

Lions, coyotes and bears

No new top predators to challenge mankind in NE



Thomas W. French, assistant director of the state Division of Fisheries & Wildlife, said local wildlife habitat cannot sustain a cougar or wolf population. (T&G Staff/TOM RETTIG)

By Bradford L. Miner TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

Shotgun blasts resounding from the rural wooded hills of Central Massachusetts through Dec. 10 confirm it's once again hunting season for white-tailed deer.

Sportsmen and women annually have an opportunity to head for favorite locations with bow, shotgun and primitive arms to keep the population of the state's healthy deer herd in check.

In the natural world, that task would fall to one or more large carnivores atop the food chain, and historically throughout the northeastern United States that meant the Eastern mountain lion or timber wolf.

However, it's been nearly a century since cougar inhabited these parts, the same for timber or gray wolf.

Thomas W. French, assistant director of the state Division of Fisheries & Wildlife and director of the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species program, acknowledged recently that humans exercise the primary control on the size and health of the Commonwealth's deer herd — either during hunting season or vehicle encounters throughout the year.

The state's deer herd is estimated at 85,000 to 95,000. The 2010 deer season resulted in the harvesting of 10,813 animals.

As for the Eastern coyote atop the food chain in Massachusetts, some characterize the opportunistic scavenger as more of a pretender to the throne than a successful predator.

“Sure, a coyote can bring down a deer,” Mr. French said, citing the fact that western coyotes moving eastward through the southern Canadian provinces interbred with the gray wolf, producing a hybrid coyote much larger than its western cousin.

“Western coyotes may weigh 25 to 30 pounds, he said, but Eastern coyote males may weigh as much as 55 pounds, and they can take down some deer. That being said, they are a poor substitute for the cougar and wolf that survived on deer,” he said.

“No matter how you cut it, however, humans and coyotes just don't provide the same degree of control the mountain lion or gray wolf once did in maintaining population density at 8 to 10 deer per square mile,” the wildlife biologist said.

State wildlife officials estimate a statewide coyote population of about 9,000 having populated virtually the entire state.

Mr. French said the basic dynamic of the state's ecosystem changed significantly in 1830s when European settlers cleared between 70 and 80 percent of the state's forests for agriculture.



The removal of wildlife habitat on that large a scale, he said, had immediate consequences.

“We lost our entire population of black bear, all of our beaver, all of our turkey, all of our fisher, all of our ravens, almost all of our white-tailed deer, and all of our moose.”

“The good news, of course, is that all of those species are back, some in greater numbers than others, and the majority of them returned on their own without any help from us,” Mr. French said.

What did not rebound with the return of large mammals was the cougar or the wolf. While a primary food source was available in a recovering deer herd, what was no longer available, according to Mr. French, were large tracts of open space and wildlife habitat.

“The landscape had changed significantly, to the point where the cougar or the wolf no longer had sufficient territory to sustain a breeding population,” he said.

Mr. French said one need only look west, to where there are stable populations of mountain lion and timber wolf to understand why they would never repopulate the New England states.

“Quite simply, there just isn't enough territory. Wolves have returned to Wyoming, Montana and Idaho in the west and the upper peninsula of Michigan, the upper Great Lakes, parts of Minnesota and Wisconsin.

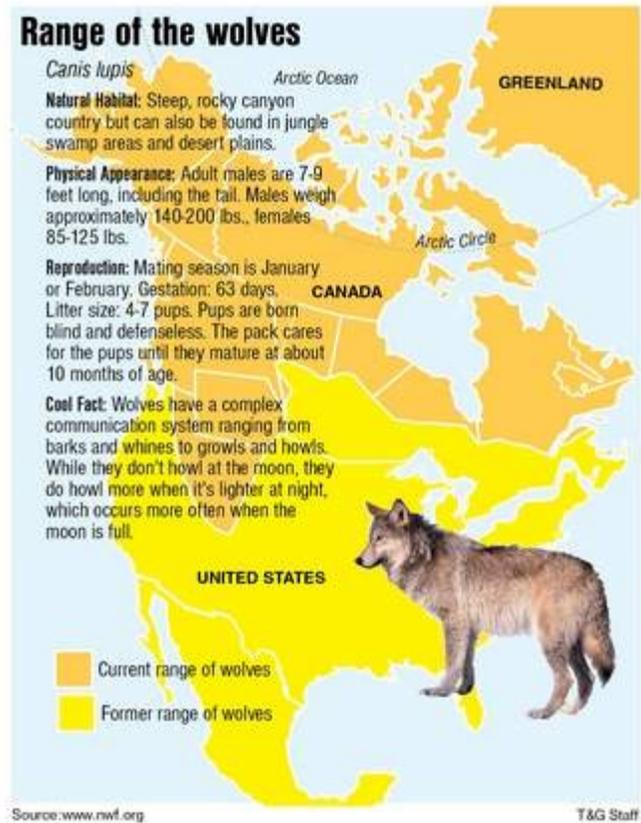
“As for a place where the timber wolf thrives, think Alaska. That's the undeveloped, unpopulated habitat that stretches for hundreds of square miles that is ideal.”

Assume for a moment there were a pair of timber wolves in Quabbin Reservation, and this pair has a litter and the young males disperse to establish their own territory.

“On average, if a young wolf was headed west from Quabbin, he wouldn't stop until he reached Albany. That's an example of the size of habitat that's needed. It doesn't have to be virgin territory like Alaska, as the patchwork of Wyoming habitat suggests.”

Today, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lists the mountain lion, or cougar, and the gray wolf, as endangered species. Martin Miller, of the Northeast Office of the Fish and Wildlife Service in Hadley, said the Eastern mountain lion subspecies has been declared extinct.

Mr. French said the position of the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife is that mountain lions in New England are transients from points far west and north, or caged species that have either escaped or have



been deliberately released into the wild. DNA analysis, he said, was critical in pinpointing the 1,500-mile trek of a cougar from the Black Hills of South Dakota to its untimely end June 11, when it was struck and killed by a car on the Wilbur Cross Parkway in Milford, Conn.

“This is about as convincing as you can get to definitive evidence of a particular animal's origin,” he said

Closer to home, he said the New Hampshire Legislature had passed a law that prohibits any gray wolf re-introduction program, citing it as a pre-emptive action to prevent the federal Fish and Wildlife Service from attempting to re-establish a wolf population in northern New England.

He said the closest breeding population of timber wolves to Massachusetts is Algonquin Provincial Park in Ontario.

For those who suggest the black bear as a possible top predator, Mr. French said the black bear population is increasing across the state at a rate of 8 percent a year and they are quickly moving toward the southeastern part of the state.

“The black bear is an omnivore; is rarely if ever a prey species, and is almost as seldom a predator. And while a black bear certainly has the power and ability to kill a deer, the problem is, the bear just can't match the white-tail's speed,” he said.

The wildlife biologist said the number one cause of endangerment for any plant or animal species is loss of habitat, and that's not just habitat that's been lost to development, but that has been degraded or become inaccessible.

“We're no longer a big landscape of forests from one end of the state to the other. Now there are cities and towns, businesses and industries, residential development, all of which represent something of an obstacle,” Mr. French said.

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