

Misconceptions About Wolves

By Julie Hammonds

No doubt about it: Wolves are fascinating animals. People have always wondered about them and woven what we think we know about them into tales both true and fantastical. In the modern age, as wolves have become the subject of scientific study, it may be surprising that misconceptions about them persist, but they do.

Two common tales told today about Mexican wolves are that they carry diseases that threaten humans and livestock, and that they pose a serious danger to humans and pets. Like other misconceptions about wolves throughout the eons, these stories are not based in fact. Here are some questions commonly asked of wolf biologists, along with the answers as we know them today.

QUESTION: DO WOLVES CARRY DISEASES THAT THREATEN HUMANS AND LIVESTOCK?

Answer: Mexican wolves are susceptible to many of the same diseases that can affect domestic dogs, coyotes, foxes and other members of the dog family. These include rabies, canine distemper, canine parvovirus, plague, tularemia, leptospirosis, neospora, intestinal parasites such as worms, and external parasites such as fleas and ticks. In general, very little infectious disease has been found in captive or wild Mexican wolves, according to information gathered and prepared by veterinarians from the Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Project, Arizona Game and Fish Department and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. No serious infectious disease has ever been found in the Arizona-New Mexico population of Mexican wolves.

Q: HOW DO WE KNOW THESE MEXICAN WOLVES DON'T CARRY SERIOUS INFECTIOUS DISEASES AND PARASITES?

A: Wild Mexican wolf populations in Arizona and New Mexico are intensively monitored for diseases and parasites, and preventively treated as a precaution. Wild wolves are routinely vaccinated, dewormed and tested for the presence of diseases and parasites when they are captured and handled. These vaccination, deworming and disease surveillance programs protect public health, individual wolves and the health of the larger wolf population.

Q: IS RABIES A SERIOUS CONCERN WITH THE WILD MEXICAN WOLF POPULATION?

A: Because rabies is present in Arizona and New Mexico, wild animals here, including wolves, can transmit this potentially fatal viral disease to humans. However, rabies has not been documented in the Arizona-New Mexico wolf population. Wild Mexican wolves that are captured and handled are given rabies vaccines to help prevent infection. Elsewhere, rabid wolves have, on extremely rare occasions, attacked people, who then died of rabies. There are two cases from Alaska (the last one in 1943) and one suspected case in the Lower 48 (Wyoming, 1833).



Q: WHAT ABOUT OTHER DISEASES CANINES ARE SUBJECT TO, SUCH AS DISTEMPER, PLAGUE, ETC.?

A: A comprehensive vaccination that prevents canine distemper, parvovirus and other diseases found in canines is given when a wild Mexican wolf is captured and handled. Distemper and parvo have not been found in the Arizona-New Mexico population of Mexican wolves.

Plague and tularemia are bacterial diseases commonly associated with smaller animals such as rodents and rabbits. Mexican wolves are routinely tested for these diseases. Test results sometimes show that a Mexican wolf has been exposed to plague or tularemia, possibly from eating rodents or rabbits or being exposed to rodent fleas (which are different from the fleas commonly found on canines), but wolves are fairly resistant to becoming clinically ill with these diseases.

Leptospirosis is a bacterial disease that can be transmitted from wildlife to humans and also can cause livestock abortions. The Mexican wolf population is routinely tested for exposure. No positive results have been detected. A similar disease, neospora, also has not been detected in Mexican wolves.

Q: ARE MEXICAN WOLVES LIKELY TO ATTACK OR HARM HUMANS?

A: To date, there have been no incidents of a free-ranging Mexican wolf attacking or injuring a person. In fact, wolf attacks in general across North America are so rare as to almost be nonexistent. In “A Case History of Wolf-Human Encounters in Alaska and Canada,” a 2002 publication by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, biologist Mark McNay states that “No human deaths have been attributed to wild, healthy wolves (in the United States and Canada) since at least 1900, and biting incidents or bluff charges are rare enough to warrant publication in scientific journals.” In the 80 cases McKay studied, aggressive, nonrabid wolves bit people in 16 cases, and none of those bites was life-threatening. These case histories are all based on eyewitness accounts and credibly documented reports rather than secondhand information, which is far less reliable.



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On one side of the wolf issue, people are pulling to have the government stop wolf conservation and kill all wolves on sight. They may believe stories about wolves, rather than understand facts about wolf biology, thus perpetuating misconceptions. Or those who strongly oppose wolf reintroduction may believe their ability to make a living will be jeopardized.



Q: ARE REINTRODUCED MEXICAN WOLVES APT TO BE MORE DANGEROUS THAN WILD WOLVES BECAUSE THEY ARE MORE ACCUSTOMED TO BEING AROUND HUMANS, AND LESS AT EASE IN THE WILD?

A: Biologists look for avoidance and fear of humans as one of the primary characteristics when selecting Mexican wolves for release. The first wolf pack released, in 1998, killed wild elk within three weeks of release. Before release, wolves are managed with minimal exposure to humans in an environment that fosters and maintains natural behaviors. They are not socialized or habituated to humans, making them unlikely to be attracted to human establishments once released.

Q: HOW CAN I KEEP MYSELF, MY FAMILY AND MY PETS SAFE IN WOLF COUNTRY?

A: Most people will never see a Mexican wolf. If you do see one or more wolves near humans or manmade structures, this does not mean the wolves are likely to attack. Extraordinary precautions are not needed. Still, it's wise to behave with caution when wolves might be present, as you would when in the territory of any wild predator. Treat wolves (and other wildlife) with respect. Never feed a wild animal or leave food or garbage outside in open containers.

People with dogs should be aware that wolves are known to treat dogs as a territorial threat and may kill them to defend their territory. A U.S. Forest Service publication recommends that people, "Keep dogs under control at all times and leashed when possible. Should you hear or see wolves near your camp, contain dogs in a tent or vehicle if possible and

harass wolves away if necessary. You may legally harass a wolf away from you and your property, but you must report it within seven days."

Learning the facts about wolves and respecting their renewed presence in the wilds of Arizona and New Mexico are the best ways to dispel misinformation about wolves. 🐾

■ Julie Hammonds, the associate editor of Arizona Wildlife Views magazine, based this story on "Blue Range Reintroduction Project Fact Sheet for Guides, Outfitters, and Forest Visitors" (U.S. Forest Service 2006) and information at www.azgfd.gov/wolf, in addition to other sources cited in the article.