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The Wolf Called OR7

The first in California since 1924

Jane Braxton Little



FROM MY BACK DOOR, THE PINE AND DOUGLAS FIR FOREST begins a gradual rise, steepening as it climbs the slopes of Dyer Mountain to the lookout tower, where I watched for fires one summer. Lake Almanor shimmers below, fringed with wet meadows and stands of timber that march toward the volcanic slopes of Lassen Volcanic National Park. Beyond these snowcapped peaks, the Modoc Plateau stretches north to the lava-strewn lands that mark the border between California and Oregon. This vast expanse nearly five times the size of Connecticut is home to bald eagles, black bears, mountain lions, and—for 15 magical months—the first gray wolf to roam California in nearly 90 years.

OR7 arrived unannounced, detected only by the global positioning systems collar he wore around his neck. He traveled alone, often covering as much as 40 miles in a day. He sampled terrain from high sage desert to tree-covered mountains. By the time he returned to Oregon, he had traveled 4,500 miles, alone, in a historic trek that announced a future for wolves in California.

Scientists were expecting *Canis lupus* to eventually make its way south through the Cascade Range and into California. I was not. I simply had not imagined having wolves in my backyard and was as thrilled and ignorant as the rest of the curious public. I tracked OR7's journey through daily time-delayed posts on the California Department of Fish and Wildlife website: where he spent the night, how long he lingered, and when he took off. This wolf was discovering the landscape I had adopted as an East Coast transplant, looking for a way to survive in unfamiliar territory.

Scientists call OR7's journey normal dispersal behavior for a young male wolf. I think of it as a hormone-driven Iron John adventure. For me and most of his rapt public, he was a charismatic explorer seeking a mate and territory of his own—a pioneer who inspired a virtual existence on social networking sites that include Twitter ("Left family to find wife & new home. eHarmony just wasn't working for me") and Facebook ("The Oregon winters were too lonely and frigid"). His cult-like status generated wolf tattoos, wolf sweaters, wolf hats, and several full-moon candlelit vigils organized by groups with names like Howl Across America and Wolf Warriors.

Wolves have been breeding and on the move in the Northwest for the past few years. This wolf, a member of the Minam Pack, one of seven known packs wandering in Oregon, was captured by remote camera on February 2, 2013. OREGON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

OR7 was still on the loose in Oregon as we went to press, but his wanderings in California offered scientists a unique opportunity to study how wolves survive and move about the land. Scientists have had next to no information about the species that is specific to this state. For the rest of us, OR7 is a herald. He showed up on his own, chose his own itinerary, and survived. He amazed us by staying in our midst month after month despite the odds of terrain and antagonism. As the first of an expected succession, his journey broadens and deepens the landscape, offering the potential to solve some problems and almost inevitably create others.

December 28, 2011

OR7 slipped unseen into California near a wildlife refuge at Lower Klamath Lake, then 2½ years old and unaware of the political boundary that made crossing it historic. He was born in the spring of 2009 to the Imnaha pack, whose founding members were the first to migrate into Oregon from wolves reintroduced in Idaho in the 1990s. The pack settled in Wallowa County in Oregon's far northeastern corner. OR7 was the seventh wolf radio-collared in Oregon, hence his uninspired name. He left his pack in September 2011, went west, and followed the Cascade Range south. Scientists have little doubt that OR7 was seeking other wolves to establish his own pack.



A hunter captured this photo of the lone wolf called OR7 on public land in Jackson County, southern Oregon, in November 2011. Shortly after that, the wolf wandered into California. ALLEN DANIELS

He entered California near the town of Dorris, where blizzards can be so blinding that my husband and I once took turns walking in front of our truck to identify the road. Volcanic craters dot the land, flaunting its tumultuous geologic past. OR7 passed close to the lava beds where, in the winter of 1872–1873, Captain Jack and a small band of Modoc Indians bamboozled the ten-times-larger U.S. Army by disappearing into lava tubes and escaping into thick tule fogs.¹ Today, the local human population remains sparse, which suited OR7. During his months in California, he had minimal contact with humans, avoiding highways, agricultural areas—anything that might force interaction. “Humans are the number one cause of mortality for gray wolves,” says Karen Kovacs, northern region wildlife program manager for the California Fish and Wildlife Department.



