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## Latest Numbers Show Decline in Wolf Sightings Along Denali Park Road

By EMILY SCHWING

Fairbanks, AK - Environmental groups are asking the state and the federal government to exchange or purchase land to create a permanent wildlife buffer along the eastern border of Denali National Park. The request comes in response to numbers released by the park service that show a decline in the number of wolves viewed by visitors.



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[\(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/kuac/files/201311/denali\\_wolf\\_o.jpg\)](http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/kuac/files/201311/denali_wolf_o.jpg)

*Credit National Park Service*

5,841 bus trips took place along the road inside Denali National Park this summer. The Park Service sampled less than one-and-a-half percent of those trips to find out how often visitors spot wildlife. Wolves, in particular, were only sighted on three occasions out of 80 trips sampled. Don Striker is the Denali National Park Superintendent. He says wildlife viewing is something visitors have come to expect. "I think the ability to experience wolves in the wilderness on their own terms is an amazing and often times transformative experience for people," says Striker. Wolves that have been spotted along the Denali Park Road in the past are likely members of the Grant Creek Pack. "The Grant Creek Pack breeds right near the road," says Striker. "So they offered the best opportunity for people to be able to see wolves. They sort of grew up with buses going by." But in May of 2012, the Park Service reported the pack's dispersal. A breeding female was trapped and killed that year. Striker says the loss of the pack means there are fewer wolves to spot in the area, but he doesn't think those numbers are an indicator of larger changes in overall population "In no way, shape or form would I suggest that this data suggests that we have a problem with respect to the viability of the wolf population in Denali," says Striker.

"There's not necessarily a link between how many wolves are seen in the park and how many are there," Says Cathy Harms. She is a Wildlife Biologist with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. For the most part, she and Don Striker agree. "A specific wolf taken by a trapper was the breeding female in a pack commonly viewed and it did disrupt viewing, but it didn't disrupt overall wolf numbers in the park," says Harms.

But environmental groups argue hunting and trapping outside the park is affecting the population inside the boundary. Last spring, the Park Service counted 55 wolves, down from 143 in 2007. It's the lowest count since the Park started keeping track of wolves in 1986. Rick Steiner is a conservation biologist and wolf advocate. "We don't know all the causes of the decline," says Steiner, "but without question it is indisputable that take of park wolves when they cross the invisible boundary park on the east side by

trapping and hunting has contributed to the decline of wolves in the park and certainly in viewing success," he says.

In 2010, the Board of Game voted to eliminate a buffer zone that protected wolves that crossed across the northeastern park boundary. Since then, Steiner and others have made multiple efforts to reinstate the buffer without success. But Cathy Harms says harvest numbers in the area where the buffer used to exist are too low to significantly impact the population. "In the area formerly known as the buffer zone, the maximum number of wolves taken per year has been four wolves and often it's zero to two so there's no correlation between trapper and a decline in wolf population in the park," say Harms.

Rick Steiner says both the state and the federal government are focused on numbers when they should be looking at wolf behavior. "It's not just about numbers," says Steiner. "It's about family groups and pack integrity and the actual cultural behavioral characteristics that they develop over years."

In a letter to US Department of Interior Secretary Sally Jewell and Alaska Governor Sean Parnell, Steiner has requested that the state and federal government negotiate an easement exchange or land purchase to secure a permanent buffer to protect Denali area wolves. Neither office has responded, but the Governor's staff is reviewing the document. The Park Service is still compiling numbers from this year's fall counts.

**TAGS:** [Denali National Park](#) [wolves](#) [Rick Steiner](#) [National Park Service](#) [wolf](#)

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# Game Board again shoots down Denali wolf trapping buffer zone

Author: **Craig Medred**  Updated: July 6, 2016  Published January 11, 2013

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Once more the [Alaska Board of Game](#) has refused to reinstate a wolf buffer zone around [Denali National Park and Preserve](#), wherein trapping is banned.

Moose that inhabit the area, which generally supports the highest concentration of the big ungulates in the 6-million-acre federal reserve, might be happy, but environmentalists are howling mad.

They say continued trapping threatens wolf-viewing opportunities in the park. Denali wolves are most often seen from the park road. And wolves particularly like the area near the east entrance to the park because moose often congregate just to the north.

In a prepared statement, [Jim Stratton](#), the Alaska director for the [National Parks Conservation Association](#) called the board's action "the latest blow from an agency that has forgotten that watching wildlife is every bit as important to Alaskans as killing it.

"The Board of Game's decision comes on the heels of the agency denying multiple emergency requests by the National Parks Conservation Association and a host of other concerned Alaska citizens last summer and fall, urging it to reinstate the buffer zone. We raised the alarm upon reviewing initial data from the National Park Service, showing a 66-percent decline in the chances of seeing wolves on Denali Park Road since the buffer zone was eliminated in 2010.

