Interior-Sport Fisheries & Wildlife

The last cry of the wolf

Plans to protect wolves face obstacles from hunters, ranchers and an indifferent public. Meanwhile the animals head toward extinction.

by Louise A. Purrett

Man has been persecuting the wolf for thousands of years. Even in ancient Greece, 27 centuries ago, bounties were awarded to the brave hunter who bagged one. The ancient Romans got five drachmas for a dead male wolf. (Apparently male chauvinists were at work even then: Female wolves brought only one drachma.)

As a result of man's relentless warfare, wolves have been all but exterminated in many regions. They are extinct in most of Europe. In the continental United States, only a few hundred remain in isolated pockets of wilderness. Conservationists are now battling to preserve the two species of U.S. wolf that are facing extinction.

The red wolf, a small version often mistaken for a coyote, once inhabited the entire southeastern United States from Florida to Texas. But the Fund for Animals, a national conservation group, records that between the 1920's and 1950 poisoning and trapping by ranchers had exterminated red wolves from most of their former territory. The U.S. Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife carried on from there, killing a total of 27,646 between 1955 and 1964 in a predator-control program. Now it is estimated that only 200 to 300 red wolves remain in several counties in Texas and Louisiana. Interior's Office of Endangered Species is now working out a recovery plan for the red wolf. The problem is difficult, says a spokesman, because ranchers in the area are eager to exterminate the wolves, which they consider a threat to their livestock. And the red wolves face another danger. The animal's territorial system and social organization has been so disrupted that red wolves have begun to mate with coyotes, producing hybrid breeds. Interior considers this interbreeding an even greater threat to the species than the depredations of hunters.

The red wolf's problems have been eclipsed lately, though, because of a controversy centering around how to save its northern cousin, the eastern timber wolf. This large gray predator, like the red wolf, has been hunted so ambitiously that only 500 to 1,000 remain in parts of Michigan and northern Minnesota.

The cause of the controversy is a wolf management plan proposed by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. The plan would establish a 2,350-square-mile wolf sanctuary in northeastern Minnesota and set up a supervised hunting season for wolves. In "open" areas there would be a six-month season for hunting and trapping wolves. In other areas wolves may be hunted without limit. The stated goal of the program is to provide an annual "harvest" of 150 to 200 wolves, and the plan states that "emphasis in harvesting wolves should be upon their trophy value for sport hunting and trapping." The plan was endorsed by the regional director of the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, Travis S. Roberts.

The Minnesota plan has gotten a mixed reception from conservationists. Lewis Regenstein, Washington director of the Fund for Animals, admits that the plan does have some merits. "In some ways it does represent an improvement over the present situation, in which wolves may be killed year round without limit, except in the Superior National Forest." But on the other hand, he notes that the plan would make fair game of wolves that are currently protected. A section of the proposed plan asks the U.S. Forest Service to "rescind its current directive, prohibiting the taking of timber wolves on the Superior National Forest, and to cooperate in a statewide wolf management policy as described. . . ." Further, some estimates of the Minnesota wolf population are as low as 300 or less. An annual take of 200 wolves would soon exterminate them. Regenstein concludes that "the proposal would not provide adequate protection to these wolves, and appears to represent merely a slower road to extinction. . . ."

Apparently he is not the only one to think so. Nathaniel Reed, assistant secretary of the Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, has since overruled Roberts and withdrawn Interior's support from the Minnesota management plan. Reed noted that though the plan had the virtue of raising the wolf's status from that of an unprotected predator to a managed game animal, it would still allow the legal hunting of

an endangered species in that state. This is a situation the Department of the Interior cannot condone, he said. (The eastern timber wolf has recently been added to Interior's official list of endangered species.) Instead, Reed called for a moratorium on killing of eastern timber wolves, "with the possible exception of those preying on livestock," until a nationwide recovery plan for the wolf can be completed. The Office of Endangered Species is now working on such a plan, and it is expected to be completed by the end of February. It would be a cooperative plan with the states where wolves still exist, as well as with any state where wolves once lived that wants to reestablish a population of the animals within its borders. Reestablishing populations of wolves would involve trapping them and moving them to new and suitable habitats. Interior also hopes to be able to work out an agreement with Canada.

Although the Federal Government has withdrawn its support of the Minnesota plan, the Minnesota state legislature can still vote to put it into effect. The vote is expected to come early this year.

In Alaska, which has the biggest population of wolves in the United States, the animals are faring little better. Steps are now being taken to preserve the estimated 2,500 to 5,000 wolves remaining, but it has been an uphill battle. Hunters and fur traders have been decimating their numbers and until recently the Alaskan wolf faced the additional danger of being run down and shot from the air by hunters in airplanes. Policing Alaska's wilderness is difficult and even with laws to protect wolves, poaching would be a continual problem. In 1971 Congress passed a law prohibiting hunting of animals by airplane, but the law has many loopholes and the state has been slow to enforce it. Alaska's new Commissioner of Fish and Game has said he will curtail issuance of airplane hunting permits, but it remains to be seen how well any measures are enforced.

