

Researchers hope to control wolves by shocking them

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A Central Michigan University graduate student and his instructor think they might have found a way to keep Wisconsin wolves from killing livestock: Don't shoot the wolves, shock them.

Jason Hawley and assistant professor Tom Gehring have joined forces with members of the state Department of Natural Resources wolf management program to study how shock treatment can help control wandering wolves.

"There are certain situations where it's not really a problem wolf you have, it's a problem area," Hawley said.

Although the federal government changed the wolf's status in Wisconsin from endangered to threatened - allowing problem animals to be destroyed - Hawley and Gehring point out that other wolves can take their place.

A "problem area" might include a place where a farmer is messy when discarding livestock carcasses, or an area that contains ideal wolf habitat.

What Wisconsin needs in addition to its euthanasia option is a way to control an existing pack without necessarily destroying it, Hawley said. That way, the well-trained pack can reside for years in an area and defend its territory from untrained packs.

A partial solution might be the shock-collar idea, which would deter problem wolves from straying into areas in which they have preyed upon livestock. Hawley acknowledges it's not a perfect plan, and skeptics abound. But if the idea works, it will decrease the number of wolves that have to be destroyed, he said.

The shock plan

Shock treatment is similar to invisible fencing, which dog owners use to keep their pets close to home. Dogs wear a collar tuned into a signal buried around the perimeter of a yard. If the unsuspecting creature roams from its owner's yard, it will get a brief but jarring shock.

Shock treatment, on the other hand, seeks to keep the wolf away from, not near, a problem area such as a livestock farm.

Last year, wolves killed a record 62 domestic animals in Wisconsin, including cows, horses and dogs. Before April, the DNR's only choice was to relocate problem wolves. Now the wolves can be destroyed, and four have been killed since April.

Gehring grew up on a dairy farm in Wisconsin 15 miles north of Chippewa Falls. He aimed to develop tools that would prevent farmers from suffering livestock losses. But he also grew fond of wolves while studying the animals for his master's level thesis in the mid-1990s.

"I'm really interested in having the two co-exist," he said. "I think it's possible." To determine that, Gehring landed funding from his university. The Defenders of Wildlife, a national organization, also is contributing to his study as is the DNR with in-kind donations.

Hawley recently moved to a campground north of Tomahawk to begin trapping wolves with DNR wildlife technician Ron Schultz.

They equipped two wolves in separate packs with shock collars. They aim to collar at least one more in a third pack, although trapping wolves has proven tricky on most days. Right now, they have steel foot traps set for a Ranger Island Pack south of Tomahawk and the Somo River Pack, just west of Tomahawk.

The majority of wolves in Wisconsin roam from a line between Merrill and Rhinelander to the north and west.

Wisconsin began the year with about 350 wolves residing in about 80 packs, said Adrian Wydeven, head of the DNR's wolf management program. The number has doubled to about 700 with the arrival of the packs' new pups this spring, but only about 100 pups will survive through the year because of disease and predation by other wolf packs, bears and large coyotes.

Once the wolves are collared, researchers will follow their movement in and around their territory. After they collect enough data, the group will install a command center, possibly on a nearby farm later this year.

'Pretty big wallop'

From the command center, researchers will dial in a signal that has a radius of 100 meters up to a range of about 40 acres. When a wolf enters the range, it will get a two-second-long shock.

"It's a pretty big wallop," Gehring said.

Then the wolf will have time to get out before getting shocked again.

Schultz is a pioneer of using the technology on wolves. He tried it on a lactating female about five years ago out of necessity.

In a very unscientific study, the wolf jumped about four feet in the air and did somersaults when being shocked.

Gehring was led to the study by Schultz's original idea.

But a lot of leg work remains before the researchers can determine if shock treatment is a viable option.

Questions remain, such as how other wolves in the pack will react when the collared wolf gets shocked. The uncollared wolves will teach researchers just as much as the collared wolf.

And, once the collared wolf learns not to go near a protected area, how long will it remember? Batteries in the collars last three to six months, Gehring said.

Another questions: When new wolves are born, will they learn from the elder wolf to stay away from the protected areas? Even if the collars are somewhat successful, they would be only a partial solution, Gehring said.

"We're not doing this as an end-all to everything," he said. "But if we can use a combination of tools in one place, we might be further ahead than using just one tool." If researchers can learn to maintain a pack, and have them defend their territory in the process, they will have taught an old dog a new trick.

No fan of wolves
But skeptics abound.

Lori Groskoph of the Lincoln County town of Harrison isn't sold on Gehring's study or the DNR's current wolf-management practices.

She thinks the wolf population is sorely underestimated and would like to see the federal de-listing process speed up, so wolves can be managed in Wisconsin without federal interference.

Groskoph is an avid bear hunter. The mother of one of her dogs was killed by wolves. She said it's common for her dogs to run into wolves during a bear hunt.

"We do take chances when we let our dogs loose, and we know that," she said.

But she wants to see more aggressive management practices, possibly even a limited wolf hunt in Wisconsin once it's taken off the threatened list, because the wolf population has already become too big in her eyes.

"What is different about this group of predators than any other group of predators we deal with in Wisconsin?" she said. "I'm not saying wolves don't belong in Wisconsin, but I own bear hunting dogs and this is a threat to my way of life."

[Source](#)