

'Was that Something We Wanted to Have Happen? Absolutely Not': Gray Wolf Kill

Rises to 216, 82% above State-licensed Goal

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Hunters and trappers killed 216 gray wolves in the 2021 Wisconsin wolf harvest season, 82% above the state-licensed goal, according to Department of Natural Resources data released Thursday.

The hastily-arranged season began Monday and ended Wednesday; the kills surpassed the established goals in each of the six wolf management units.

State-licensed hunters and trappers had a harvest quota of 119 spread across the state, excluding Native American reservations.

The swift pace of the wolf kills, mostly by hunters using trailing hounds, took the DNR by surprise. And the overage was made worse by a state statute that requires 24-hour, rather than immediate, notice of the season closure, as well as a decision by the Natural Resources Board to issue twice as many as the normal number of permits.

The process and the higher-than-planned kill has focused criticism on DNR wildlife officials.

"Should we, would we, could we have (closed the season) sooner? Yes." said Eric Lobner, DNR wildlife director. "Did we go over? We did. Was that something we wanted to have happen? Absolutely not."

After the final registration deadline Thursday afternoon, hunters and trappers had killed 50 wolves in Zone 1 (quota was 31), 45 in Zone 2 (18), 43 in Zone 3 (20), 7 in Zone 4 (6), 31 in Zone 5 (27) and 40 in Zone 6 (17).

The vast majority (86%) of the wolves were taken by hunters using dogs, while 9% were killed by hunters using other means such as calling or bait, and 5% were claimed by trappers. Fifty-four percent of the animals were male, 46% female. No age information was made available on Thursday.

Hunters and trappers registered 216 gray wolves in the 2021 Wisconsin wolf harvest season. The season lasted just three days and the state-licensed quota was exceeded by 82%.

Law enforcement officials said a "handful" of citations were issued but declined to specify the type or number.

This wolf hunting and trapping season is the fourth in state history. It was triggered by the Jan. 4 delisting of the gray wolf by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and a lawsuit that

forced the DNR to hold a season before the end of February.

It was the first to be held in February, during the wolves' breeding season. Wolf advocates have expressed concern over the impact killing pregnant females will have on the population and its potential to disrupt wolf packs.

The rushed timeframe also allowed very little opportunity for legally-required consultation with Native American tribes. "This season trampled over the tribes' treaty rights, the Wisconsin public, and professional wildlife stewardship," said a spokesperson for the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission. "It will go down as a stark example of mismanagement, and the problems that can be expected when the state Legislature and the courts embrace special interest groups over the public as a whole."

During the three previous regulated wolf seasons, hunters and trappers killed 117 wolves in 2012, 257 in 2013 and 154 in 2014. Those seasons lasted about two months and ended in late December.

As with this year, the state-licensed quotas were surpassed in the previous wolf seasons, but by much smaller margins (1% in 2012, 2% in 2013 and 3% in 2013).

The conditions this week, with fresh snow for tracking on Monday and Tuesday in northern Wisconsin, and a large number of hounders set the stage for a rapid wolf kill.

But DNR managers stressed the state's wolf population came into the season in strong shape. Wisconsin had 1,195 wolves in 256 packs in late winter 2020, according to an agency estimate.

The agency had set an overall harvest goal of 200 wolves with an objective of stabilizing the population. Native American tribes claimed a quota of 81, leaving 119 for state-licensed hunters and trappers. The tribes hold wolves sacred and generally use their quota to protect, rather than kill, the animals.

"We have a robust, resilient wolf population," said Keith Warnke, DNR administrator of parks, land and wildlife. "I think we are very confident we will be able to manage (wolves) properly going forward."

The DNR's next challenge is completing its annual wolf monitoring project to establish the late winter 2021 population estimate. If the species remains in state control, the next wolf hunting and trapping season would begin Nov. 6.