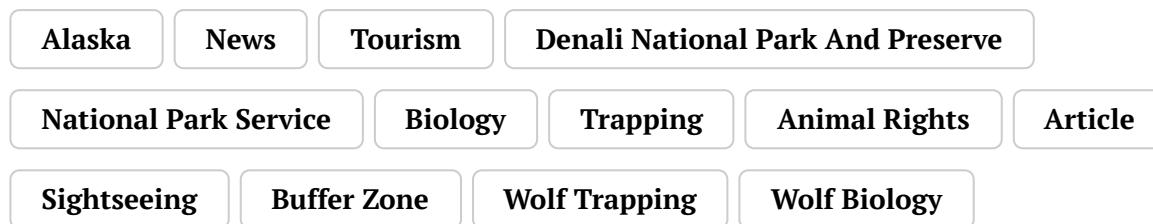
"Park service researchers also counted the lowest population of wolves in 25 years last October: only 57 wolves, down from a high of 143 wolves in 2007. Viewing wolves in Denali National Park not only provides visitors unforgettable memories; there are serious economic benefits associated with visitors traveling to Alaska with the sole purpose of seeing – not killing – wolves and other wildlife."

Park Service officials say they don't know why they counted only 57 wolves in October. They suspect the count missed some, and they note that Denali isn't home to enough moose, caribou and Dall sheep to support many wolves. Wolf densities in the park since 2010 have hovered in the range of wolf densities in the park in the mid-1980s.

The numbers are significantly lower than the peak wolf years of the early 1990s, but biologists note wolf populations vary widely over time. The population of the nation's most studied wolves -- those that live totally protected on Isle Royale National Park in Lake Superior -- has over the years ranged from 50 to 10. The Denali population swings pale in comparison.

The state Game Board says it is in a position of mediating between various wildlife interests in Alaska. Wolf trapping provides some income in the Parks Highway community of [Healy](#), and some year-round residents of the area are supportive of trapping because low wolf numbers help keep moose numbers higher. And moose are an important source of meat in rural parts of Alaska.

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**Wildlife**

# Are hunting and trapping to blame for a drop in wolf sightings in Alaska's Denali National Park?

Author: **Alex DeMarban** Updated: September 28, 2016 Published November 28, 2013

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Wolf viewings by tourists are down dramatically in Denali National Park and Preserve, and conservation groups are blasting a 2010 decision by Alaska game managers to allow wolf hunting and trapping on a chunk of state-owned land outside the park.

The National Park Service didn't voice that same accusation so clearly. But in a press release about the drop in viewings, the agency highlighted the decreased wolf population and the state's policy.

Ted Spraker, the Alaska Board of Game chairman who has voted against allowing the hunting and trapping in the area, said the drop in wolf numbers appears to be related to a drop in prey in the park -- moose, caribou and sheep.

"It has nothing to do with trapping and the fact that a buffer is not there," he said.

For years, the state did not allow hunting and trapping in a 122-square-mile buffer at the northeast edge of the park that is "most frequented by wolves," the park service said.

In 2010, the park service asked the state Board of Game to expand that buffer zone. That would have banned "hunting and trapping in additional areas where many of the most-viewed wolves winter, the agency said.

But the Board of Game rejected the expansion and went even further, eliminating the buffer zone, the statement noted.

The possibility of wolf viewings in Denali is considered an important draw for the park's 400,000-plus annual visitors, meaning it's also important for a state economy that's partially dependent on tourism.

But the chances of seeing a wolf from a bus ride through the park -- the way the vast majority of visitors travel -- have plummeted, the park service reports.

In a **random sample of 80 bus trips** this summer, wolves were seen on three occasions, or about 4 percent of the trips. By contrast, in the three previous years the likelihood was 12 percent (2012), 21 percent (2011) and 44 percent (2010), the park service said.

The number of wolves counted in the park and preserve north of the Alaska Range during the spring has fallen from 66 in 2012 to 55 in 2013. That's the lowest level since 1986, but the wolf population remains viable, the park service said.

Trapping as well as hunting for sport and subsistence remain legal in certain areas of the federally owned land, but the "documented wolf harvest is quite small."

The decrease in wolf numbers has not led to higher numbers of prey in the park and preserve, such as caribou or moose. And while populations of moose, caribou, sheep and bears vary annually, those animals have not undergone the "steady decline found with wolves," the agency said.

Spraker said he has twice voted to support the buffer. But as a board member, he said he supports the body's decision, which will be reconsidered in 2016.

He said wolf numbers have fallen across the park, not just the area near the buffer, another indication that the hunting and trapping outside the northeast boundary is not to blame.

"We need to have more science and less emotion involved in this discussion because once it gets to this state you have these circular arguments," he said.

