



Sources: University of Minnesota, Voyageurs Wolf Project, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, OpenStreetMap contributors

One wolf's travels in northern Minnesota

Wolf O1T roamed dozens of miles after being collared on May 24, 2021, south of Lake Kabetogama. The short videos from his collar, which tracked him for about a month, gave researchers a new window into wolf behavior, sometimes revealing individual quirks.

- 1 After circling to the south and crossing Hwy. 53, O1T turns back northwest. Video shows O1T around June 3 crossing a river and other marshy area, then curling up for a rest.
- 2 A few days later, as he heads farther north, O1T can be seen with his prey — a fawn. Later, the wolf pauses to lap water out of mud puddles or look around a clearing in the woods.
- 3 On June 9, collar video shows O1T walking through a thick stand of pine forest. The same day, he is seen inspecting and pawing at a beaver dam. This is about as far north as O1T goes before heading back to the area where he found the fawn, then heading due south and east, eventually spending a few days north of Pelican Lake and the town of Orr. The collar stops recording data on June 21.

Minnesota's wolves are just about out of places to go

◀ POLITICS from SH5

Misinformation got worse in 2014, when the predators seesawed on and off the endangered species list. Somehow support for the animals turned political — with Republicans typically leading the charge to reduce wolf numbers and enable more hunting.

“Wolves became Democrats,” Callahan said. “I don’t know how that happened, but it did.”

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Wolves have always been polarizing, said L. David Mech, one of the world’s top wolf biologists. The only time Americans were close to united over their fate was in the late 1800s and early 1900s, when most people wanted to kill them, he said.

Modern wolf research really began with Mech — pronounced “Meech” — who is the senior research scientist for the U.S. Geological Survey and an adjunct professor for the University of Minnesota.

He started what would become the Wildlife Science Center with a captive colony of about 40 wolves in 1976.

He wanted to learn more about how they communicate and needed a place to test their blood, urine, anal secretion glands and a dozen other things. Callahan was a young biologist hired to help.

More than 40 years later, she and a small staff that includes her daughter, Megan Callahan-Beckel, now take care of about 120 wolves.

Mech was the first to track wolves by plane in the late 1950s over Lake Superior’s Isle Royale, just him and a pilot, following packs of wolves by sight.

Minnesota still paid bounties for dead wolves then, but it was the only state outside Alaska that hadn’t killed them all.

Mech was the second person to ever put a radio collar on a wolf, starting a revolutionary study on their population, movement, pack sizes and prey relationships in Superior National Forest that continues today.

Before radio collars, researchers relied on ear tags. If they were lucky, those tags would let them know two things — where the animal was caught, and where it died.

Radio collars were “a total revolution,” Mech said. “Even in the earliest days, they let us follow that animal around — you could stay right with it.”

Mech grew up in New York state and was raised a fur trapper. When he started radio-collaring wolves, he knew he needed to catch a lot of them quickly.

So he hired the best trapper in

Minnesota — Bob Himes. He learned Himes’ secrets for a year, and then taught them to his assistants and technicians.

Wolves are wary and so cautious that they won’t step on a twig if they can avoid it. But it wasn’t so much the trapping or the bounties that knocked wolves to the brink of extinction, Mech said.

It was poison. The state dropped strychnine-tainted meat from airplanes. Ranchers and cowboys would leave out dead carcasses laced with poison. Everyone was worried about Minnesota’s deer population then, Mech said. The hope was that without wolves, the deer would flourish — a common thought around the country.

“People did terrible things to wolves, everything they could to get rid of them,” he said. “They burned dens. They put fish hooks in pieces of meat — and worse things than that. They hated wolves.”

Minnesota paid trappers \$35 per dead wolf throughout the 1950s and early ’60s. The hides were usually worth another \$10, said Bob Carlson, an avid hunter and fur trapper who lives in Ely.

Carlson now traps beavers and sells them to the International Wolf Center, where the meat has helped feed their beloved wolves for years.

But when Carlson was in his 20s, he would go after the bounties. If he could just trap two wolves in a week, he would double his take-home pay from the mine.

By then, there weren’t many wolves left, and trappers rarely saw them, he said.

