



Are Wolf Viewing Opportunities at Risk?



Photo by Kes Woodward

The viewability of wolves near the Denali Park Road may be adversely affected by the elimination of the closed areas outside the park (closed to hunting and trapping) in a recent vote by the Alaska Board of Game (spring 2010).

I've seen pictures [that a photographer took of wolves in Denali]—looks like some mangy dogs walking down the dusty road with the bus along side of them. But it's just not appealing to me at all. I guess people in the bus think it's just great. But it's just not what Alaska is...

—Cliff Judkins, Chair
Alaska Board of Game (2010)

The bus driver broke the silence, announcing by microphone, “There’s a wolf ahead, and it’s coming this way.” As shuttle bus passengers reached for their cameras, she began to whisper, “There’s a second wolf too. Get your windows down, and stay quiet.”

The first wolf was gray with a few reddish streaks at his muzzle and ears. He trotted with lanky, effortless strides, fur slightly furrowed with the drizzle. He hesitated only briefly before passing alongside the bus, eyes forward, ignoring the open windows, clicking cameras, and the wide-eyed, awestruck viewers. His large GPS (global positioning system) collar indicated he was the alpha male—previously captured and collared to track his movements. The second wolf was red on the face and legs, and a bit more wary—she turned to look at the bus with piercing yellow eyes. In a few moments, both wolves were gone, but the spell of silently watching wild wolves—their gait, their fur, their yellow eyes—lingered for the rest of the bus trip.

Special wolf viewing opportunities such as this may decrease in the future.

Protecting wolf viewing opportunities

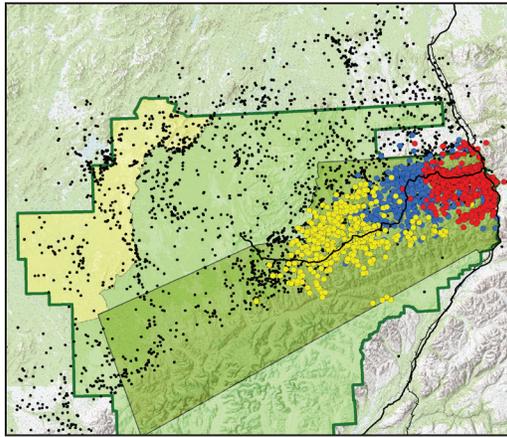
Each year, 20,000 to 30,000 visitors to Denali National Park and Preserve view wolves along the park road—on the tundra, a gravel bar, or the road itself. Denali is recognized as one of the best places in the world for people to see wolves in the wild. Wolf

viewing offers park visitors and the Alaska tourism industry substantial benefits.

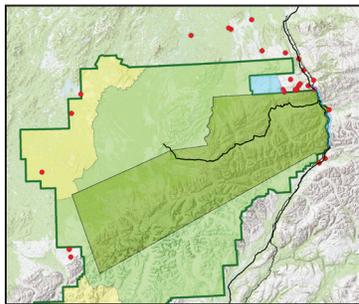
Wolf viewing opportunities are provided primarily by three packs of wolves that live near the park road (see Map 1 on reverse). These viewing opportunities in Denali depend mainly on the behavior of individual wolves that frequent the park road. While the degree of tolerance to humans may vary widely among wolves, it is likely that the wolves that are most tolerant of humans, and therefore most often seen by humans along the park road, are the same ones that are most vulnerable to being legally harvested (i.e., trapped and shot) when they venture fearlessly beyond park boundaries.

Since 2000, certain areas adjacent to the park boundary have been closed to the taking of wolves, in order to protect wolf viewing opportunities in the park. The size of the closed areas has changed several times, but since 2004, these closed areas total 316 km² (122 square miles) (see darker blue areas on Map 3 on reverse). These closed areas are located in Alaska Game Management Units (GMU) 20A and 20C.

