Mech. "A thriving pack of three to nine members producing six pups each year thus 'pumps out' about half its members annually."<sup>3</sup>

Not accounting for mortality, that sort of reproduction and the subsequent exodus results in an approximate doubling of the wolf population every two years. Because wolves are territorial and are also habitat generalists able to survive almost anywhere, the natural expansion into new unpopulated regions by dispersing wolves is largely a given. That's been a hard pill to swallow for communities already nervous about the prospect of wolves in their states. "One of the most common misconceptions people have about wolves in Oregon is that they were brought here in the back of trucks," said Morgan. "The state did not actively reintroduce wolves. They dispersed here of their own volition and on their own time frame."

The distance a dispersing wolf travels varies by the individual wolf and by the surrounding conditions at the time of dispersal. Some wolves will travel to the edge of their natal pack's territory and attempt to establish themselves as a neighbor. Others will travel hundreds of miles into areas without other wolves before settling down. Regardless of how far they travel, all dispersing wolves are looking for three things necessary for their survival: a mate, food, and defensible territory. According to Mech, there are a few ways a dispersing wolf can meet these needs: he can kill and replace the dominant wolf of an already established pack; he can join a pack briefly and try to lure out a female who will then move with him into new territory; or he can leave occupied territory, locate a mate doing the same thing, and together they can set up house in a new area that will ultimately expand the entire population's range. All options are risky, and the route chosen by any individual depends largely on the population's overall density within its range. If the population has already filled all the readily available space, dispersers have little option but to join established packs, often temporarily, or challenge pack leaders for a more permanent place within the pack. However, when a population is reestablishing and there are large areas that are not part of an established

pack's range, it becomes much more likely that individuals will attempt to start new packs in areas that have long been without wolves.



The first wolf to reenter Oregon, a female yearling dubbed B-45 by wildlife managers, dispersed from the Jureano pack in central Idaho. Forging the Snake River, she crossed the Hells Canyon Wilderness and went into the wilderness of northeastern Oregon's Blue Mountains in early spring 1999. Because she was wearing a radio collar, researchers from both Idaho and Oregon were able to track B-45's movements with relative ease. Word of her arrival in Oregon spread rapidly through government agencies, and then out to the media and the public. In general, the news that for the first time in more than fifty years a living wolf was present in Oregon was not well received, and discussions on what was to become of B-45 could be heard throughout the state's capitol building, on the editorial pages of local and regional newspapers, at coffee shops, and in the ivory halls of the state's universities.

B-45 was protected under the federal Endangered Species Act and under Oregon's state ESA.<sup>4</sup> However, the state did not have a management plan capable of providing insight into how protection should occur, and officials claimed they were ill equipped to deal with wolves in the state. In a move that is now known to have been illegal under the federal ESA, state officials made the decision to relocate B-45 back to the designated wolf management areas in Idaho. For two days a small plane and helicopter worked in tandem to flush the young wolf out of the steep, forested wilderness of the Blue Mountains and into an open clearing where she could safely be captured. They eventually succeeded, and she was sedated, given a physical, and transported back across state lines.

B-45 seemed to recover relatively quickly from the experience. A month after her release she was seen north of McCall, Idaho, where she and a male wolf were thought to be establishing territory for a new pack.<sup>5</sup> The interest, some of it from national and international levels, that accompanied B-45 into Oregon and then back to Idaho was a harbinger of the political circus that

would ensue as the wolf population continued to grow and expand at a rate much faster than anticipated.



At the time of reintroduction in 1995, federal and western wildlife managers thought it would likely take at least a decade before wolves began to expand out of the predefined management areas in Idaho and Montana. It was assumed that wolves, like most endangered species, were a fragile population in the West and it would take time to see them rebound in areas of reintroduction. However, like many assumptions, this was largely incorrect. “The reintroduced population was far more prolific and resilient than I ever would have anticipated,” said Niemeyer. “At first we were handling every situation with kid gloves. We treated every wolf as if it was one precious commodity in the recovery effort. We realized pretty quickly that when left to its own devices the population had an amazing ability to adapt to new areas and circumstances.” This was a realization that had managers in the region shifting rapidly from hoping they could keep enough animals alive to foster recovery to worrying about what an expanding wolf population meant for other species and the greater landscape.

At six months old, wolf pups need as many calories as adults, about six thousand per day. In packs that have yearling wolves in addition to a breeding pair and a litter of pups, resource demands can increase by a factor of fifteen, according to Mech. In terms of the gross amount of food necessary for a pack of six, this translates to about forty-three pounds of food necessary to feed the pack per day.<sup>6</sup> This means that when establishing territory, a breeding pair must select and defend an area much larger than what they require to sustain only themselves. As the wolf population increases, the number of individual territories also increases, yet the average size of each territory decreases.

During the early 2000s the growing wolf population in Idaho and Montana resulted in increased competition over food resources and breeding space. Associated conflict led to higher rates of dispersal, the splitting of packs, and the carving out of new territories by wolves establishing new packs. It wasn’t

long before the landscape of reintroduction neared saturation. Like B-45 before them, dispersing wolves began exploring new areas farther from their home packs, occasionally over state lines. Again, as was the case with B-45, their movements were followed carefully by people from all walks of life and in all positions of power.

“Just as the humans involved in the wolf debate deserve to be seen as individuals, not stereotypes, so do the wolves. They are not the boogeyman, or storybook monsters aiming to prey upon the young and old. They aren’t cuddly pets or religious icons. They are *Canis lupus*. Wolves.”

—from the Introduction

Teeming with the tension and passion that accompany one of North America’s most controversial apex predators, *Collared* tracks the events that unfolded when wolves from the reintroduced population of the northern Rocky Mountains dispersed west across state lines into Oregon.

In a forthright and personal style, Aimee Lyn Eaton takes readers from meeting rooms in the state capitol to ranching communities in the rural northeast corner of the state. Using on-the-ground inquiry, field interviews, and extensive research, she documents the story of how wolves returned to Oregon and the repercussions of their presence in the state.

*Collared: Politics and Personalities in Oregon’s Wolf Country* introduces readers to the biologists, ranchers, conservationists, state employees, and lawyers on the front lines, encouraging a deeper, multifaceted understanding of the controversial and storied presence of wolves in Oregon.



AIMEE LYN EATON has worked with the National Geographic Society, the Bonneville Power Administration, the Freshwater Trust, numerous community newspapers, and as a science communicator at Oregon State University. She earned a BS in journalism from the University of Oregon and a MS in physical geography from OSU. Eaton’s writing has been published in *The New York Times*, *National Parks Magazine*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *The Dirtbag Diaries*, and a range of other national and international media. She lives in Central Oregon, where she grew up. Read her blog at <http://drysidenotes.wordpress.com>

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