

Why was Colorado's Precious, Promising First Wolf Pack Decimated?

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The wolves did what they were asked to do and were victims of their own success. The loss of this beautiful family group is unforgivable and shameful.



*****For more information on this ill-fated operation that was just posted please see CPW's somewhat self-serving [Copper Creek Pack Operations: Frequently Asked Questions](#) and [Wolf dies after Colorado Parks and Wildlife completes capture of pack tied to livestock killings](#). In this essay we read, "Wildlife advocacy organizations have speculated that misuse or lack of use of nonlethal actions led to these depredations." We also read about the death of the male, "According to the agency [CPW], it is unlikely the wolf would have survived much longer in the wild." They don't know this at all, and it's a sure thing that the male was highly stressed having been trapped and ripped away from his family. What a lame thing for CPW to say as if his supposed impending death justifies what they did. Also, note that CPW went public after a wolf had been caught! The entire project was cloaked in inexcusable secrecy.*

Some key points

- Colorado's formerly wild and live wolves offer many lessons about human-animal relationships.
- For the past 9 months, CPW's silence allowed misinformation about wolves to circulate unchecked, biasing people against them.

- The damage is done. Even after these errors are corrected, many people will continue to refer to the myths that have circulated about Colorado's wolves as if they are scientific facts.
- People often underestimate the psychological effects of biased media for or against a particular issue.
- Colorado's botched effort to reintroduce wolves offers many valuable lessons about the nature of human-nonhuman relationships.
- Colorado's new wolves did what voters hoped they would do: they formed a pack in the wild only to be lured out, trapped, and relocated.
- There are many biological and ethical reasons why this misguided operation should never have happened.
- The wolves shouldn't be punished for engaging in wolf-appropriate behavior.
- Now, we finally know the fate of the 6 wolves. The father was trapped and subsequently died of a leg infection and the mother and her 4 children are now in captivity.
- After 4 years of planning, Colorado's wolf reintroduction program was supposed to set a new benchmark for how to manage a wolf reintroduction successfully. Instead, it raises serious questions about human-animal relationships and the ability of wildlife agencies to remain impartial in the face of mounting pressure from special interest groups.
- Would CPW do it all again?

A brief introduction and an interesting cryptic telephone call

Like many people across Colorado and around the world, I've been eagerly waiting to learn more about Colorado Parks and Wildlife's (CPW) operation to capture and relocate the individuals comprising what has come to be called the Copper Creek pack—a tight knit family group consisting of a mother, a father, and their four children.

On Friday August 23, 2024, before the CPW operation was announced, I received a cryptic phone call from someone out of state who asked me a number of questions including: Would I be okay if some wolves were killed to save others, to which I answered no, killing is off the table. I also was asked if I would support trapping and relocating wolves from where they were causing a problem and I said I'd prefer that they were left alone, but if that wasn't an option and they had to be relocated the entire pack had to be kept intact and they could only be moved to another wild location. Thinking back on this phone call, I felt like I was being played, being tested, because the person who called well knew my position of leaving the lupine family alone and had to know what I'd say.

When the announcement of the trapping and relocating operation was made on August 27th, I once again thought about the surprising phone call and it felt as the caller knew something was coming down the turnpike and was warning me, offering a premonition of what was to come, and wanted to see if perhaps I'd change my views.

It sounded pretty messy and, as it turned out with an avoidable yet tragic decimation of the pack, it was extremely disconcerting and messy. It reeked of disaster. My worst fears had come true, I was being told that someone is going to tamper with the precious and pioneering Copper Creek Pack.

**Note: After this essay was written, I learned I was indeed being played because the operation actually began the day before the phone call, August 22, according to CPW's [Copper Creek Pack Operations: Frequently Asked Questions](#).*

We now know the Copper Creek pack made their den on the property of a rancher who wanted them dead, but [was denied a chronic depredation permit](#) because they did little to deter the wolves from preying on their sheep, and perhaps even encouraged it by leaving unburied carcasses in an exposed 'kill pit'.

(See [Defenders Denounces CPW's Decision to Relocate Colorado's First Wolf Pack](#). August 27, 2024. (They write: [Recently disclosed CPW documents](#) suggest this tragic decision is the result of producers' refusal to accept the help and advice they were offered.) Also see [Colorado Parks and Wildlife denies Middle Park stockgrowers' request for a chronic depredation permit after 8 sheep killed](#).)

