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Media contact: [Cody Norton](#), 906-202-3023

Michigan wolf surveys show stable, healthy population

Recent winter survey results point to a minimum estimated Upper Peninsula population of nearly 700 wolves



The Michigan Department of Natural Resources said today that the state's wolf population has remained relatively stable over the past nine years, with the most recent survey completed this past winter. DNR Wildlife Division staff who participated in this latest survey estimate there was a minimum of 695 wolves found among 143 packs across the Upper Peninsula. Pack size has remained stable and averages just under five wolves.

Dan Kennedy, acting chief of the Wildlife Division, said the DNR has surveyed wolves since 1989 when they began naturally recolonizing the U.P.

"The survey is important because it helps us monitor wolf distribution and abundance, answer research questions and evaluate progress toward state and federal recovery goals," Kennedy said. "Our survey results continue to demonstrate that Michigan's wolf population has recovered."

The survey was conducted from December through March, before wolves had produced pups, when the population is at its lowest point in the annual cycle.

"Once survey units have been identified for a given year, surveyors drive roads and trails in trucks and on snowmobiles looking for wolf tracks," said Dean Beyer, a DNR wildlife research biologist who organizes the sampling and generates the wolf population estimate for the biennial survey. "Once they find wolf tracks, surveyors follow the tracks as long as is practical to determine the number of individual wolves that made the tracks."



The wolf survey is completed by DNR Wildlife Division and U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services staff who search specific survey areas for wolf tracks and other signs of wolf activity, such as territorial marking or indications of breeding.

"Surveyors try to locate adjacent packs on the same day, to ensure they are not double-counting the same wolves," said Beyer. State and federal wildlife staff also trap wolves in the spring and outfit them with GPS collars to help determine pack boundaries. This

helps determine which tracks belong to each pack during the winter survey.

In 2019-2020, approximately 62% of the Upper Peninsula was surveyed.

After wolves returned naturally to the U.P. through immigration from Minnesota, Wisconsin and Ontario in the 1980s, the population rebounded remarkably over time. The pronounced long-term increase in wolf abundance is evident, despite human cause-specific mortality, such as poaching and vehicle collisions.

Over the past decade, Michigan's minimum estimate has hovered between 600 and 700 wolves, which is indicative of a stabilizing population.

"Given the relatively consistent abundance estimates since 2011, it appears the wolf population has likely reached the carrying capacity of the Upper Peninsula," said Cody Norton, a wildlife management specialist with the DNR's bear, wolf and cougar program in Marquette.

Since the winter of 1993-94, combined wolf numbers in Michigan and Wisconsin have surpassed 100 wolves, meeting one of the federally established goals for delisting wolves in the Great Lakes states. In 2004, Michigan achieved its recovery goal of a minimum sustainable population of 200 wolves for five consecutive years, and wolves were removed from the state list of threatened and endangered species in 2009.

Wolves in Michigan remain a federally protected species and may be killed legally only in defense of human life.

More information about Michigan's wolf population can be found at Michigan.gov/Wolves.

/Note to editors: Accompanying photos are available below for download. Caption information follows./

[Trail cam](#): A DNR trail camera image, taken in August 2019, of a gray wolf in the Upper Peninsula.

[Bedded wolves](#): Two gray wolves bedded down in the snow. Taken during a previous winter's aerial wolf survey.