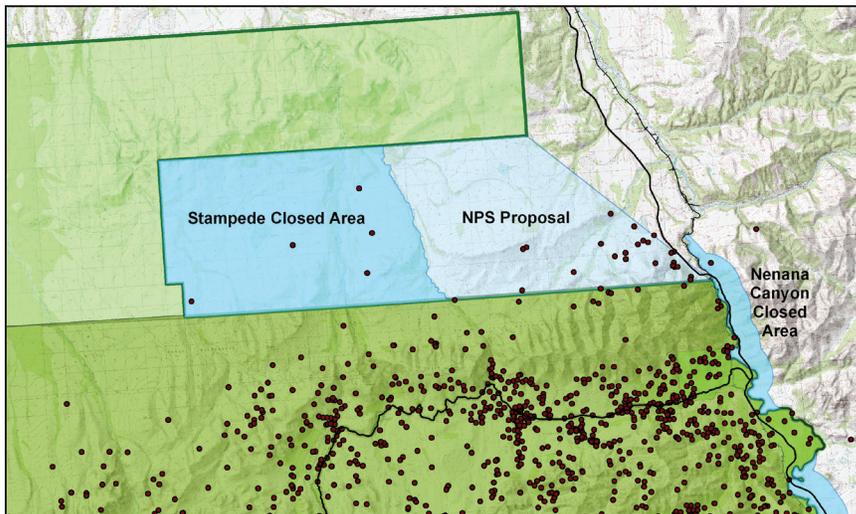
Analysis of data from GPS radio collars placed on wolves by park wildlife biologists shows that, in recent years (2003-2009), two of three most commonly viewed wolf packs in the park have occasionally traveled east of the Stampede Closed Area into areas where they are vulnerable to harvest.



Map 1. Colored dots represent six years (2003-2009) of winter locations of GPS-collared wolves from the three packs that live near the park road and provide the most sightings for visitors. Black dots are collared wolves from other packs during the same time period.



Map 2. Recent wolf harvest (2003-2009) is primarily outside the northeast park boundary. The Stampede Closed Area is shaded blue.



Map 3. The NPS proposed to extend the closed area east to include the light blue area. The Board of Game voted against this proposal and also voted to eliminate all existing closures (darker blue areas).

Effects of wolf harvest near the park

The taking or harvest of wolves (particularly breeding wolves) near the closed area in what are known as the Wolf Townships or the Stampede Corridor, has the potential to (1) decrease wolf numbers in the park, (2) alter wolf behavior, (3) decrease opportunities for wolf viewing by park visitors, and (4) increase the likelihood of sightings of wolves with trap-related injuries.

In 2009, wolf numbers in the park were lower than any time in more than 20 years. The spring 2010 estimates of population size in the park were

even lower. Using wolf tracking data in Denali to compare the locations where radio-collared wolves were killed by humans in recent years (2003-2009) compared to such locations in the early years (1986-1994), park biologists have demonstrated that wolf harvest has concentrated increasingly on areas just northeast of the park (see Map 2). Lowered population size of wolves in Denali has little effect on wolf populations at a regional scale, but can have significant, year-long effects at the park level, and thus can have substantial impacts on visitor experiences.

Another consequence of wolf trapping just outside the park is the increase in sightings of wolves bearing trap hardware and injuries. In the winter of 2007-2008, many people saw one wolf with a gaping throat wound from a broken snare still around his neck. A second wolf with a snare was also seen in the park, as was another wolf with a trap clamped to its foot. Such sightings have a detrimental effect on public opinion of trapping and wildlife management.

NPS proposal to extend closed areas

The NPS supports maintaining the Stampede and Nenana Canyon Closed Areas (see darker blue areas

on Maps 2 and 3), which the NPS believes have protected both the wolves that live near the park road and the wolf viewing opportunities for park visitors. Park managers recently evaluated the effects of several options for the Stampede Closed Area. In late winter 2010, the NPS proposed to the Alaska Board of Game a closed area extension that would enlarge the closed area by 64 percent by adding the light blue area (Map 3).

Based on the documented locations of wolves from the three “park road packs” beyond the park boundary (dots on map based on collared wolf data), the expanded closed area would provide almost complete protection of the wolves from the Teklanika-Toklat area of the park (yellow and blue packs, Map 1) and 75 percent protection for the wolves at the east end of the park (red dots, Map 1) when they leave the park. That is, of the colored dots beyond park boundaries, none of the yellow and blue dots, and only one fourth of the red ones, was located outside the closed areas as proposed by NPS.



Vote by the Alaska Board of Game

In late winter 2010, the Alaska Board of Game received 11 proposals to either expand, reduce, or eliminate the closed areas outside Denali. The board rejected the proposal submitted by the NPS to expand the closed areas. In addition, they also voted to eliminate all existing protection for Denali wolves traveling outside the park by removing the Stampede and Nenana Canyon Closed Areas. The board also closed any dialogue on the issue by voting to not reconsider the closed area policy for six years.

What's next?

Denali's wildlife biologists and park managers are continuing and enhancing efforts to track movements of wolves when they travel to wintering caribou populations beyond the park boundary, and to document where collared wolves are harvested. A new study will focus on the patterns of viewability of wolves on the park road. Park managers will continue to advocate for measures that protect natural and healthy park wolf populations and that provide opportunities for visitors to see wolves—the wild charisma of their gait, their fur, their yellow eyes.

For more information

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