This was not a good situation for the once wild adults or the pups, who, if trapped, would all likely spend the rest of their lives in a cage. People want to know who was behind this invasive operation? Clearly CPW were but the roles of other people and the ad hoc committee remains a mystery, as does the process by which its members were chosen. For a program that was passed by the people of Colorado, their input has been conspicuously absent in most if not all aspects of the decision-making process.

A brief history of Colorado's repatriation/reintroduction project

On December 18, 2023, [five wolves were released](#) into the mountains of Colorado, and five more were released over the following three days. Because the people of Colorado voted directly to authorize this reintroduction, opponents began referring to it pejoratively as "ballot box biology". In reality, it's "ballot box [morality](#)."

I was pleased to be at the initial release because of my longtime interests in [rewilding nature](#) and because of my research on the social behavior of wolves, coyotes, and domestic dogs and my interest in observing [personality differences](#) among the first group of wolves who were released.

These are incredibly difficult projects to organize and to implement, and many people are unaware of the various hidden factors—the so-called [slippery slope](#)—that come into play. For example, many people had no idea that it was possible that some wolves might be killed to save others.

Around six months after the wolves were released, in June 2024 the CPW Commission voted to allow nighttime spotlighting of 'chronically depredating' wolves. Although no effort was made to hide this concession to ranchers from the public, it is worth noting these troubling facts:

- (1) At the time this regulation passed, there was no official definition for "chronic depredation" (and there still isn't).
- (2) Ranchers did not request this regulation, leaving one to wonder who did.
- (3) During the discussion preceding the vote, CPW staff even admitted that it's unheard of for wildlife professionals to engage in nighttime hunting of wolves, so who was this regulation designed to empower?

(See [LET'S KEEP COLORADO'S WOLVES OUT OF THE SPOTLIGHT](#))

It's been very difficult to keep up with all of the behind the scenes discussions among and within special interest groups and action on the ground and when I ask people questions like, "Did you know this or that about this project?" they do not. I hope to fill them in here. A wide variety of important questions need to be considered many of which center on our relationships with other animals, especially those focusing on [who lives, who dies, and why](#).

The importance of individual lives. Suffice it to say, when these projects get underway, the lives of *individuals* are put on the line, and I along with many likeminded people feel that the life of every single individual wolf matters and should *not* be traded off for the good of "the many." In the past nine months, I've learned that a number of wolf advocates are willing to allow some wolves to be killed to save the lives of others, and many people have no idea this is even legal. Many ranchers have already gone on the record asking for Colorado's new wolves to be killed, despite it being well-known there were

only 11 statewide prior to the arrival of the Copper Creek pups. There can be no doubt that even one life lost at this stage of the reintroduction could doom the project before it even gets off the ground. One of the basic principles of the ever-growing field of compassionate conservation is that the life of every individual matters because they have inherent or intrinsic value—not because of what they can do for us—but simply because they are alive.

Following the science

Research clearly shows that killling the leader of a pack can and often does lead to the group becoming less stable, and this, in turn, might cause them to disband and cease to exist as a cohesive group. CPW often claims it follows the science of what's known about wolves and other animals, but this isn't always true. (For a more extensive discussion of this and other wolf-related issues see Colorado Wolves: Hyped Media Derails Neighborly Coexistence).

Concerning the video of the three pups playing in a puddle, we read, “You can see the wolf pups deeply focused on playing with each other. Playing not only allows a wolf pup to practice hunting behaviors but also teaches them to communicate effectively with other wolves, which is a skill they will use throughout their lives as social creatures living in packs.”

I've been studying play behavior in various animals for decades. While it is true that play is important to wolves (and many other animals) for socializing so they learn what they have to do to be wild wolves—to become card-carrying wolves, if you will—there is no evidence that play by youngsters has any influence on their proficiency in hunting as adults. I mention this because a number of people have suggested that this misinformation could be used to fuel yet another false myth about these magnificent carnivores—namely, if they play, they'll be more efficient predators. It isn't that simple.

Other prevailing myths are that wolves wantonly attack and kill humans—they don't—and they “kill for fun”. Many people thought wolves were responsible for the bizarre situation of around 50 cows being killed but left uneaten in northwest Colorado in 2022—they weren't (also see). Clearly, this horrific situation cannot be used to claim wolves kill for the hell of it.

Wolves and other large carnivores are often misjudged and misrepresented by sensationalist media that wrongly labels them as unpredictable, dangerous, aggressive, and untrustworthy.

What's happening now?

