



Field Season 2020

Final Report



Wolf-Livestock Coexistence Work Pushes On

13 Seasons in the Wood River Valley

It's hard to believe, but the Wood River Wolf Projects Field Season 2020 is already over! 2020 marked the thirteenth year the Wood River Wolf Project has been around. For the past several years, the project has been operating in twelve different grazing allotments throughout the Sawtooth National Forest surrounding the Wood River Valley. In 2020, nine sheep bands, some 17,000 strong, and their five producers operated across this massive territory of 286,889 acres. Despite the challenges of having this many sheep operating in such a vast landscape, no wolves were lethally removed from the Project Area this field season, marking another successful year.

Reasons For Concern

Going into this season, it seemed likely it would be a troublesome one. Idaho had extended the previously six-month hunting season on wolves to an eleven-month hunting season, and there had been a below average snowpack, leading to drier conditions in the area. The possibility of pack structures being fractured by random killings combined with increased stress due to heat and drought looked like a deadly combo. With the vast majority of the allotments in the project having a consistent wolf presence on top of these other worrisome factors, ensuring herders and operators were trained to use non-lethal deterrents was more important than ever.

Trail Miles Galore!

Throughout the 2020 Field Season, I added almost 3200 miles to my vehicle and logged nearly 300 trail miles while doing site analyses, herder trainings and check-ins, and camera checks. Our multiple volunteers logged hundreds of additional hours and trail miles checking camera traps, looking for wolf sign, and shooting videos for us.

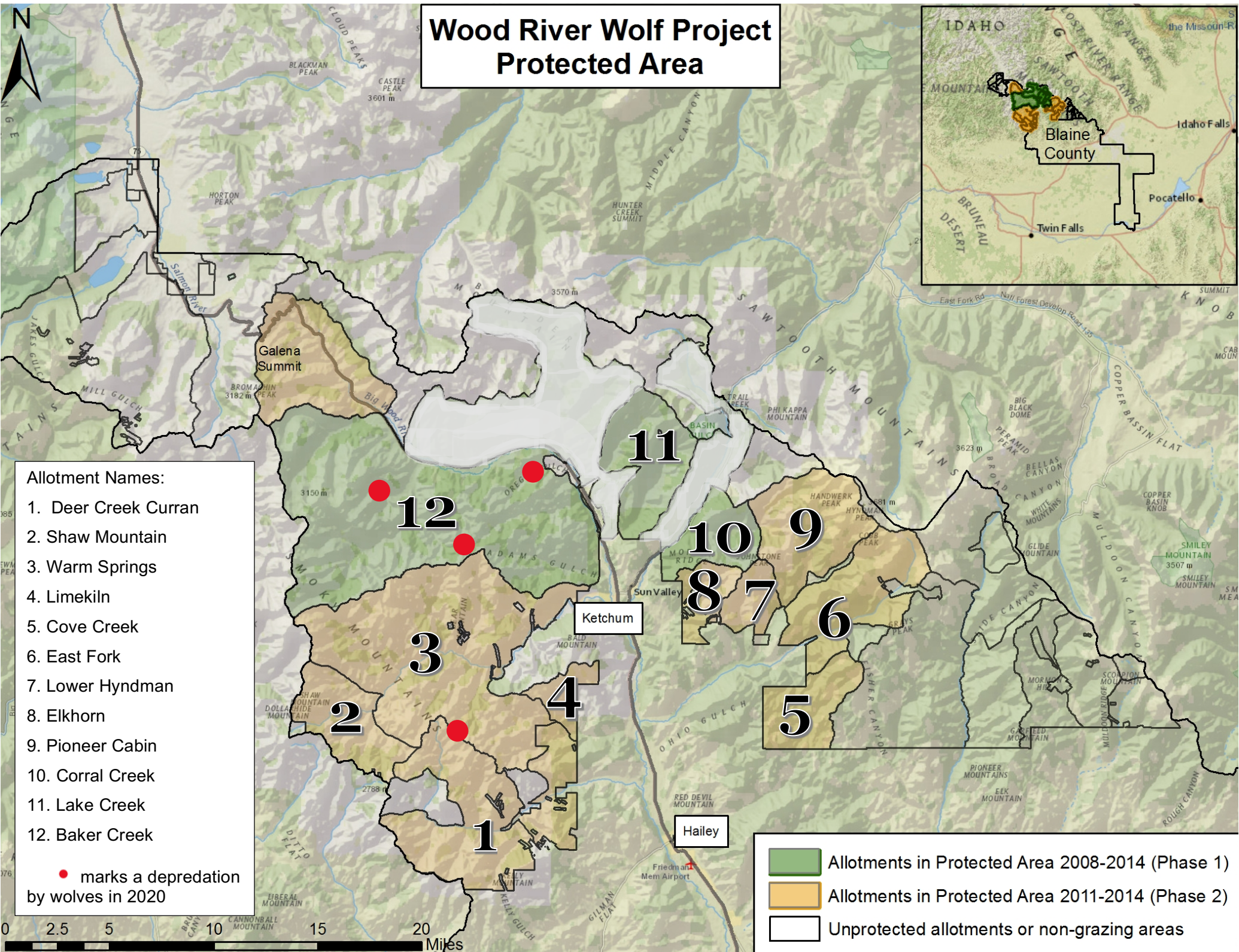
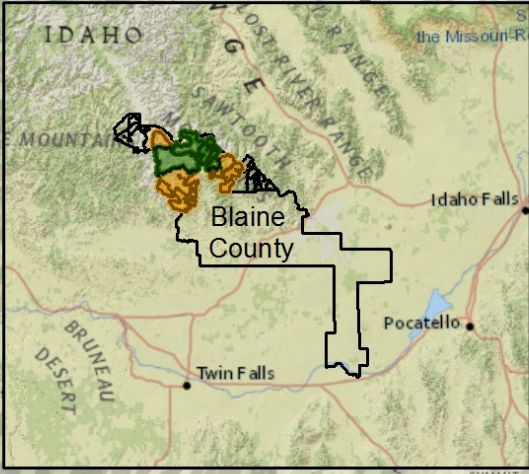


