

Dr. Deer's Whitetail World

BY DR. JAMES C. KROLL

Are There Too Many Predators? Part 2

In Part 1, I noted that predators have been on the increase in many areas in recent years, and in some places they are definitely taking their toll on whitetails. In particular, black bears, wolves, coyotes and even mountain lions are having a significant impact on some deer herds.

The average black bear can detect smell seven times better than the average bloodhound, and 210,000 times better than you or I! In a bear's world, there's no such thing as a fawn without scent. And, in my opinion, that's where bears have the greatest potential impact on whitetails.



PHOTO BY KEN ARCHER

In many regions of North America, deer herds are out of control. In an effort to reduce deer densities, some states either have begun or are considering establishing predator populations to do the job. In areas where large predators like black bears have been encouraged, they often have done their job too well.

Studies have shown that black bears really are significant predators of deer. Research conducted in Pennsylvania by Justin K. Vreeland and other colleagues reported on a study in which they captured and tagged 110 fawns on agricultural land and 108 fawns in forested habitats. There was an estimated 46.2 percent predation rate, a significant amount of that being credited to bears or coyotes. Other studies have reported a direct correlation between bear harvest and whitetail recruitment (the number of fawns living to reach a year of age).

Meanwhile, we've recently seen an effort on the part of some states to restore the black bear. In fact, a group has formed in my home region of East Texas for this purpose. Although I like bears, the thought of them roaming around an area where the average tract of land is under 20 acres is frightening to me. Plus, East Texas happens to be one of the top five poultry-producing regions in the country. A poultry house is just "chicken in a can" to a bear.

On a positive note, a property I manage in northern Michigan has one of the highest densities of bears I've ever seen, but we still recruit more than 60 percent of our fawns annually. The trick is that we have good cover.

MOUNTAIN LIONS AND WOLVES

In modern times, mountain lions (pumas, panthers, cougars, etc.) haven't been a significant predator of whitetails until just recently. In response to changing land use, lack of control by absentee landowners and an ever-increasing prey base, lion populations have steadily increased throughout much of the U.S.

Interestingly, lions tend to be "trophy hunters." That is, these big cats (especially males) tend to single out bucks over does. The reason, I think, is that a buck usually travels alone, and rather than flee, will stand and fight: just what a lion wants him to do!

Although many state wildlife agencies still won't admit they have lions, the public is now well aware they exist in a number of places. And, they can have a real impact on whitetails. In general, a male lion will eat one deer per week, while a female with young will eat two deer per week. The hidden blessing is that lions tend to have very large home ranges, and they therefore don't defend their territories as vigorously as wolves or bears do.

The wolf literally is a beast of a different nature. There's a long-standing enmity between humans and wolves — probably because we're so much alike! Wolves are social animals that hunt in packs. They're highly intelligent, cover very large areas and won't tolerate other predators, which is why they so readily attack dogs.

Studies have shown that, just like humans, wolves are capable of killing out local populations of deer and other prey. Some studies suggest that in areas with high wolf populations, the only place to find deer is along seams between wolf-pack territories, where members of either pack tend to be reluctant to go.

Wolf populations continue to grow at an impressive rate. Stocked in Yellowstone National Park in the mid-1990s, the species has increased by as much as 400 percent annually in that location. But by no means is this strictly a Western issue. In 2003, wolves killed 20 cattle, 24 sheep, several dogs and a farmed deer in Wisconsin — and wolf numbers in the state have increased impressively since then.

Wisconsin's original statewide wolf population goal, set by the Department of Natural Resources, was 350 wolves. There now conservatively are more than 600! Minnesota reports its wolf

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population could be as high as 2,500.

Despite these numbers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has rescinded the declassification of wolves as an endangered species. Thus, at the time of this writing, it remains illegal to kill a wolf anywhere in the Great Lake States.

THE HUMAN FACTOR

As noted in Part 1, my training as a wildlife biologist began 40 years ago. At that time, virtually all of my fellow graduate students came from a farming or ranching background. We all were hunters, and the anti-hunting movement was only beginning.

I remember when "Guns of Autumn" aired on TV in 1975. CBS promoted it as taking an objective look at hunting. Yet it portrayed hunters as "butchers" and slobs. My fellow biologists and I were shocked. We considered the program to be just another case of liberal media bias that would be rejected by the viewing public, but its message resonated with many people who lacked our outdoor backgrounds. "Guns of Autumn" was a wake-up call for hunters and wildlife managers.