Needless to say, the Copper Creek wolves were presented with the choice of pursuing their natural prey—deer and elk—or herds of unguarded sheep and cows—the equivalent of “room service”. Understandably, ranchers got very upset about this, but that makes it all the more puzzling why they left unburied carcasses in an exposed ‘kill pit’ and refused help from Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the Colorado Department of Agriculture. (See <https://defenders.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/CPW%20-%20Denial%20of%20Chronic%20Depredation%20Permit.pdf>).

We now know that CPW has decimated the Copper Creek wolf pack—quite literally, in a highly secretive and thoroughly misguided and inhumane operation that defies science, commonsense, ethics, and heart, we are witness to what happens when the people in charge decide that the lives of individual wolves don't matter, because they are just cogs in the machine of restoration. By selling out to ranchers who have done little to nothing to deter wolves from preying on their herds, CPW has set a dangerous precedent. The Copper Creek Pack has now gone from a mom, a dad, and what four healthy pups]to a family forcibly removed from their rightful den at the behest of ranchers, and relocated minus one very important *individual*—the father—who tragically died four days after being captured. It's clear that

Colorado is not ready for these magnificent beings to roam the landscape as they did nearly a century ago. Wolves cannot call Colorado a safe home.

I want to be clear—I have no doubt that CPW and others working on this project mean well, but sometimes good intentions are not good enough. In this case, people stopped caring what the wolves themselves were thinking and feeling, and we punished them for doing what we brought them here to do, all to accommodate ranchers' demands.

In a follow-up essay, [Colorado's New Family of Wild Wolves Must be Celebrated](#), I review other issues centering on Colorado's program.

The current situation for the trapped and relocated wolves

The first and only breeding pack of wolves to have lived in Colorado since the 1940s is gone. Anyone paying attention to what we know about wolf behavior and how this sort of operation would work out knew it [was ill-advised and ill-fated from the get-go](#).

At long last, we finally know the fate of the Copper Creek wolves. The father was trapped while trying to take care of his family, and subsequently died of a leg infection and the mother and her four children are now in captivity. Surely this is not what Coloradans had in mind when they voted to bring wolves back to Colorado.

There still is much we do not know, and CPW has a long way to go to restore the trust it has broken with the 5.8 million Coloradans it serves. How were the Copper Creek wolves trapped and did it have anything to do with furthering the father's leg infection and death? Surely he was deeply stressed and in pain. Are the caged wolves going to be released and if so, when and where?

After four years of preparation, CPW seemed to have a workable plan for reintroduction. And the formation of the Copper Creek pack seemed to be the realization of that promise. But then we trapped and relocated them, with deadly consequences for the father. Why should Coloradans trust CPW to do better next time?

In what will no doubt be remembered as a contest between the majority of Coloradans who voted for wolves to be brought back and the ranchers who opposed it, Round 1 clearly goes to the ranchers who complained, not the voters, and most definitely not the wolves who defied the odds and managed to start a new family in the first year after reintroduction.

To put it bluntly, CPW has stolen away the Copper Creek pack's wildness and robbed them of wolf appropriate lives. Let's not forget: we brought them here. They were wild in Oregon and then wild in Colorado and now one is dead and the other 5 are in cages somewhere. CPW abandoned them as if they were unfeeling insentient objects or property.

People who know carnivores, whose strong moral compass tells them that each and every *individual* wolf is as much a stakeholder in the reintroduction as any rancher, is likely thinking the same thing: these mistakes were entirely predictable and totally avoidable.

These sentient, highly social, and highly intelligent and emotional beings continue to be pawns in an anthropocentric (human-centered) program. We need to consider things from their point of view—what they are feeling about what's happening to them—and who they truly are. As one of my colleagues aptly puts it, *they've done what we wanted them to do—form a family group—a cohesive group pack—and make more of themselves*—and some people want to punish them—kill them— for pushing the

repatriation program forward. This is thoroughly unreasonable, arrogant anthropocentrism, an egregious double-cross that asks them to rewild what we tamed, and then curses them for that same wildness.

What does the future look like?

When the removal operation began because of ranchers' complaints, Colorado had only 9 wolves on the ground who were brought here from Oregon, But really, this entire debacle began with only two adult wolves and an unconfirmed litter of puppies, yet it was enough to unravel four years of careful negotiations and [hundreds of pages of rules and regulations](#). So why should we ever believe that when there are 40 or 50 wolves and however many more packs spaced across Colorado, that people will suddenly find a way to share the landscape with them?

