

Mexican gray wolves thrive in 2022

Story by [John Larson, El Defensor Chieftain](#) | Mar 9, 2023



A sedated Mexican wolf is carried from a helicopter to a team of staff who will conduct a health check and attach a collar to the wolf before releasing it back into the wild.

Photo courtesy of Mexican Wolf Interagency Field Team

In January, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service Interagency Field Team wrapped up its annual Mexican gray wolf count and capture operation to complete its 2022 end-of-year population survey. Results of the annual survey show that for the first time since reintroduction into the wild, the number of Mexican wolves in Arizona and New Mexico has surpassed 200, with a minimum of 241 wild wolves. The population is distributed with 136 wolves in New Mexico and 105 in Arizona.

Brady McGee, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Mexican Wolf Recovery Coordinator, said that going from zero wild Mexican wolves in 1998 to the current 241 “is truly remarkable.”

“In 2022, we recorded more packs, more breeding pairs, and a growing occupied range, proving we are on the path to recovery. These achievements are a testament to partner-driven conservation in the west.”

Annual surveys are conducted in the winter as this is when the population experiences the least amount of natural fluctuation. In the spring, the population increases dramatically with the birth of new pups and declines throughout the summer and fall as pup mortality generally occurs in this period.

Thus, the Interagency Field Team summarizes the total number of wolves in the winter at a fairly static or consistent time of year. Counting the population at the end of each year allows for comparable year-to-year trends at a time of year when the Mexican wolf population is most stable.

At the end of January, included in the overall count, there was a minimum of 59 identified wolf packs in New Mexico and 19 in Arizona. A wolf pack is defined as two or more wolves that maintain an established home range.

In addition, a minimum of 121 pups were born in 2022, with at least 81 surviving until the end of the year. The average survival of Mexican wolf pups in their first year is around 50 percent.

A minimum of 20 breeding pairs in New Mexico and 11 in Arizona were recorded in 2022.

There were 109 collared wolves in the wild at the end of the year, which is 45 percent of the wild population. Not all of the wolves are collared.

Additionally, seven captive Mexican wolves were successfully rescued from enclosures at the Ladder Ranch Wolf Management Facility during the Black Fire in the spring. The wolves were temporarily held at the Sevilleta Wolf Management Facility until it was safe to return them to the Ladder Ranch.

Mexican wolf population information is gathered from November through February by the Interagency Field Team. During this time, the IFT conducts ground and aerial surveys, using a variety of methods, including remote cameras, scat collection, and visual observation.

According to U.S. Fish and Wildlife, this marks the seventh consecutive year of population growth and a more than doubling in size since 2017.

Erica Prather, greater Gila Arizona advocate for WildEarth Guardians, said the population increase is something to celebrate, “but we need comprehensive landscape protections to help the species thrive in the face of climate change.

“The Greater Gila is a biodiversity hotspot, and lobos are one its most iconic species,” Prather said. “We cannot separate the Mexican wolf’s success from the habitats they need to thrive.”

WildEarth Guardians and its allies have repeatedly sued the Service to improve recovery plans and management rules.

The lobo, or Mexican gray wolf, is the smallest, most genetically distinct and rarest subspecies of gray wolf in North America. It is listed separately from the gray wolf as an endangered subspecies under the federal Endangered Species Act. In 1977, the Fish and Wildlife Service and its partners initiated efforts to conserve the subspecies by developing a bi-national captive breeding program with the seven remaining Mexican wolves in existence. Mexican wolves were first reintroduced to the wild in 1998, marking the first time in 30 years that Mexican wolves were known to exist in the wild in the United States.

In addition to the minimum wild population, there are approximately 380 Mexican wolves currently maintained in more than 60 facilities throughout the United States and Mexico through the Mexican Wolf Species Survival Plan.

Partners in Mexican wolf recovery in the United States include the Service, Arizona Game and Fish Department, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service, USDA APHIS Wildlife Services, White Mountain Apache Tribe, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service and the Species Survival Plan.