In January 2013, the wolf called OR7 was wandering in northern California near Lassen Peak, a volcano in the southern Cascades.

JANE BRAXTON LITTLE

January 12, 2012

After traveling more than 200 miles since crossing the state line, OR7 hunkered down for nearly a month in the high sage country of northern Lassen County. Whether it's the mule deer, the jackrabbits, or the juniper cover, the area is apparently appealing winter habitat for wolves. The last wolf in California was found in a trap in nearby Litchfield in June 1924. He was old, missing a portion of a hind leg, and emaciated. Had he been healthy, scientists estimate that OR7's California predecessor would have weighed around 90 pounds—exactly what the young male weighed when he left his pack in Oregon.

¹ “Tule fog” is the pea-soup stuff that gathers around tule grasses, which grow in wetlands. It's common in California's wet valleys.

Despite the inviting habitat, the humans in the area were blatantly inhospitable. Local ranchers viewed OR7 as a threat and greeted him with open hostility. “If I see an animal in my livestock, I kill it. If I kill a wolf, you going to throw me in jail?” asks Lassen County Supervisor Bob Pyle, whose ranch is near Susanville. OR7 happened to arrive on the eve of an organized coyote hunt. Shooters were set to compete in the sixth annual Coyote Drive, designed to manage coyotes in the Big Valley area of Lassen and neighboring Modoc counties.

The fact that OR7 survived is a tribute to his ability to remain invisible, says Kovacs. “We called him the ghost wolf,” she says, confirming a mere three sightings during more than a year in California. One was by hunters in Tehama County, who saw a group of deer running, followed by a single deer with “a very large canine in hot pursuit,” Kovacs says.

Like other gray wolves in California and most of Oregon, OR7 is protected under the federal Endangered Species Act—at least for the moment. California offers no significant additional protections, but that could soon change. A few months after his arrival, the Center for Biological Diversity petitioned the state Fish and Wildlife Department to list *Canis lupus* as a California threatened or endangered species, which the Fish and Wildlife Commission agreed to consider. A report was due in September and a decision expected by the end of 2013.

OR7’s journey has excited Californians, both pro and con, and put state officials on a fast track to prepare for the return of gray wolves. Officials are working on a management plan that anticipates the eventual establishment of packs. In fact, when OR7 crossed the border, officials were nearly finished with an evaluation of the potential for wolf recolonization and its management implications. Since then, wildlife officials have been meeting with a diverse group of stakeholders that includes private landowners, deer and wolf advocates, and other agency officials. The goal is to have a plan in place by the time wolves return.

May 30, 2012

Late spring sent OR7 my way—close to the woods where my sons built hideouts and futilely followed yipping coyotes from hither to yon. The wolf spent March and April crisscrossing the California–Oregon border before heading south of the Cascade Range to the Sierra Nevada, the tilted block of granite that forms the eastern California border with Nevada. For most

of June, he loitered in the mosaic of meadows east of Lake Almanor amid an abundance of deer, squirrels, and other small mammals. At some point, he moved south over Dyer Mountain—within spitting distance of my home. Did he trot through our forested property one moonless night, eluding the wildlife camera that has captured bears, bobcats, and a mountain lion? Where did he cross Wolf Creek, a local stream named for his predecessors? California wildlife officials have been purposefully vague about OR7's exact whereabouts to protect him when he was in the state and safeguard future wolves likely to return to these same places.

But they know where he has been, and studying these haunts is giving scientists a record of his diet. He fed on the carcasses of deer, says Kovacs: "Has he killed these animals? Probably." He has dug up the burrows of ground squirrels and fed from a bone pile of livestock carcasses left out by ranchers. There are no reports that OR7 has killed any livestock, Kovacs says.

That, however, does not alleviate the fears of ranchers as they face a future with a new predator on the landscape. A lone wolf like OR7 is mostly a curiosity, says Jack Hanson, a Lassen County supervisor and rancher. Even if a pack develops, it's "no big deal." But multiple packs? "That's a concern to our industry," Hanson says. "It may be inevitable. We just don't welcome it."