“As soon as wolves walked out of the backwaters, guys were after them,” he said. “They were very wary and very smart.”

One winter he was after two wolves — a male and female. Whenever they were together, the male always walked in front, so it was no surprise that he was the one to spring one of Carlson’s traps. Somehow, he was able to slip it. Carlson never came close to catching him again, even though he kept seeing the pair’s tracks in the snow.

“But from then on he was always behind the female,” he said. “He made her go first after that.”

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Public attitudes toward wolves changed during the environmental reckoning of the 1960s. The state outlawed poisoning wolves. In 1965, it ended its bounty program.

Minnesota’s wolf population, after falling to an all-time low of 300 to 500, immediately began climbing.

Once the federal government added endangered species protections in 1974, the growth accelerated, said Dan Stark, large carnivore specialist for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

“By the early ’70s some estimates had it up to 1,000 wolves,” he said. It’s important to remember how quickly wolf numbers can grow, Mech said. When they have space and prey, they can double their population in a year or two.

In parts of Alaska and Canada, for example, wolves rebound so quickly that wildlife officials have been trying to thin them to help a struggling herd of caribou. They need to kill 75% of the wolves each year just to keep them at bay, Mech said.

Wolves have done so well in Minnesota that the administrations of each of the last four presidents — Clinton, Bush, Obama and Trump — have tried to remove them from the endangered species list.

Each time, courts reversed the

decisions, saying wolves haven’t returned to enough of their original range, which spans the continent.

Wolves most recently lost their federal protections in 2021.

The state of Wisconsin held a hunting season just a few weeks later. Hunters there primarily used hounds, a practice banned in Minnesota, to chase and kill wolves. Those hunters — and their dogs — killed 218 wolves in three days, 83% more than the licensed quota.

The hunt proved that states are not capable of managing their wolves, advocates argued in lawsuits filed around the country. The courts agreed, and restored protections in February 2022.

The Wisconsin hunt raised terrible ethical questions, Mech said. Callahan called it a legalized and glorified statewide dogfight.

But even killing 218 of the roughly 1,100 wolves that were in Wisconsin will not make a serious or lasting dent in their population, Mech said.

That’s because wolves have just about run out of places to go in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Young wolves are constantly dispersing and searching for new territory where there is enough prey and little competition, quickly replacing the wolves killed by hunting.

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Mech’s studies have taken him to the Arctic — to Ellesmere Island — where wolves were so unused to humans that they were practically tame.

Researchers could pick up a pup by hand and bring them inside a tent, while the mother wolf would just stand outside waiting.

He’s followed the wolves in Yellowstone, where, unlike in Minnesota, they can be seen from miles away and where hundreds of citizen scientists have been photographing and filming their every move for decades.

Every place wolves are studied, it’s been proven time and again, Mech said, that their populations depend almost entirely on available prey. They primarily kill the young, old and sick in a herd — animals that are less likely to survive winter even if the predators weren’t around.

During especially harsh winters, with deep snow to slow prey, wolves will be more successful and kill more.

A wolf pack will have about six pups a year. If there is enough to eat, the pups will stick around for a few years and the pack will grow. If not, young wolves will disperse and keep traveling until they find space and prey or run into trouble against ranches, farms or, in recent years, suburbs.

Minnesota wolves may be at their saturation point — the limit of what society will accept. Their population hasn’t changed significantly in nearly three decades, hovering between 2,400 and 3,000. When wolves disperse to find a new place to live, they don’t survive long.

“Cedar Creek is a prime example of that,” Mech said.

Two wolves found each other in Cedar Creek, a science reserve just 20 miles north of Minneapolis, in 2014. They had a few litters of pups over a couple of years and expanded their pack to 19 wolves, all within a short day’s wolf walk to the homes of more than 2 million people.

A pet dog was killed. Then a cow. Then a few calves and two more dogs. Federal trappers were called in to wipe out the wolves.

“That’s what happens on the frontier,” Mech said.



L. David Mech pioneered many aspects of modern wolf research, including using radio collars to follow them; here he holds a 1984 photo of himself with a sedated wolf in Superior National Forest, where his revolutionary study on population, movement, pack sizes and prey relationships continues.