Long-time volunteer Kurt Holtzen using a tracking ruler to show new volunteers how to identify wolf scat.

Encouraging Deterrents, Preventing Wolf and Livestock Deaths

Throughout the season, all herders were provided a band-kit and a tutorial on how to use the items in the kit within a couple days of them arriving on the forest. Herders were routinely notified when wolves were sighted in their area and were advised to use the appropriate non-lethal deterrents (NLDs). Volunteers and I staked out with the sheep on multiple occasions when the risk for depredation was high. As a result of these incredible efforts on the part of the herders and our volunteers, sheep losses to wolves were minimized.

Wood River Wolf Project Protected Area



- Allotment Names:**
1. Deer Creek Curran
 2. Shaw Mountain
 3. Warm Springs
 4. Limekiln
 5. Cove Creek
 6. East Fork
 7. Lower Hyndman
 8. Elkhorn
 9. Pioneer Cabin
 10. Corral Creek
 11. Lake Creek
 12. Baker Creek
- marks a depredation by wolves in 2020

- Allotments in Protected Area 2008-2014 (Phase 1)
- Allotments in Protected Area 2011-2014 (Phase 2)
- Unprotected allotments or non-grazing areas



Season Recap

Early Season (June – mid-July)

The sheep bands in the Deer Creek (2) and Limekiln (1) allotments were met with first, after having arrived in early June. The herders that were passing through the Deer Creek allotment had not been introduced to non-lethal deterrents in the past, making this their first season being using non-lethal deterrents (NLDs). Fortunately, demonstrating the use of Fox Lights, airhorns, starter pistols, and spotlights occurred under the supervision of their foreman. This is generally helpful because herders are more likely to participate if someone they work with has shown enthusiasm for using non-lethal deterrents.

The herders from Limekiln had already worked with non-lethal deterrents prior and were thrilled to see the equipment brought back. They immediately began deploying the tools, as there had been wolf sign seen nearby. These two herders continued to use these lights and sound makers as they travelled up and over Galena Summit, passing through the area without having any wolf depredations.

The next two bands on the forest were those in the Lake Creek and Baker Creek allotments. These two bands were both notified there had been recent wolf activity in the area. Similarly, they were quickly provided band kits upon arrival.



Father and son, Alfredo and Sixto Castañeda, displaying the contents of their band-kit

Mid-Season (mid-July – August)

The Baker Creek band quickly had troubles with wolves. On 7/17 upon talking to the herders while going to check a camera, I learned that four sheep had been killed in Oregon Gulch on 7/13. I advised they place Fox Lights out with the sheep and use airhorns at dawn and dusk. On 7/19, I visited them at the top of Fox Peak and slept out with the sheep to show the herders how to place Fox Lights and encourage their use. I returned on 7/21 to do a follow up interview about the depredation event, again sleeping out with the sheep. Upon arriving, I saw that one of the herders had placed two Fox Lights with the herd.