Game animals pay the bills for the vast majority of state agencies. "Hunter opportunity" thus is the flag around which agencies have rallied for years. New deer-management ideas such as antler restrictions are weighed against the potential impact on license sales before any agency will seriously consider them. And now, another factor — the non-hunting biologist — is further complicating deer management.

A NEW BREED OF BIOLOGIST

My old-school colleagues are being replaced by young people who grew up in cities, learning about wildlife from the Discovery Channel and Animal Planet. As children of the environmental movement, they've been inundated with propaganda that the root of all evil and the threat to the natural world is hunters. Thus, the hunter-biologist is being replaced by a professional who dislikes deer and hunting — even though the whitetail is, for all practical purposes, what pays his or her salary. In fact, our studies suggest that fewer than half of today's practicing wildlife biologists actually hunt.

What's more, a significant percentage of university wildlife professors not only don't hunt, but are anti-hunters. In some cases, their students are being told that they won't get very far if they choose to work with game animals such as whitetails.

Agency biologists also must deal with increasing deer problems in urban areas. The whitetail is the most deadly animal in North America, each year causing more than 300 human deaths from automobile accidents. Deer also cause billions of dollars' worth of landscape and crop damage. When you couple these problems with professionals who don't hunt, you see why so much effort is being put into protecting and even restoring large deer predators.

TOUGH SOLUTIONS

On my recent speaking tour mentioned in Part 1, I became very empathetic with Minnesota and Wisconsin hunters who have given up hunting deer because the herd has been decimated in some traditional whitetail areas. The Upper Peninsula of Michigan is in a similar boat, and I fully expect wolves to somehow cross the water to the Lower Peninsula in the near future.

I don't hate large predators or want them extirpated from the landscape. However, I do have strong opinions about where and how these animals should fit into whitetail management. And I'd include the other large predator — man — in this equation.

For too long we hunters have failed to effectively control deer populations. Rather than continue to measure success in deer management strictly in terms of "body count," we must focus on the overall health of the ecosystem we share with wildlife.

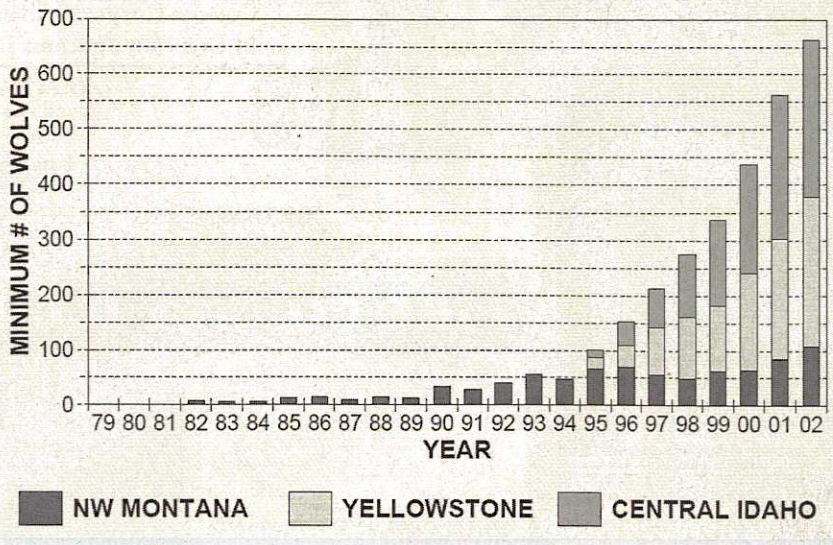
Wolves and other non-human predators should be viewed as game species, not sacred animals to be protected at all costs. We already hunt bears in areas that have viable numbers, so why not wolves as well?

We got into over-population situations with deer because many wildlife agencies too long had a *restoration* mentality, rather than shitfting to a *management* mentality as the herd grew. I'd like to think we learned something from this mistake, but with predators we're going down the same road.

There is no "balance of nature." That's a concept for nature TV and "feel good" groups with animal-rights agendas. Human population pressures, booming predator populations and decreasing numbers of hunters combine to demand a true management solution. Both the states and the federal government need to set population goals for large predators and then develop seasons and bag limits aimed at keeping populations within these numbers. If they don't, the future of deer hunting in much of the U.S. won't be nearly as bright as it otherwise would be.

Figure 5: Wolf Population Trends

N. Rocky Mountain States, 1979-2002



COURTESY OF THE U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Wolves have tremendous reproductive potential. As this graph clearly shows, populations in the Northern Rockies have experienced exponential growth.