

Denali National Park and Preserve January to December 2023 Wolf Pack Narratives Plus update through February 2024

NOTE: Pack narratives span from January 1 to December 31, 2023, with any significant changes through February 2024 also noted. Pack names are followed by the October 1 2023 pack count.

Wolf identification numbers are created as follows: first two digits refer to the year they were first collared, second two digits are assigned sequentially to wolves collared for the first time that year, the first letter indicates the color of the wolf (G-gray, B-black) and the second letter indicates the sex (F-female, M-male). Thus 0811GM is a gray male wolf that was the 11th wolf collared in 2008.

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Eastern Packs

Erratics (7 wolves)

Erratics pack began the year with a pack count of 5, but 2013GF dispersed in February, for a March count of 4 wolves. No additional wolves were collared in March. Dispersing 2013GF made her way northeast, to the area around the mouth of the Little Delta River and Birch Lake on the Richardson Highway. She died in October, in unknown circumstances. The Erratics pack again denned in the Carlo Pass den, and had several rendezvous sites in the greater Riley Creek and Park road corridor areas. They recruited 5 pups, for a fall pack size of 7. Monitoring flights showed that breeding female 2109GF has a fierce personality, especially when it comes to bears. On August 30th, the telemetry monitoring flight observed: “Defending pups from bear.. There was a big dark grizzly that appeared to be trying to get at the pups...The female collar was real aggressively chasing off the bear who kept coming back and trying to sneak in towards the pups...When I left the bear was walking uphill and away from the area.” Then on September 13th: “[2109GF] seems to dislike and have no fear of bears. I previously saw her chasing a bear in this same area. Today, I found her resting alone on a knob above mid-Jenny creek. Two pups, 1G, 1B, were resting ~100 meters away. They got up to romp and play while I circled and eventually went over to the grey female... As I circled, I noticed a bear just 100m away feeding on remains of a moose kill. During my circling, 2109GF got up and noticed the bear and immediately gave chase and ran him off to the south. When I left, she was still in pursuit chasing him off.”

Grant Creek (7 wolves)

This generally strong pack seemed to have challenging year. They began the year with 9-10 wolves. Telemetry flights identified a smallish light grey wolf typically leading the pack. During March captures we collared this animal, 2303GM, as well as re-collaring 2102GF and adding a collar on adult female 2304GF. They had a March count of 9 wolves. There was evidence that both 2102GF and 2304GF whelped litters. 2102GF used a new den site on the East Fork, but abandoned it by the end of May. 2304GF used one of the traditional Wigand dens. Unfortunately, no pups were ever seen with any pack members in the summer or fall. 2304GF was twice observed in September holding an injured right front leg off the ground. The pack continued to maintain a very large territory from the Kantishna hills east across Wigand Flats and including portions of the Stampede corridor area. They had a fall count of 7 wolves. At the beginning of December, the whole pack traveled north to the area of Toklat Springs at the mouth of the Sushana River. 2303GM and possibly some other pack members did not return to the territory with the rest of the pack, and instead finished out the year well to the north of the Park.

February 2024 update: In January, 2303GM returned to the territory but was not traveling with the other collared wolves. In late January, the collar of 2303GM sent a mortality signal before going off-air. The collars of 2304GF and 2102GF both went off-air that same week. The last locations of all three animals were seen to be in areas of active trapping. It is unknown how many pack member may remain and if they are still in the territory.

Serena (6 wolves)

This pack began the year with 9 wolves, but by March this number had diminished to 6. 1915GF died of starvation in early April. In mid-April the telemetry flight observed the pack “just east of Cabin Divide Mt. stalking two big sheep rams. The two leaders sneaked within 30 yards then made their rush as the rams blew out. One went downhill and the other cut back across the hill. They chased the one going downhill. The ram ran like his life depended on it and barely skidded into a small rock face outcropping downhill a half mile. When I left them he was still cliffed out there and the wolves were resting and others were trying to get within reach.”

To ensure continued monitoring, we added a collar to adult female 2307GF in April. 2307GF whelped pups in a den on Stony Creek, and the pack recruited 2 pups, for a fall count of 6 wolves. In November we collared another adult female in the pack, 2309GF.

Riley Creek (11 wolves)

This pack continued to be large and successful. In the early part of the year this pack had as many as 14 members, with a March count of 12. In March we recollared breeding female 2007BF. Shortly thereafter, the GPS portion of her mate 1911GM’s collar failed, making it very fortunate that we were able to maintain at least 1 functional GPS collar in the pack. At 7 years of age, 1911GM is the oldest wolf monitored in 2023. This pack returned to a den site on the Teklanika that they used in previous years, where they whelped at least 3 pups, all of which survived through October, for a fall pack size of 11 wolves.

Western Packs

Abbie (8 wolves)

Abbie pack began the year 9 strong, but in early February presumed breeding male 2105GM drowned in Birch Creek. In March we collared another adult female, 2302GF, and the pack had a March count of 8 wolves. Neither collared female, including presumed breeding female 2112GF, showed clear evidence of whelping or den site attendance, although we suspected the pack was using one of the dens in the Slippery Creek den complex. 2302GF died of starvation in June. Our suspicions were supported by fall sightings of two wolves behaving like pups, snuggling up to 2112GF. The pack had a fall count of 8 wolves. In November we recollared 2112GF and added collars to two adult males in the pack, 2308GM and 2310BM.

