

Nature Notes

COULD THE MEXICAN GRAY WOLF – SOURCE OF FASCINATION AND HOSTILITY – RETURN TO THE WEST TEXAS WILDS?



photograph courtesy of the El Paso Zoo Above, a lobo – or Mexican gray wolf – at the El Paso Zoo. Once an apex predator of West Texas, the lobo was extinct in the wild by the late 1970s. Reintroduction of wolves in Arizona and New Mexico has met fierce opposition from many ranchers, but conservationists argue that returning the wolf to the Trans-Pecos could contribute to a healthier, more robust ecosystem.

The gray wolf ranged from the Llano Estacado to present-day Arizona and northern Mexico.

But the relationship between wolves and pastoral communities has always been fraught, and as the livestock industry moved west, wolves were targeted. In 1915 alone, more than 900 lobos were killed in Arizona and New Mexico.

In Texas, the last two were killed in 1970 – one south of Alpine, one southwest of Sanderson.

In 1976, the animal was listed as endangered. Roy McBride, a legendary Alpine trapper, was commissioned by U.S. Fish and Wildlife to travel to Mexico – to see if he could trap lobos.

Rick LoBello is the El Paso Zoo's education curator. In 1978, he was a Big Bend National Park ranger. He got a call from McBride, a former Sul Ross classmate.

"One day he called me to his ranch and said, 'Rick, I want to show you something,'" LoBell said, "and I saw one of the wolves he had captured for the initial breeding program. It was at the moment when I saw that wolf – and I didn't take video, I took 8mm film – when I saw that wolf, I thought, 'I can't believe what I'm seeing here.' I didn't even know the Mexican wolf existed."

McBride succeeded in capturing just five wolves. But, along with several captive animals, they're the forebears of the surviving lobos.

Zoos led the way in a breeding program. Lobos came to the El Paso Zoo in 1994. Today, the zoo holds older wolves, past the breeding age. But in a new exhibit that's currently under construction, wolf litters may be born here.

In 1998, Fish and Wildlife began to reintroduce lobos in Arizona and New Mexico. Wolves can and do kill cattle, and the project met fierce opposition from many ranchers. Today, with wild lobo numbers just above 100, that opposition continues.

The El Paso Zoo has supported reintroduction. Carrie Trudeau is among zoo staffers who've helped build fences in Arizona designed to reduce wolf-cattle encounters.

After one long workday, the laborers gathered around a campfire.

"Then we were greeted by the sound of the wolf pack," Trudeau said. "We could hear the yip-

ping and howling. And that was really a shot through the heart. It was haunting. You get chills through your body – you realize that all hope is not lost, that we still have a chance to bring this very important species back."

The federal government has led reintroduction elsewhere. But here, LoBello said, Texas Parks & Wildlife would have to lead. And private landowners would need to buy in.

Any West Texas wolf population would be small. But LoBello points to black bears, which have returned to Big Bend, and now thrive even in harsh desert.

LoBello notes that in Yellowstone, reintroduced wolves have thinned elk populations, leading to a more balanced and robust ecosystem. They've also generated millions in eco-tourism.

Here, Big Bend's protected lands could be a place to start, he said.

Wolves inspire both intense fascination, and intense hostility. LoBello notes they were wiped out before their role here was understood.

"There is habitat there that will work for a small population," LoBello said of the Big Bend region, "and they can sustain themselves if they're given a chance. They might surprise us all. We might find out there are things they're going to do to help maintain the biological integrity of the ecosystem that we never thought of. We won't know that till we get them back in the wild and can study them."

Ultimately, whether the lobos' howls return is a decision for the people of West Texas.

Nature Notes is supported by the Shield-Ayers Foundation and produced by Marfa Public Radio with the Sibley Nature Center. This episode was written by Andrew Stuart.

The federal government has led reintroduction elsewhere. But here, LoBello said, Texas Parks & Wildlife would have to lead. And private landowners would need to buy in.

Any West Texas wolf population would be small. But LoBello points to black bears, which have returned to Big Bend, and now thrive even in harsh desert.

LoBello notes that in Yellowstone, reintroduced wolves have thinned elk populations, leading to a more balanced and robust ecosystem. They've also generated millions in eco-tourism.

Here, Big Bend's protected lands could be a place to start, he said.

Wolves inspire both intense fascination, and intense hostility. LoBello notes they were wiped out before their role here was understood.

"There is habitat there that will work for a small population," LoBello said of the Big Bend region, "and they can sustain themselves if they're given a chance. They might surprise us all. We might find out there are things they're going to do to help maintain the biological integrity of the ecosystem that we never thought of. We won't know that till we get them back in the wild and can study them."

Ultimately, whether the lobos' howls return is a decision for the people of West Texas.

Nature Notes is supported by the Shield-Ayers Foundation and produced by Marfa Public Radio with the Sibley Nature Center. This episode was written by Andrew Stuart.

Nature Notes is supported by the Shield-Ayers Foundation and produced by Marfa Public Radio with the Sibley Nature Center. This episode was written by Andrew Stuart.



Rick LoBello is education curator at the El Paso Zoo. A former Big Bend National Park ranger, LoBello saw some of the last Mexican gray wolves to be captured in the wild in the late 1970s. Conserving the endangered animal – once an apex predator of West Texas – has been a passion for LoBello ever since.



SIBLEY NATURE CENTER
NATURE CENTER