A statement from Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility said the drop in wolf numbers was even sharper and blasted the state's policy.

"In 2010, the Alaska Board of Game, comprised of hunters and trappers, eliminated this no-take wolf buffer altogether," said a statement from PEER. "The wolf population across the 6 million acre park and preserve has declined from 143 in fall 2007 to just 55 in spring 2013 -- a drop by more than half in just six years."

The PEER statement said the cooperative spirit between state and federal wildlife managers has "broken down completely" under Gov. Sean Parnell, who became governor in summer 2009 after Sarah Palin quit.

PEER board member Rick Steiner said the game board's 2010 decision hurts tourism.

"The State of Alaska should understand the simple economics of this," he said. "In places like Denali, wolves are worth far more alive than dead. Removing the buffer benefits two or three trappers, but costs thousands of park visitors the opportunity to watch wolves in the wild, and thus costs the Alaskan economy."

Spraker, who said he enjoys wolf trapping though he doesn't take many, said a potential solution may be a land exchange with the federal government. An exchange would allow the feds to increase the park's

holdings. If the trade is fair for the state, perhaps the federal government could trade for a much larger area than the current buffer. That's a decision that would be made at a higher level than the Game Board, most likely the Legislature.

"The board is understanding and sympathetic to the viewing public," he said. "But we feel hunting and trapping and viewing can be done at the same time if done properly."

PEER laid out its concerns in a letter to [Gov. Parnell and Interior Secretary Sally Jewell](#).

The park service and Spraker agreed the problem is complex.

"We are just beginning to learn about the factors, such as pack disruption, that play a role in magnifying the impacts of individual wolf losses on viewability," said Philip Hooge, assistant superintendent for Resources, Science, and Learning with the park.

The issue will be explored more deeply in a peer-reviewed paper expected to be released in the spring.

*Contact Alex DeMarban at [alex\(at\)alaskadispatch.com](mailto:alex(at)alaskadispatch.com)*

#### **About this Author**

**Alex DeMarban**

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**Alaska News**

# Petition seeks to limit hunting, trapping of Denali wolf packs

Author: **Kim Murphy**  Updated: September 29, 2016  Published September 6, 2012

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The wolf pack that has enchanted thousands of visitors at Denali National Park did not produce any pups this year and its members have dispersed widely throughout the park, says a petition seeking to ban hunting and trapping along the park's northeastern boundary, where a female wolf was fatally snared this year.

Visitors are likely to have substantially fewer chances to see wolves, which habitually denned close to the main road through the 6 million-acre park, says the petition, filed by the Alaska Wildlife Alliance, the National Parks Conservation Association and other groups.

"To me, and I know probably 400,000 other people who visit Denali, these wolves are way more valuable alive than dead. I don't know what they get for a wolf pelt, but it's not much," said Valerie Connor, conservation director for the Alaska Center for the Environment, which also joined in the petition.

The proposal to the Alaska Board of Game for a hunting and trapping buffer on state lands around Denali has been a point of friction for years between conservationists and the board, which became so weary of the issue that it put a moratorium on any further consideration for the next several years.

But the deaths of the Grant Creek pack's two main breeding females this spring -- one from the trapper, the other from natural causes -- raised concerns that have been partially realized.

Bridget Borg, a biologist at the park, said the 15-member pack split up and the chief monitored group is down to five or six wolves. After not producing any surviving pups, she said, they abandoned the den that put the pack in viewing range.

She said biologists had not determined that the pack has no breeding females and that there was a chance the pack could join up again over the fall and reproduce next spring.

Marybeth Holleman, who is writing a book on Denali's wolves and joined in the petition, said she traveled to the Grant Creek pack's den over the summer and found no wolves there.

"The Grant Creek pack was the most visible pack in the park. People saw them hunting along the road. A bus driver told me about having the pups sitting in the road howling right in front of the bus -- incredible sights," Holleman said. "This summer, we saw one lone wolf near the visitors center. It was a solo wolf, out hunting by itself."

The problem, the petitioners say, is that pups are what hold a pack together: Some wolves remain at the den site to tend the young, while others make hunting forays and return to the den with food.

"The loss of just one important breeding animal can lead to catastrophic impacts over the long term," Alaska conservation biologist Rick Steiner, who led the drafting of the petition, said in a statement.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game rejected Steiner's initial request for an emergency ban on hunting and trapping on state lands east of the park, prompting conservationists this week to appeal directly to the Alaska Board of Game.

Douglas Vincent-Lang, head of Fish and Game's Division of Wildlife Conservation, said the loss of a few wolves from one pack is of little concern biologically when overall the wolf population in that area of Denali is healthy.

By Kim Murphy

Los Angeles Times

#### **About this Author**

**Kim Murphy**

Kim Murphy is a reporter at the Los Angeles Times.

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