

WANDERING WOLF TRACKS LEAD TO DEATH, AND DREAMS

By David Frey

AT THE END OF MARCH, as spring began to crawl into the High Country, the radio transmissions from the collar fitted on a female wolf stopped moving. The stagnant signal emitted from a spot in western Colorado, and when state and federal wildlife investigators descended, they found her dead body. Her epic journey across some of the West's wildest lands had come to an end in a state where native wolf populations had been decimated some 70 years before.

Authorities aren't saying what killed the two-year-old wolf or whether foul play was involved. Until a necropsy and an investigation are complete, they won't even say exactly where they found her. While her death remains a mystery, though, her travels in the months before are unusually well known. They were tracked by satellites that followed her every step and remain recorded on a tiny computer within her GPS collar.

Last September, Wolf 341F embarked on a journey that carried her over 1,000 miles in a meandering trek from southern Montana to Colorado. She traveled solo across some of the West's most-lonesome territory. She traversed Yellowstone National Park and trekked across western Wyoming, following the spine of the Rockies through the Bridger-Teton National Forest. She roamed across Wyoming's natural gas fields into the corner where southeastern Idaho meets northeastern Utah, then on into western Colorado, crossing from high desert to the mountains until she reached the wild country north of Vail's tamed ski slopes.

The journey carried her 450 miles in a straight line from home before she turned around, roamed back into Wyoming, then doubled back into Colorado, where her travels ended.

Wildlife officials downplay the crossing as nothing unusual. "They cover a lot of ground. Wolves always did that," said Ed Bangs, gray wolf recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Biologists call this footloose activity "dispersing." It's a behavior that helps form new packs. Wolves can travel 20 to 30 miles a day, and since 1992, about 10 wolves have been documented traveling over 190 miles. Since most wolves don't wear collars, the actual number may be much higher. Still, it's rare for them to stray more than 60 miles.

What was so captivating about Wolf 341F wasn't the distance, though. It was the destination. Wolf populations were wiped out of Colorado in the late 1930s, part of the destruction of the wildness of the West to make it safe for cattle and sheep. The last record of a native wolf killed in Colorado was in 1943. For wolf advocates, who long to see wolves return to their native territory, the journey gave them cause to dream.

"This adventurous wolf sparked Colorado's imagination. She made us think about what Colorado is missing without its wolves," said Gary Wockner, a former member of the Colorado Wolf Working Group. The diverse gathering of ranchers, environmentalists and others got together to determine how to handle wolves if they wandered into the state. Their

decision: If they're not harming people or livestock, leave them alone.

Wolf 341F came in search of a mate. Plenty of mountain girls can relate. Dissatisfied with the prospects in her own pack, she went elsewhere,

not knowing her travels had carried her into territory where wolves had long since vanished.

Other wolves have made similar journeys. Wolves have wandered before into Utah and South Dakota. They've appeared in Colorado before, too. The last confirmed wolf in the state wandered from a Yellowstone pack in June 2004. Another young female fitted with a radio collar, she was killed by a passing vehicle on Interstate 70 near Idaho Springs. Three years later, video footage captured what appeared to be a wolf near Walden, in northern Colorado. Numerous more unconfirmed reports come in each year to the state's Division of Wildlife. It's anybody's guess how many of these are dogs, coyotes, hybrids or how many may be the real thing.

WOLF 341F WAS BORN IN the spring of 2007 to the Mill Creek pack, formed seven years earlier between the towns of Gardiner and Livingston, Mont., amid the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, just north of the park boundary. Last July, Montana wildlife officials fitted her with a GPS collar, part of a research program with the University of Montana to improve wolf monitoring techniques. A photo taken



that day shows her lying in a patch of grass and wildflowers, knocked out by anesthesia, the bulky collar looking oddly mechanical on her 68-pound canine body. Like a James Bond gadget, it was fitted with an electrical charge designed to blow the collar off her body after two years, if she didn't die first, allowing biologists to track it down and download the data.

When she came to, said Carolyn Sime, wolf program coordinator for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, she trotted off into the forest before another photo could be taken. "If I ever lose my awe and my respect for wild animals and what they can do, that's the day I should quit," Sime said.

In September, Wolf 341F left home, and while biologists tracked her movements, the political landscape around her was changing. In the waning days of the Bush administration, Western gray wolves like her were taken off the endangered species list. In President Obama's first day in office, his administration suspended that move, only to reinstate it later, except in Wyoming, where state and federal officials have been at odds over measures to protect an animal Wyoming ranchers still see as the enemy. Despite environmentalists' insistence that the wolf populations were still too small and threatened to be inbred, the Interior Department declared wolves aren't endangered in the West anymore.

Endangered or not, Wolf 341F set out on her long journey. It

gave wolf advocates hope that, in the absence of a wolf reintroduction plan in Colorado, wolves may find a way to come back on their own, just as they started to do in Montana 25 years earlier.

"I wouldn't be surprised to see wolf pups in the state within five years," said Michael Robinson, conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity and a longtime wolf advocate.

Wolves had wandered across the Canadian border years before any reintroduction efforts began. By 1986, the first den was documented on the U.S. side of the border. Within a few years, packs were lingering in Montana. It would be nine more years before the federal government released wolves into Yellowstone and central Idaho.

Wolf 341F's untimely death was no surprise. Long-wandering wolves usually have short lifespans. While we don't know what killed her, we know the usual culprits walk on two legs. While she lived, though, Wolf 341F gave hope that a bit of the wild that's been

taken out of wilderness could rebound on its own. It may still be worth listening on moonlit nights for a howl across the mountains in a land where wolves, once commonplace, have disappeared.

David Frey writes in Glenwood Springs, Colo. Read him at www.davidfrey.me.

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