

Trapper takes eight wolves in a month

Summer Williams/St. Maries Gazette-Record

Eight wolves harvested in one month is a new record for one local trapper.

It is only a month into the trapping season and Paul Coward has already more than doubled his take from last year and he still has two more tags to fill.

The expenses he's faced to harvest wolves, however, may force him to pull his traps before he can fill those tags.

Mr. Coward said he started trapping wolves three years ago because he saw the impact the predators had on wildlife populations and the economy.

"I'm out in the woods a lot and I see the damage they are doing," Mr. Coward said. "The numbers of elk are dwindling down to nothing."

He said businesses in small communities have been put out of business because out-of-state hunters are no longer attracted to the area due to dwindling herds.

"It's hurting the small communities," he said. "There are towns that used to have several hotels and now there's only one or two."

The 2014-2015 trapping season for wolves opened more than a month earlier than the traditional season, Brad Corkill, an Idaho Fish and Game commissioner, said.

"The traditional trapping season doesn't open until Nov. 15, but we opened it up Oct. 10. It's a very important part of our management plan," he said, "especially in the area of the upper St. Joe drainage. We opened it early to give trappers the opportunity to get into that country before the snow gets too deep and shuts off access."

The elk herd in the St. Joe River drainage, which is in Unit 9, used to have numbers close to 3,000, Mr. Corkill said.

"Our numbers are now showing that the herd is below 500. Restoring the herd to that area is very important," he added.

Tony McDermott, who served as a Fish and Game commissioner from 2005 to 2013, is the sportsman's representative on Governor Butch Otter's wolf control board.

"We have a wolf problem," Mr. McDermott said. "And it has cost the state millions of dollars."

In an article he wrote last year, Mr. McDermott spoke to David and Tina Banderob, who are the owners of Banderob's Wild Meat Processing Plant in St. Maries.

In 2005, the Banderob's processed 205 elk, the majority for nonresident hunters. In 2013, they processed 31 elk for mostly resident hunters.

"Tina reported that nonresident elk hunters have quit coming to St. Maries because the elk are gone," Mr. McDermott wrote.

Mr. McDermott said there are close to 1,000 wolves in Idaho if not more which is far more than what was agreed upon. In 2002, the Idaho Legislature approved a Wolf Management Plan that called for 150 wolves and 15 breeding pairs.

"Over the last five years, the state has lost in excess of \$100 million," Mr. McDermott said. "Elk populations in the Lolo Zone have gone from 1,500 to less than 700 and there are less than 500 elk in the St. Joe drainage, down from 2,000 or more. That is due to the addition of the wolf."

According to the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation a wolf will kill 20 to 30 elk each year, he added.

Mr. Coward estimates by removing eight wolves he's saved close to 160 elk.

"That's a lot and that's huge," he said. "I've come across elk that are still alive that have been chewed on by wolves. The wolves just ate the hind end off and the elk can't walk anymore. I decided I was going to learn how to harvest wolves and try to save some elk."

Trapping is not cheap, but it is the best way to control wolf populations, Mr. Coward said.

"You can drive around for days and not see one, but they are out there," he said. "This is the best way to do it."

Equipment and fuel are the largest expenses, Mr. Coward said. He said traps alone cost \$50 and scents can cost as much as \$60 for a gallon.

"I lose about \$7 each time I set a trap because I won't get the anchor back," he said. "It costs me \$60 per fuel per day when I'm checking traps three times a week."

Wolf pelts are only worth about \$200, Mr. Coward said.

"When you start tallying up the expenses, you can't even break even," he said.

Mr. McDermott is a member of the Foundation for Wildlife Management, an organization that formed two-and-a-half years ago which seeks to reimburse trappers up to \$500 for each wolf they harvest. However, the budget is only set up to cover wolves harvested from Dec. 1 through March 31 not those taken in October and November.

Mr. McDermott said he wants to help Mr. Coward pay for some of the expenses he incurred to trap the eight wolves.

"If we had the money, we could help pay in the early trapping season as well," he said.

There are only about 350 members in the organization. Of those 250 reside in Idaho while 100 are from out of state.

"It's not a bounty we pay," Mr. McDermott said. "It's mean to help trappers with their expenses. It costs a lot of money to trap a wolf so we want to help those who harvest a wolf legally."

Mr. McDermott said there are 155,000 hunters in Idaho and if each of them donated \$5 it would help the Foundation for Wildlife Management to be able to reimburse legitimate expenses of trappers who harvest a wolf.

"Not everyone is aware that we are here," Mr. McDermott said. "If we had 4,000 members we wouldn't have to worry about fundraising so much."

Mr. McDermott and Mr. Coward believe controlling the elk population is key to restore the elk herds and ultimately the economy they say the wolves have destroyed.

"It's getting worse," Mr. Coward said. "There are less and less elk and more and more wolves out there."

Mr. Corkill added it is going to take the effort of people like Mr. Corkill who take the initiative to bring back the elk numbers to where they once were.