Others worry about the impact of wolves on deer, elk, and other game animals. The California Deer Association does not favor wolves in California, but if they arrive, its members hope Fish and Wildlife will have a management plan in place, says association spokesman Jerry Springer. Even without a plan, Springer cynically concedes that wolves have an advantage coming to California: "Everything here goes to the voters and they don't use science to base their decisions," he says.

July 29, 2012

In late June, OR7 moved into the high country south of Lassen Volcanic National Park. Sandwiched between the Feather River to the east and the Sacramento Valley to the west, he settled in for a season on the summer range of the Tehama deer herd. The land is a mix of national forest and private ranches tucked into rugged canyons with few paved roads. The wolf hugged the ridges, likely following the Pacific Crest Trail midway on its 2,663-mile course between Canada and Mexico. Did he venture down to Green Island Lake and the sphagnum bog that supports strange sedges and sundews? At



The Endangered Species Act has allowed wolves the freedom to grow and travel. Above, a member of the Snake River pack as he traveled through Oregon on June 26, 2012. ODFW

one point, he dipped south into the Sierra front country, where Ishi, a member of the Yahi-Yana tribe, survived alone until 1911 on the deer and small game that may also have fed OR7. When the Chips fire broke out along the PCT on July 29, OR7 surprised scientists by staying within a few miles of the expanding perimeter. While the rest of us suffered in smoke, OR7 took advantage of the deer and other wildlife fleeing the flames. He remained in the vicinity of the 75,000-acre fire into fall and early winter.

For wolf advocates, the arrival of this top predator promises to restore the dynamic tension between predators and prey, improving biodiversity and overall ecosystem health. Since wild wolves have returned to Yellowstone, the elk and deer are stronger, the aspens and willows are healthier, and the grasses are taller, advocates say. “The ecological benefits are not just about wolves,” says Amaroq Weiss, a former attorney, biologist, and West Coast wolf organizer for the Center for Biological Diversity. Although not everyone accepts this theory, known as trophic cascade, Weiss calls it the concept underlying the federal Endangered Species Act. She credits the act for allowing wolves to recover and their populations to expand throughout the northern Rockies into states farther west. Those protections are about to go away. In June, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced plans to delist *Canis lupis*. A final decision could come early in 2014. That leaves only a small population of Mexican wolves on the endangered species list. With no California listing yet in place, wolves here would be completely unprotected.

January 8, 2013

January brought frigid temperatures to northern California. That may be what sent OR7 out of the mountains and into the foothills east of Redding. It didn't last. Soon he was back in the high country, on the move through the mountains and meadows where he'd spent the summer, loping south of Lake Almanor, along Wolf Creek again, and into Humbug Valley, which Mountain Maidu have called home for centuries. On Valentine's Day, OR7 suddenly began heading north—straight past Lassen Park, through the Lassen County ranch country, and on into the lava fields just south of the Oregon border. On March 13, he left California within a few miles of his entry point 15 months earlier, returning only briefly in April. OR7 remained in southwest Oregon into the summer.

OR7's journey confirms what wildlife scientists have long believed: that California has habitat not only good for wolves but ample enough to support their long-range dispersal patterns. With the return of wolves all but certain, California has the opportunity to be a leader in wolf management by putting together a plan based on the best available science, not simply the best political compromise. Wolf advocates hope the plan will include practices that reduce conflicts with livestock and wildlife. They are encouraging the use of range riders to patrol livestock areas, dogs to guard livestock, flagging, and noisemakers that scare wolves away from livestock. These techniques, they say, will avoid the acrimonious lawsuits and anonymous shootings triggered by regulations elsewhere, which one rancher said were shoved "down our throat with a plunger." Although Hanson and other livestock representatives view these non-lethal techniques with unbridled skepticism, they, too, believe that if any state can craft a compromise plan for wolves, it's California. "We're all at the table rubbing elbows. It's a start," Hanson says.

Whether wolves return in a year, a decade, or in my lifetime, my backyard will never be the same for me. When I hike near Juniper Lake in Lassen Park, I wonder if OR7 passed along the same trail. I look for his scat when I cut juniper firewood in western Lassen County. Even knowing that he is gone, I listen for his howl at night. This young lone wolf has infused the land with possibilities, making it wilder, vaster, and immeasurably richer.

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