Bearpaw (2 wolves)

The Bearpaw pack started the year with 8 wolves, although by March this was reduced to 7. In a surprise moment of synchronicity during March captures, we came over a ridge to find 2103BF, a wolf we hoped to re-collar, alone and in the open far from the rest of the pack. We were able to recollar her, and although she briefly rejoined the pack in early April, she moved separately in the territory before ultimately dispersing eastward (see Dispersers). Meanwhile, the other collared wolf, 2209GM, also split off from the pack in mid-April and trended northwest. Lacking a way to monitor the remaining Bearpaw wolves, the Bearpaw moniker went with him for the time being. In June, Roosevelt female 2210GF began spending time in the same area, and eventually joined 2209GM and was reclassified as a Bearpaw wolf. These two animals remained

together for the rest of the year, for a fall count of 2. It is not known if the remaining Bearpaw wolves are still maintaining a territory or if they denned.

Blanc (? wolves)

After their steep decline last year, this pack did not rebound. They had a spring count of 4, and shortly thereafter presumed breeding male 2106GM died of starvation. The remaining collared wolf, 2211BF, began trending westward, spending much of the year outside the park and too far for regular aerial monitoring. There was no suggestion that she attended a den. The fall count of this pack is unknown.

Glacier City (5 wolves)

Glacier City began the year with 5 wolves, and maintained that for their spring count. In March we were able to recollar breeding female 1904GF. Her mate, a large black male, is quick to flee from aircraft and has proved too elusive to collar. This pack denned in a location similar to last year, on lower Moose Creek. Most of their territory is steep and thickly vegetated, making it challenging to spot them. They were observed to have 1 pup with them in fall, for a fall count remaining at 5 wolves.

Roosevelt (1 wolf)

This year saw this pack seemingly wane in strength. They started the year with 8 wolves, and had a spring count of 7 wolves. The GPS portion of presumed breeding female 1903BF's collar was already intermittent at the beginning of the year, and got worse as the summer progressed. Nevertheless, we could determine that she denned at one of their traditional den sites on the Kantishna river. With 2210GF having dispersed to Bearpaw pack, monitoring of Roosevelt became limited. Summertime monitoring showed three adults, but the only visuals of 1903BF from the fall showed her alone, with no evidence of pups or other pack members.

Spyglass (4 wolves)

Spyglass began the year as a pair after losing their pup last year, with a spring count of 2. In March we recollared 1918GF, and found her to be in excellent condition, particularly for a wolf about to turn 7 years old. They denned in a new location near the terminus of the Herron glacier, and recruited 2 pups for a fall count of 4.

Kotahino (1 wolf)

After seeing tracks of a pack of 6-7 in the western part of the park all winter, we were able to collar adults 2305GM and 2306GF out of a group of 7. They ranged a large territory southeast of Lake Minchumina. 2306GF appeared to whelp in a den near Starr Lake, but no pups were ever seen. In early June, 2305GM dispersed to west/southwest (see Dispersers) This pack was challenging to get visuals on, but fall sightings were of only 2306GF herself, with no others.

Packs No Longer Monitored

Cantwell Creek (monitoring ended)

This pack began the year 11 strong, with two collared females, breeding female 2108GF and adult female 2008GF. They dropped to 9 by the end of January. In early March, 2108GF and likely several other pack members were caught and killed in an avalanche, bringing their numbers down to 6. After this incident the pack began spending more time further outside the park, in Broad Pass and the mountains to the south. 2008GF whelped at least 5 pups in that area, but was harvested in July. There were no attempts to add additional collars to this pack in 2023 given their distance from the park. The fate of the remaining pack members was unknown.

Dry (monitoring ended)

This pack's territory overlapped with several developed areas outside the park. The only collared wolf, breeding female 2206BF, was trapped in March. The fate of the remaining 4 pack members was unknown.

Hana (0 wolves)

This pack began the year consisting of only 2115BM, after he lost his two previous mates to Grant Creek aggression. In early March he met the same fate, killed by Grant Creek in his own territory, which they quickly annexed.

Sesui (7 wolves)

Although the year began with promise for this pack, it turned out to be a severe one. The pack began the year with 7 wolves and kept them through March, consisting of the breeding pair 1808GM and 2107GM and their surviving pups. In March we recollared 2107GF. They again used a den on the west side of Castle Rocks, and were seen to have whelped 5 pups. Their fall count remained 7. Then in October 1808GM died of unknown natural causes. When we investigated, his body had been almost fully consumed, perhaps by his own pack, reminiscent of the fate of his previous mate 1919GF. The following month, 2107GF was killed by other wolves, leaving any remaining pups and yearlings to fend for themselves, and ending our monitoring of this pack.

Short cache (monitoring ended)

This pack, named for its short monitoring tenure and capture location, had been snowtracked as a group of 4 in the winter. In March we collared adult male 2301BM out of a group of 4; unfortunately he died only 5 days later of natural unknown causes, likely killed by other wolves – perhaps by neighboring Kotalhno.

Sunday Creek (0 wolves)

This pack began the year as only a pair, with one collared animal. 2012GM was harvested in February, ending the story of the Sunday Creek pack.

Dispersers

Sometimes wolves collared in the Denali Wolf Project Study Area end up dispersing to areas far away. With the use of collars that collect GPS location data and transmit the data

via the Iridium satellite network, we have been able to document the movements of these wolves. However, given the distance from the main study area, our aerial tracking flights do not cover these wolves' ranges so we know do not know if these wolves are traveling with other wolves or have started a new pack.

2305GM, from Kotahlno: After dispersing in early June, he traveled southwest, into the Telida area. He likely encountered Blanc female 2211BF but they did not remain together. He ended the year near the Telida lakes. Due to his distance from the park, we were not able to monitor him after dispersal and do not know if he is with other wolves.

2301, from Bearpaw: After dispersing in April, she traveled northeast outside the Park to the Parks Highway Corridor. She then seemed to localize into a territory east of the Nenana River. Monitoring flights of her have been limited but so far she has not been seen with other wolves.