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Montana's first-ever wolf trapping season opens Saturday



Wolves of the Rockies

This August 2012 photo shows an image provided by Wolves of the Rockies of the Lamar Canyon wolf pack on a hillside in Yellowstone National Park, Wyo. The pack's alpha female was shot Dec. 6, in Wyoming, among at least five collared wolves from Yellowstone killed by hunters this fall. Four more wolves collared in the park but no longer living there also have been shot.

December 14, 2012 4:00 am • By Erin Madison - Tribune Staff Writer

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GREAT FALLS, MONT. -- Montana's first wolf trapping season begins Saturday, and more than 2,400 people statewide have been certified to participate.

Montana held its first wolf hunting season in 2009. In the two wolf seasons since, hunters were unable to meet the harvest quota. The Fish, Wildlife and Parks commission voted to allow trapping during the 2012-2013 season, and this year there is no statewide quota.

"We are clearly aiming to reduce the wolf population in Montana," said Ken McDonald, FWP's wildlife bureau chief in Helena, earlier this year.

In order to trap wolves, hunters are required to complete a six-hour class, covering some of the gear, procedures and ethics of trapping.

"There was tremendous demand for the classes," said George Pauley, wildlife management section supervisor for FWP.

FWP offered some 2,700 class slots and certified more than 2,400 trappers.

"I think we were surprised," Pauley said. "We didn't expect quite that many."

The general archery season for wolves started in September, followed by rifle season in October.

So far hunters have killed 90 wolves this year, which is less than last year.

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 Montana's 2012 wolf hunt shifted to a

Last year, by the close of the general big game season, hunters had taken 99 wolves. This year that number was only 81.

"Generally the harvest rate's just been lagging behind last year," Pauley said.

That may be because the novelty of wolf hunting is wearing off, and people aren't trying as hard to pursue them.

"It could be that wolves are becoming a little more wary of hunters," he said.

But that's just speculation, Pauley added.

The slow harvest could also have to do with the lack of snow, making it difficult to track the animals, said Ty Smucker, wolf management specialist with FWP in Great Falls.

"Otherwise it's kind of like looking for a needle in a haystack," he said.

Smucker is curious to see how successful trappers will be during Montana's first trapping season.

Idaho allowed wolf trapping for the first time last year, and it increased the harvest by about 50 percent compared to the previous wolf hunt, Pauley said. However, Idaho allowed traps and snares, but snares are illegal in Montana.

"We don't expect Montana hunters will have the same success," he said.

Wisconsin hunters also saw success with a wolf-trapping season, Smucker said.

While thousands of people took the wolf trapping class, Smucker doesn't expect that they all will participate in wolf trapping this year.

"It requires a lot of equipment and gear to go out and trap wolves," he said.

Many class participants were surprised by how gear- and time-intensive the sport is.

Hunters can take one wolf, and trappers are allowed three wolves, meaning if they've killed one with a rifle or arrow, they can trap only two others.

Trappers are required to check their traps every 48 hours and must kill trapped wolves immediately. A wolf harvest must be reported to FWP within 24 hours by calling 800-385-7826. Wolves must be brought to FWP within 10 days of harvest.

"We collect information from the hunter and the wolf," Pauley said.

Traps must be at least 150 feet from a public road or trail and at least

1,000 feet from a trailhead or campground.

This is to keep people and pets safe.

"If you're letting your dog roam widely ... it very likely may encounter a trap," Smucker said.

If someone does come across a trap, it is illegal to move it or otherwise disturb it.

"It is illegal to step on that trap or disturb that trap in anyway," he said.

Wolf trapping and general rifle seasons end Feb. 28, but some trapping and hunting rules may change between now and then. There are several wolf-related bills that may be introduced when the Legislature convenes in January.

"There is potential legislation to reduce the nonresident tag price," Pauley said.

Other bills would allow hunters to use electronic calls and allow hunters to harvest more than one wolf.

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