CPW say this new operation isn't establishing a precedent for the future, but a precedent is not what you say—it's what you do. And we've done the wolves wrong. And there can be no question that in the future, those in charge will refer back to this operation and use it as an example of another 'tool in the toolbox' of ways to manage wolves.

Defying science, ethics, and common sense CPW has decimated the first family group of wolves seen in Colorado in around 80 years. Round one goes to the ranchers and there's no reason to think that it will change in the future. Reinvigorated by the success of their campaign to get our first pack uprooted and relocated into captivity, it is fair to assume they will resort to similar tactics going forward. What would Colorado's formerly wild and live wolves have to say about this? They are stakeholders in this reintroduction as each and every life is on the line, and they have been treated as if they're unfeeling objects.

A few lingering questions: Would you conduct this sort of operation again? '

- After so many months of silence, CPW's update raises more questions than answers. Among them, how were the wolves trapped, and did it have anything to do with the leg injury that eventually claimed the life of the father? The father had lost a lot of weight but was strong enough to mate and to hunt for his family.
- How will CPW deal with the inevitable conflict when more wolves are here, breeding and moving across the state? It's naïve to think that they're going to stay where we put them – after all, they are wild animals and they will adapt, not according to the rules we write for them, but to the distribution of food and competition from wolves and other carnivores such as cougars and maybe black bears.
- At a certain point, CPW must acknowledge that it does not serve ranchers alone. Yet ranchers are to blame for the dissolution of Colorado's first successful breeding pair of wolves and the pack they formed. How will the agency prove to the Colorado public that the majority who voted for this reintroduction matter as much as the ranchers who doomed this first pack to be rounded-up and caged?
- In passing regulations that would grant ranchers nighttime aides for hunting 'chronically depredating' wolves, the CPW Commission demonstrated that it, too, cannot be counted upon to represent the vast majority of Coloradans who are not ranchers. What protections can we expect CPW to enact that demonstrate advocates will have equal access to the decision-making process as the ranchers who this regulation was clearly crafted to benefit?
- Would CPW trap another wolf who they knew could not be released in the wild because that is exactly what happened in the case of the Copper Creek father? Yielding ranchers' demands and decimating the DNA of the future wolves of Colorado sends a strong message that what ranchers think matters more than the majority of voters who approved this reintroduction.

- Would CPW resort to the same secrecy that has broken trust with so many voters given that there were still leaks and no one knows who was the mole. Some ranchers on the ground certainly knew what was going on and the secrecy implied something was being covered up.
- How does CPW plan on holding ranchers accountable who refuse help and turn down compensation? Surely they should not be the ones deciding the fate of the reintroduction program and the individual wolves who are conscripted into it.
- Explicitly, why does Colorado deserve wolves when we couldn't even protect the single early pack who would have provided the DNA for future wolves in our state? CPW ought to have pushed back harder against those calling for these wolves to be killed. Had they done so, the Copper Creek pack would have made history as the first wild pack of wolves to call Colorado home in more than 80 years.

I would love to have wolves roaming Colorado's landscapes and want them to be wild wolves able to live wild wolf appropriate lives. That's the least we can do for them. And if we can't manage even this, why bring them here at all?

References

**A shorter version of this essay can be found here: [Colorado's New Wolves: Why Was This Pack Decimated?](#)

[Colorado's New Family of Wild Wolves Must be Celebrated](#)

[Colorado Wolves: Hyped Media Derails Neighborly Coexistence](#)

[Colorado Wolves Receive Mixed Hellos and Muddy Media](#)

[Colorado's Reintroduced Wolves Already Being Relocated for Killing Livestock](#)

[Gray wolves reintroduced to Colorado relocated within the state amid controversy](#)

[Wolf pup relocation could have detrimental consequences, says biologist](#)

[Colorado to Relocate Gray Wolves After Reports of Livestock Attacks](#)

[Colorado Parks and Wildlife denies Middle Park stockgrowers' request for chronic depredation permit after 8 sheep killed.](#)

[Why We Misjudge Wolves, Bears, and Other Large Carnivores; The Hidden Slippery Slopes of Animal](#)

[Reintroduction Programs; Do Individual Wolves Care if Their Species Is on the Brink?; LET'S KEEP](#)

[COLORADO'S WOLVES OUT OF THE SPOTLIGHT; Wolf Packs Suffer When Humans Kill Their](#)

[Leaders; The Perks of Appreciating Wild Neighbors as Sentient Beings.](#)