7/28, a small dry band (ewes only) entered the forest on the Corral Creek allotment. I had planned on camping out with the sheep their first night there, because of a nearby sheep pile up



and consistent wolf presence. Upon arriving, I found the band with no guard dogs and a herder not even slightly interested in the non-lethal equipment. I quickly received word of five wolves being reported nearby. A volunteer and I set up Fox Lights around the band, sounded off airhorns, and stayed up with the sheep band till the morning with no casualties.

On 7/31 I was notified of a depredation of four sheep that had occurred on 7/29 on the Warm Springs allotment. Upon arriving, I found the sheep thirty minutes walking from the shepherd camp, with two Fox Lights on a nearby hill facing sideways rather than upwards. I stayed with the sheep that night, using it as an opportunity to show the shepherd how to use the Fox Lights and other deterrents effectively.

Shortly after the Warm Springs depredation, on 7/31 a five sheep depredation occurred in the Baker Creek allotment. No NLDs were used and the sheep slept well outside of earshot of the herders. Upon visiting the herders to see what practices they were implementing, I found them with the sheep close to camp with Fox Lights placed and air horns being sounded off.

Unfortunately, these practices did not continue and two weeks later on 8/14 they lost six more sheep to wolves.

The day prior to them losing sheep, the Lake Creek band was about to ship. They had seen wolves nearby but were not placing Fox Lights or using their spotlights. They did fire off rifle rounds into the air. Nonetheless, a volunteer Tara Rodkey and I staked out with the sheep minute to avoid any last-minute depredations before shipping occurred.

Around 8/11, another ewe-lamb band entered the forest on the Lower Hyndman allotment. This herder had been with his company for years and already knew the procedure. He consistently used Fox Lights and air horns and lost no sheep to wolves while in the Project Area. However, he had issues with bears and coyotes on different occasions, losing twelve lambs to coyotes on 9/1 and then 2 lambs and 1 ewe to a bear on 9/5.

End of Season (September – October)

The end of the season passed by with relative calm, other than the bear and coyote depredations noted above and another bear depredation out Cove Creek. No other herders reported any wolf depredations in the Project Area despite the Warm Springs band hearing wolves nearby.

Herder check-ins and communication continued throughout September, including occasionally replacing batteries or assisting with solar chargers for equipment.

Band kits were recollected from the herders prior to the end of the season, without almost all equipment being returned successfully.



Challenges and Successes

Depredations

This season proved quite challenging in terms of the number of depredations we saw. The Project found a total of 19 suspected depredations by wolves. All of these depredations except four occurred with the same sheep band without any non-lethal deterrents being used, other than livestock guardian dogs. The other sheep band that had depredations never experienced more depredations after implementing NLDs consistently. Sheep bands with herders that utilized NLDs preemptively avoided wolf depredations. This includes the Limekiln band that passed through similar territory to the Baker Creek band without losing any sheep to wolves.

Communications

Communication represented both a challenge and a success. Often WRWP was notified several days after a depredation had occurred or was not notified at all and only found out about it by visiting with the herders. Much room for improvement exists in terms of how quickly the project is notified by herders, foremen, and producers.

On the other hand, communication

greatly improved with herders compared to previous years. Since all herders in the Project Area are from Peru, having volunteers and a Field Manager who speak Spanish allows for ease of communication while helping to build trust. As a result, this year herders frequently called WRWP notifying the project of wolf, bear, and coyote sightings, as well as depredations. On top of this, herders frequently provided the project with feedback regarding the use of the NLDs. These conversations are critical for the project to be more effective and helpful. In this sense, WRWP has improved relations with the herders and created the opportunity for increased communication and collaboration.



Roberto Machacuay out at dusk deploying Fox Lights after hearing wolves nearby.



Maintaining Low Sheep Losses and No Wolves Killed

While this season saw more depredations by wolves than previous years, the Project still maintained sheep losses to wolves to less than 1% of their total population within the Project Area, a percentage much lower than surrounding areas. In doing so, we continue to demonstrate that non-lethal deterrents are incredibly effective in maintaining low losses of sheep to wolves, proving that coexistence is possible.

As a testament to the success of this coexistence project, we had another year in which no wolves were killed in the Project Area as a result of sheep depredations. The more we are able to work with ranchers to adapt these coexistence measures, the healthier and more resilient our local wolf population will become.