

## Teacher's Guide

### Background Information

Prior to European colonization, wolves occupied almost every habitat in North America. As Europeans colonized North America several hundred years ago, they began to trap and kill the gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) and other predator species, such as the grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos horribilis*) and mountain lion (*Cougar concolor*). Predators like the gray wolf were considered competition for wild game species, they preyed on settler's livestock, and they were perceived as a threat to humans. As a result, gray wolves were extirpated from the entire continental United States by the 1930s, with the exception of a small population in Northern Minnesota.

As opinions of wildlife and the environment began to change, the gray wolf was placed on the Endangered Species list in 1974. In the 1990s there were reintroductions of gray wolves in and around Yellowstone National Park and in the Southwest. These populations, as well as the population in the Midwest, have grown. In the past several years, wolves have been removed from the Endangered Species List to be managed by state governments and then relisted numerous times. There is pressure from many sides to either keep the wolf federally protected thus restricting management control options, or allow it to be managed by the states which would give much more flexibility for livestock depredation control and hunting.

The gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) spends most of its life living in a pack of other wolves. Pack size ranges anywhere from 2 wolves to over 20 animals. Packs consist largely of related wolves. Typically there is only one breeding pair of wolves in a pack, but occasionally the dominant male will breed with other females in the pack. The wolf pack lives in a territory, an area where the wolves hunt, raise pups, and spends most of their time. They defend this territory from other competitors, such as other wolves or coyotes. The size of the pack territory is strongly dependent on prey availability. Areas that are dense with prey tend to have smaller pack territories.

When a wolf becomes sexually mature, it will disperse from its pack and seek other lone wolves with which to mate and create a new pack. Wolves do not usually breed with related wolves, so dispersing from their original pack is important for maintaining genetic diversity. Wolves will travel hundreds of miles in search of a mate.

The primary prey of the gray wolf is ungulates, or hooved mammals like deer, elk, and moose. However, wolves will also eat medium and small sized mammals, such as beaver, rabbits, and mice. If live prey is not available, they will scavenge on animal carcasses (carrion), or even eat insects. Wolves tend to eat on a feast and famine schedule. They will often go many days

without eating and when they make a kill or come upon a large amount of food, they will eat very large quantities.