

What's become of the West's big, bad wolf

by Bert Edises

"Take eight coyote or wolf glands

¼ liver with gall

1 kidney

Black coyote or wolf dung (black from eating meat diet)

Grind glands, liver with gall and kidney, place in glass jar but do not seal airtight. Let stand in a warm place until well-rotted. Then dissolve black dung in warm water and add two ounces of the well-rotted glands. Then it is ready to use."

This is not a recipe for mincemeat. It is the formula for wolf scent bait, an important ingredient in wolf trapping. Steel traps using wolf scent, together with firearms, strychnine, arsenic, cyanide, and a particularly devastating poison known as Compound 1080, have succeeded in almost completely eradicating the gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) from the southwest. Known to the early settlers as Lobo, the gray wolf once roamed Arizona, New Mexico and northern Mexico by the hundreds; now he is almost gone. How did this happen and is it a good thing?

It happened because by the 1880's the southwest had become one large livestock ranch. With great adaptability, the wolf turned from his diet of white-tailed deer and mule deer to the much more plentiful cattle, sheep and goats. Unfortunately for the wolf, the livestock industry suffered an economic collapse in 1893, probably as the result of overgrazing and drought. From 50 percent to 75 percent of the cattle in Arizona were lost. With ranchers whose herds had been ravaged by wolves turned to their county, state and federal governments for help in getting rid of the "varmints." One of the first results was the establishment of a bounty system, under which counties and private stockmen paid hunters up to \$75 for a dead wolf. Continued pressure by stockmen brought the US Forest Service into the anti-predator campaign. In 1908 forest rangers killed 352 wolves in national forests in New Mexico and Arizona. This was followed by Congress' creation in 1915 of Predatory Animal and Rodent Control (PARC) which hired professional hunters on a salaried basis. Under the slogan "Bring them in regardless of how," PARC's director, the wolf-hating J. Stokley Ligon, encouraged PARC's hunters to make unprecedented kills. By the

mid-1960's the wolf population of Arizona and New Mexico had been reduced practically to zero.

For the first time cattlemen reported no stock losses and the only wolves observed were a couple that had wandered up from their dwindling stronghold in Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidental.

What kind of creature is it whose eradication has caused the expenditure of so much time, money and manpower? The southwestern wolf looks very much like an oversize coyote. The male weighs between 80 and 100 pounds; the female is 5 to 10 pounds lighter. The maximum weight of a coyote is about 35 pounds. Adult southwestern wolves range in length from 4½ to 5½ feet, including the 14-17 inch tail.

The southwestern wolf's preferred habitat is wooded country and forests. He does not like and does not ordinarily frequent the desert. Interestingly, California, although it has a lot of territory of the kind preferred by wolves, has none. The reasons for this anomaly are not known.

Male and female wolves mate for life and share the job of raising the pups, of which there are two to a dozen in a litter. The southwest wolf is a remarkable hunter. He can travel hundreds of miles in a few days, guiding himself by his extraordinary sense of smell, and when he finds game, outrun any prey he chooses. His courage is legendary. As one hunter said of a wolf taken in his trap:

"She did not cower like a coyote, but met the trapper's club — vicious and defiant to the end."

The wolf's hunting habits are unusual, to say the least. Pursuing a steer or a cow, the wolf attacks from the rear, biting the rump and flank areas and often tearing off large chunks of meat from the animal's hindquarters without killing it. The wounded animal invariably dies, though it may remain alive for some time. The thing that used to infuriate stockmen is that the wolf rarely returned to feed on his victim, but instead killed another ... and another ... as many as four in the same night, while feeding on only one.

The power of a wolf's jaws is almost beyond belief. He has been known to free himself from a trap by biting through the heavy steel frame. With jaws so strong he will tackle the largest bull or steer, inflicting damage which will bring about the animal's death. Incidentally, it is not true that the wolf habitually

culled the sick, weak and unfit members of the herd. To the contrary, wolves were not scavengers; they chose and dined on quality livestock.

I have not spoken of the hauntingly beautiful voice of the wolf, the famous wolf howl. According to David E. Brown, on whose book, *The Wolf in the Southwest*, this article is largely based:

"The howling of wild wolves is one of the most exciting wilderness sounds a human can experience."

Unfortunately, he adds:

"It is increasingly rare in Mexico and only a memory in the rest of the southwest."

That is a pity.

Is the eradication of the southwest wolf a loss to humanity? Before the rise of the environmentalist movement the answer would probably have been a resounding No! Stockmen and ranchers would, of course, have been in the forefront of this negative chorus, stressing their duty to provide the nation with meat and wolf's savage obstruction of that duty. But most ordinary citizens would probably have agreed with the cattlemen, swayed by the popular image of the big, bad, bloody wolf.

In today's different atmosphere, many would argue that respect for life, including wildlife, requires that at least some wolves be kept in a preserve in a natural state, where they will be available for observation and study by qualified persons. After all, similar protection has been provided to other predators.

Those who oppose this position argue that wolves cannot be confined to one area. They add that if a male and female couple broke away from the reserve, the species' tremendous reproductive powers would enable the breakaways quickly to restart the cycle which was so brutally and expensively broken with traps, guns and poisons.

Nevertheless, there are still a few southwest wolves in the mountains of northern Mexico, and if a small number could be painlessly trapped and brought to a reserve in this country, their numbers could be controlled — and the thrilling call of the wolf might once again ring out upon the night.