

Are Gray Wolves Coming to the Northeast?

By Gerry Lavigne

Canis lupus, *Canis lycaon*, *Canis sousep*. What's in a name? A wolf is a wolf is a wolf, right? Wrong! The US Fish and Wildlife Service is playing a sneaky name game that may well affect our freedom to hunt and trap coyotes from Maine to Georgia. The tale is a little convoluted, but I'll try to unravel it as best I can.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is the federal agency responsible for enforcement of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and since the inception of that law in 1973, the Service has gotten pretty good at getting its way for the sake of those critters deemed to be heading toward extinction. Over the years, the USFWS has had a lot of help from myriad organizations who aren't too friendly toward hunting, trapping, and fishing here in the US. These antis are vocal, well-organized, well-funded, and court-savvy.

The gray wolf was placed on the Endangered Species list in 1973. It didn't matter that wolves were thriving then and now in most of Canada, Alaska, most of the former Soviet Union, Scandinavia, Spain, France, Italy, Eastern Europe, parts of the Middle East, and India. In 1973, gray wolves were absent from the lower 48 states in the US, except for a remnant, but secure population in northeastern Minnesota.

Federal protection under the ESA has certainly been effective in the Great Lakes states. Since 1973, gray wolves have increased and expanded their range within Minnesota and then into northern Wisconsin, and the upper peninsula of Michigan. By 2008, wolves in these 3 states numbered in the several thousands, enough for the USFWS to consider them "recovered" and eligible to be removed from the Endangered Species list.

In the west, the feds took another tack to promote wolf recovery. Along about 1996, they introduced wolves into Yellowstone National Park, and onto Indian lands in northern Idaho. The USFWS also tried to establish wolves into the Southwest in Arizona and New Mexico. To date, the Southwestern reintroduction effort has been a flop, but the Northern Rockies are teeming with gray wolves (and wolf conflicts). Wolf populations in the Northern Rockies have reached and exceeded federal recovery goals, and are in various stages of being de-listed.

The Northeastern states have long been a target for gray wolf re-introduction among wolf zealots in the USFWS, and among their anti hunting/animal rights camp-followers. Beginning in the early 1990s, various states have been approached by the feds to host a gray wolf re-introduction effort. It is fortunate for us in the Northeast that there is insufficient acreage in federal ownership to establish a wolf population, as was the case in Yellowstone. The millions of acres of industrial forest in northern Maine were targeted by the wolf lovers, but cooler heads have prevailed to date. Ditto for the Adirondack Park in northern New York. Besides, we northeasterners already have the eastern coyote (*Canis latrans* for now), itself a wolf hybrid of sorts. Our deer are already feeling the sting of canid fangs. We don't need to double-down on the genus *Canis*.

Along about 2008, the USFWS formally proposed to de-list the gray wolf in the Great Lakes region, which would allow the states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan to manage wolves and wolf conflicts on their own dime. Surprisingly, the feds also

proposed to abandon efforts to establish gray wolves in the Northeastern states. The 2008 federal wolf proposal was very strongly opposed by the antis, especially the part about abandoning wolf “recovery” in the Northeast. The de-listing proposal was withdrawn, and we heard little further about it -- until now.

In the summer of 2011, those clever feds at the USFWS have returned with a proposal to de-list the Great Lakes wolves AND keep the door open for gray wolf recovery in the Northeast. To do so, they are asking us to pretend that the Great Lakes wolves are something they are not, while also declaring a whole new wolf species exists, namely the “Eastern wolf” *Canis lycaon*. Confused? Me too! But I’ll try to sort out this chicanery for you.

Throughout its extensive range, there are various races of wolves which differ in body size and weight. These size differences in turn, affect the size prey they can efficiently kill. Scientists who get excited about classifying animals (taxonomists) account for these different races of wolves by assigning a sub-species name. For example, the wolf currently inhabiting the Northern Rockies is *Canis lupus occidentalis*. This is a brute among wolves. Most mature individuals exceed 90 lbs on the low end, and 170 lbs at the extreme high end. This critter can kill everything from 60 lb deer to 2,000 lb buffalo – and you.

In contrast, the wolf inhabiting the Great Lakes region is much smaller, with mature individuals ranging from 50 to 80 lbs, rarely larger. In addition, these are not pure wolves. They are mongrels that contain what the USFWS euphemistically calls “coyote-like” genetic traits. Moreover their diminutive size limits Great Lakes wolves to deer-size and smaller prey. Great Lakes wolves cannot efficiently kill moose. Moreover, the Great Lakes wolves are not an isolated population. They are part of a larger population of smaller, coyote-bastardized wolves that also inhabits southeastern Ontario and southwestern Quebec. In Canada, these little wolves are often referred to as “Tweed” or “Algonquin” wolves. Until this year, taxonomists referred to the Great Lakes-SE Ontario-SW Quebec wolves as *Canis lupus nubilus*. But no longer. Here comes the trickery.

In the 2011 de-listing proposal, the Great Lakes wolves are being separated from their Canadian brethren and classified as simply *Canis lupus*. Just like that, gone are the subspecies classifications scientists used to differentiate the various races of wolves for so many decades. So we are now left to pretend that the wolves inhabiting the Great Lakes region are the same critter as the brutes that are ravaging the Northern Rockies. After all, they now both have the same scientific name, i.e., *Canis lupus*. But it gets better!

The feds have declared that we have had a new species of wolf kicking around all this time. The taxonomists have declared that the little Tweed wolf in Canada is really the mythical Eastern wolf, now called *Canis lycaon*. The taxonomists fancy this to be a remnant species of wolves that once occupied white-tailed deer-dominated range in the Northeast, but which are now hiding out in southern Canada like draft dodgers! Hard to square this against the fact that these wolves have been riddled with coyote genes for the past 100 years. Are these little fellas really a wolf species as the taxonomists now claim or are they just another population of wolf/coyote hybrids as the geneticists have revealed?

Whether or not the SE Ontario-SW Quebec wolves are a distinct species or just another form of gray wolf/coyote hybrid remains speculative. But it was wrong and devious of the USFWS to separate the little wolf of the Great Lakes from its counterparts in Canada. If these little wolves are the long-lost or the long-imagined “Eastern wolf” (*Canis lycaon*), this little wolf should be declared recovered in the US, when wolf management reverts to Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan -- and not under the name *Canis lupus*.

Instead, we are to pretend that the Northern Rockies and the Great Lakes wolf populations are the same in form and function, i.e. *Canis lupus*. On paper at least, this conveniently leaves no representatives of the Eastern wolf in the US. As a result, the antis get what they want: a renewed focus of the USFWS on wolf re-introduction/recovery in the Northeast.

To get the process going again, the feds announced as part of the 2011 wolf de-listing proposal, that they are conducting a “status review” of their newly created wolf species, the Eastern wolf (*Canis lycaon*). Hard to imagine what that status review will conclude huh? Get ready for another intensive round of wolf re-introduction proposals, litigation, and possibly pressure to protect the wolf-tainted eastern coyote from hunting and trapping from Maine to Georgia. The spine of the Appalachians ties all Northeastern states together ecologically. If Maine or Vermont gets wolves, every other Northeastern state and Maritime Canada will soon have them too. Stay tuned. We will be hearing from the USFWS and their cronies within 15 months.