At present the chief hope of conservationists rests on a new endangered species bill that is expected to be reintroduced in Congress this year. The bill would require Interior to list animals that are likely in the foreseeable future to become threatened with extinction and would provide Federal penalties for killing listed animals. In effect, it would put animals such as the wolf under Federal protection and allow the Federal Government to overrule state management plans such as the one proposed in Minnesota. But passage of the bill is not assured. Introduced last year in Congress, it died in committee in both houses.

Who will prevail in this last battle over the American wolf is uncertain. What is certain, says Regenstein, is that if steps are not taken soon, the time is not far off when the wolf will howl its last. □

Choosing the best young high-school scientists

—A possible chemical solution to smoke pollution caused in Oregon at harvest time by the burning of tons of waste rye straw.

—A finding that mentally retarded people retain the ability to perform eidetic imagery beyond puberty, when most people lose the capacity.

—A novel way to determine the ratio of the mass of the planet Jupiter to the mass of the earth.

—Development of a mathematical method of analyzing a basic problem in international trade: the degree to which countries should specialize in the products they produce comparatively the cheapest.

Results of research projects by scientists at a major university? No, these are among the findings resulting from projects of 40 outstanding high-school science students in the United States chosen winners last week in the 32nd annual nationwide Science Talent Search.

Each year, the nation's high schools are surveyed to find the most talented young scientists. The search is sponsored jointly by the Westinghouse Electric Corp. and Science Service Inc. The former funds the program through the Westinghouse Educational Foundation; Science Service administers it through its Science Clubs of America.

The 40 winners this year—29 boys and 11 girls—were selected from among 1,105 students who completed all entrance requirements. More than 13,000 students from all 50 states received entry materials.

The 40 winners will be honored with an expense-paid five-day trip to Washington in March where they will compete for $67,500 in Westinghouse scholarships, to be awarded March 19. The top award will be a $10,000 four-year scholarship. E. G. Sherburne Jr., director of Science Service, points out that the Science Talent Search has awarded $856,000 to 1,240 young scientists since its inception in 1942. Many of them have gone on to promising scientific careers.

The 40 national winners announced last week were chosen on the basis of reports on their individual science projects, ratings by teachers and scholastic records. In Washington, they will be interviewed by a committee of judges, exhibit their science projects to the public and visit scientific laboratories.

By state, the winners are:

ARIZONA: Joseph L. Demer, Salpointe H.S., Tucson.

CALIFORNIA: Esther L. Zack, Alexander Hamilton H.S., Los Angeles; Steven L. Brittenham, Skyline H.S., Oakland; Glenn J. Greene, Will C. Crawford H.S., and June A. Vavo, James Madison H.S., San Diego.

COLORADO: Arvind N. Srivastava, Poudre H.S., Fort Collins.

CONNECTICUT: Irving W. E. Fallon, Southington H.S., Southington.

FLORIDA: John R. Minter, Terry Parker H.S., and Laureen P. Miller, William M. Raines H.S., Jacksonville.

HAWAII: Darryl A. Higuchi and Rodney S. Kawahara, Aiea H.S., Aiea.

ILLINOIS: Bradford J. Rodriguez, Barry H.S., Barry; Nancy E. Everds, Lake Forest H.S., Lake Forest.

INDIANA: Deborah J. Zygmunt, Central H.S., Evansville.

MARYLAND: Michael T. A. Weinert, Gaithersburg H.S., Gaithersburg.

MISSOURI: Anne L. Raymond, Notre Dame de Sion H.S., Kansas City.

MONTANA: Michael A. Smith, Malta H.S., Malta.

NEBRASKA: Donald P. Schneider, Minden H.S., Minden.

NEW JERSEY: Karin G. Zupko, Perth Amboy H.S., Perth Amboy.

NEW YORK: Robert J. Lipshutz, Baldwin Sr. H.S., Baldwin; Eric M. Fogel, Benjamin N. Cardozo H.S., Bayside; Van J. Wedeen, Midwood H.S., Brooklyn; James V. Noto, Elmont Memorial H.S., Elmont; Thomas F. Rosenbaum and Leon H. Tatevossian, Forest Hills H.S., Forest Hills; Donalisa V. Boccio, Sanford R. Climan, Joshua L. Rubin and David Treatman, Bronx H.S. of Science, Bronx; Jill E. Bechtold, Hunter College H.S., New York; Lee H. Laiterman, Martin Van Buren H.S., Queens Village.

NORTH DAKOTA: Rex T. Skodje, Bismarck H.S., Bismarck.

OHIO: Leilin Hsu, Euclid H.S., Euclid.

PENNSYLVANIA: Renée J. Conroy, Marple-Newtown Sr. H.S., Newtown Square.

RHODE ISLAND: Mark A. Musen, Cranston H.S. West, Cranston.

SOUTH CAROLINA: Patrick G. Jobe, Spartanburg H.S., Spartanburg.

TEXAS: David A. Goldberg, Bellaire H.S., Bellaire.

UTAH: David N. Weidman, Box Elder H.S., Brigham City.

VIRGINIA: Robert C. Reynolds, McLean H.S., McLean.

WISCONSIN: Robert J. Brentrup, Sheboygan South H.S., Sheboygan.