United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
BUREAU OF SPORT FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE
Federal Building, Fort Snelling
Twin Cities, Minnesota 55111

IN REPLY REFER TO: WS

February 19, 1971

REPORT

on

A SURVEY OF THE TIMBER WOLF (Canis lupus) IN UPPER MICHIGAN

The gray wolf (Canis lupus) once lived throughout almost all of North America. At present, however, the range of this species in the 48 contiguous States is restricted to Minnesota, Isle Royale, Upper Michigan, and perhaps a few small scattered pockets of the western States.

On mainland, Michigan, wolf numbers declined during the past several decades, and in 1965 the species was given legal protection. Since that time only incidental observations of lone wolves, and an occasional pair, have been reported. Because of the scattered nature of these reports, the general conclusion has been reached that little or no breeding is occurring among Michigan wolves and that therefore the population is doomed to extinction unless it is rejuvenated by a natural or artificial influx of additional animals.

To check the validity of this conclusion, the Bureau attempted to make a systematic aerial and ground survey of selected areas of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, during the period January 27 through February 5, 1971. Financial support for the project was granted by the Huron Mountain Wildlife Foundation. Pilot-biologist John Winship flew the Bureau's Cessna 206, with Dr. L. David Mech as observer; and Dr. Robert Brander (USDA, Forest Service) and Dr. William L. Robinson of Northern Michigan University accompanied Mech in part of the ground work. The main objective was to try to locate packs of wolves and to determine the suitability of certain areas for supporting wolf packs.

Methods

Four methods were used during this study: (1) aerial scanning of lakes, rivers, ridges, and other open areas for wolves' tracks and kills, (2) snowshoeing through deer concentration areas, (3) driving roads and scanning for wolf tracks, and (4) interviewing for reports of wolves and tracks.

Approximately 500 linear miles were flown, over the following areas: Ironwood, north along Black River, south along Presque Isle River, east to Merriweather, and south along Lake Gogebic to the Wisconsin border, zig-zagging east along border lakes to Lac Vieux Desert, north to Bond Falls Flowage, and east to Perch Lake (Iron County), southeast to Amassa and Michigamme Reservoir, northeast over Witch Lake, Helen Lake, Long Lake, and Ishpeming, and Marquette, and northwest over Dead River Storage Basin, and Huron Mountains, south over Big Bay, Buckroe, Palmer, the headwaters of the Escanaba and Ford Rivers, east to Perkins, Indian Lake, Manistique, north over Seney Refuge, and west over Au Train and the Lake Superior shore. In all the areas mentioned, attempts were made to cover broad areas by circling and zig-zagging. Snowstorms and poor visibility prevented our scanning several areas we would have liked to, especially along the Lake Superior shore.

Ground work was conducted in the Huron Mountain deer yard, especially in the areas of Rush Lake, Pine Lake, and Middle Pine Lake. Roads northwest of Iron River were driven in search of tracks, and Mr. Donald D. Lappala, USDA, Forest Service, Iron River, was interviewed. (Previously, Mr. Ralph Bailey, Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Mr. Leo Wouri, Huron Mountain Club, had also been interviewed for reports of wolf sightings and tracks.)

Reports and Discussion

No sign of a wolf pack was seen, and only one report of a sighting or sign of a pack was received. This sighting was reported by Mr. Charles Martin of Watersmeet to Mr. Donald Lappala. Mr. Martin claimed to have seen four timber wolves (two large and two smaller) on Ottawa Forest Road 208, three-quarters of a mile west of Englesby Lake and about 23 miles northwest of Iron River, on January 18, 1971. Mr. Lappala did not hear of the report until about 10 days later, and when he checked the area for tracks he found none.

As mentioned earlier, the existence of lone wolves and occasional pairs is known for Upper Michigan, and our results confirm their presence. A single wolf scat, probably made during autumn, was found along the Lake Superior shore on Huron Mountain Club property, and tracks of what we suspect was a lone wolf were seen from the air east of Perch Lake (Iron County). In addition, we learned of four single wolves that had been killed during 1968 in the Iron River area.

The best documentation of lone wolves, however, comes from Mr. Lappala. Lappala is a surveyor for the Forest Service, who hunts coyotes and bobcats as a hobby. His work takes him over most of the Ottawa National Forest, and his hunting takes him into the area within 25 miles north and west of Iron River. Whenever he sees a wolf or a track, he notes it, and when sightings are reported to him from other people, he attempts to confirm them be checking for tracks. Following is a summary of his records of confirmed sightings or tracks of wolves since 1960:

Year	Tracks	Sightings
1960	2	--
1961	--	--
1962	1	--
1963	3	--
1964	--	--
1965	5	--
1966	--	3
1967	3	1
1968	5	2
1969	1	2
1970	1	3

It is of interest that since 1965 there has been an increase in the tracks and sightings recorded by Lappala. It is unknown whether or not this increase is a result of more reports having been brought to his attention recently because of the legal protection and publicity given to the wolf since that time. However, one other possible explanation is that this increase reflects a real increase in numbers of lone wolves in Michigan. If this is true, it might indicate that lone wolves are straying into the area from Minnesota, for since the bounty was removed in 1965, wolves have been extending their ranges within Minnesota to points south of Duluth. An eastward dispersal from Minnesota would take them into Wisconsin and eventually Michigan. Straight-line dispersal distances of up to 185 miles have been reported for wolves in tundra areas, and up to 130 miles in Minnesota. The Iron River area is about 220 miles from the nearest known Minnesota wolf population.

Just why Michigan's lone wolves haven't mated, had pups, and formed more packs is unknown. Perhaps the reason is related to the fact that coyotes are now so thoroughly established in the region. Studies from several other areas have indicated that wolf and coyote populations are seldom found occupying the same areas.

Food supply does not seem to be a problem for the wolf in Michigan at present. Deer yards appear overstocked, and starvation is known for

deer in many of them during severe winters, so vulnerable prey would be available. However, even if Michigan wolves did breed and form packs, it is highly doubtful that populations of high densities could thrive there. The maturing of Michigan's forests appears to be a major impediment to increasing deer populations, and the soundness of the official view of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources that the deer herd is decreasing and will continue to decrease is apparent.

Conclusions

1. No sign of wolf packs was found, although a recent unconfirmed report of a pack of four wolves was received.

2. There probably are several lone wolves in the Upper Peninsula, because four were known to have been killed in 1968, and reports of others have persisted in several areas since then. These animals may be dispersing into the State from Minnesota on the west and Ontario on the east.

3. Attempts should be made to secure the skulls of any wolves taken in Michigan so that age determinations can be made on them. A preponderance of old animals would indicate that the animals taken may be remnants of former populations, whereas a preponderance of young would indicate either that a resident breeding population still exists or that the animals are immigrating to Michigan from outside populations.

4. There appears to be a high enough population of deer in Upper Michigan to support far more wolves than currently live there, but the long-range potential of the area for deer, and thus for wolves, is not high.

5. If any attempt is made to restock wolves in Michigan, a family group should be used, for it appears that lone wolves have not been able to re-establish a breeding population.

6. From the biological standpoint, the Huron Mountain area appears to be a suitable location for supporting a pack of about five wolves.

Respectfully submitted,

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