

# The Mountain Wolves of Southwestern Manitoba

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## **The Mountain Wolves of Southwestern Manitoba**

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I first became interested in the wolves of southwestern Manitoba while conducting peatland research at Duck Mountain during the last two summers. At first all I saw were wolf tracks and scat along the logging roads, but then I began to find the remains of ungulates, usually moose that had been taken by wolves in the forested peatlands (Figure 2). On lucky days, the silence of hot summer afternoons was broken by the howls of wolf pups and once two adults called very close to the camp. These experiences fueled a long-time fascination with wolves and I embarked on a quest to discover more about the wolves in the region. My search led me over Duck Mountain and south to Riding Mountain National Park and the results have revealed a remarkable story of the mountain wolves of southwestern Manitoba.

Duck and Riding Mountains are two in a series of highlands that dot the landscape of southwestern Manitoba (Figure 1). Separated by only 35km of farmland, these landforms are not mountains in the real sense, but rather bumps that rise up to 500m (Duck Mountain) above the surrounding prairie. There are many similarities between the two areas. The vegetation grows lush as a result of orographic precipitation and wildlife abounds, including wolves. Both mountains are protected to some degree by park status, with Riding Mountain as a National Park and Duck Mountain containing a Provincial Park. Recreational activities are popular at both areas. Duck and Riding Mountains are very roughly the same size at 4300 and 3000 km<sup>2</sup>, respectively, and due to their proximity to prime agricultural land, both mountains are, to varying degrees, islands in a sea of agriculture. Duck Mountain maintains a small degree of connectivity to contiguous forest, and Riding Mountain, further south, is completely enclosed by agricultural lands. However, despite the similarities between the two mountains the story of the wolves themselves is quite different, including degree of protection, differences in population size, and type of wolf.

The most obvious distinction between the two populations of wolves is the degree of protection from humans. Wolves are only protected for part of the year at Duck Mountain and the significant logging activity there has left a matrix of logging roads across the landscape that gives good access for hunting and trapping. Three to four wolves are reportedly trapped per year at Duck Mountain, but many more are likely taken during the 7 month wolf-hunting season (Kitch, pers. com.). No logging occurs at Riding Mountain and wolves are protected year round. However, once outside of the part boundary wolves are fair game and are often shot while feeding on bait set out for bears or by ungulate hunters in the agricultural fields surrounding the park (Goulet and Paquet 2000).

Noting the differences in hunting and trapping pressures between both mountains, the respective population sizes are counter intuitive to what one might imagine. At Duck Mountain, the wolf population is estimated to range between 75 and 100 individuals and this is considered a healthy population (Kitch, pers. com.). At Riding Mountain, the wolf population is approximately 30-50 wolves, roughly half the number recorded in the 1970's, and until recently, in a decline. Why

would there be more wolves at Duck Mountain where there is a hunting season than at Riding Mountain where wolves are protected?

The answer is probably related to the most interesting distinction between Duck and Riding Mountain wolves, which is wolf type. Recent genetic analyses of wolf tissue from both Duck and Riding mountains have revealed that Riding Mountain wolves are primarily gray wolves (*Canis lupus*), and Duck Mountain wolves are predominately red wolves (*Canis rufus*), with some gray wolves, and intermediates between the two. This is surprising, given the short distance that separates Duck and Riding mountains. Although the tissue sample size from both of these areas is still small, preliminary results suggest that segregation is occurring between the respective wolf populations. Current research submits that red wolves and coyotes (*Canis latrans*) are more closely related to one another than either are to gray wolves and that red wolves and coyotes are more likely to hybridize with each other than with gray wolves (Goulet and Paquet 2000). Evidence also suggests that gray wolves may not tolerate human disturbance as well as red wolves. Red wolves may be more behaviourally similar to coyotes, which have successfully survived human persecution and have actually expanded their range as a result of human disturbance (Goulet, pers. com.).

Gloria Goulet and Paul Paquet have researched southwestern Manitoba wolves for the past few years. Gloria believes that gray wolves may have been more negatively affected than red wolves by the extensive human disturbance in and around Duck Mountain. This may be the reason for little evidence of gray wolves at Duck Mountain. Conversely, the lack of red wolves at Riding Mountain may be due to physical isolation from Duck Mountain and adjacent areas. Hunting pressure around both mountains has been significant and wolves are regularly shot for sport. Gloria feels that both wolf types can successfully interbreed in southwestern Manitoba, as has been the case with Ilse Royale and Minnesota wolves, and this may be the saving grace for Riding Mountain wolves. However, further research is required and safe corridors are needed for wolf travel between Riding Mountain and Duck Mountain and adjacent areas. This may be easier said than done as wolves are perceived as threats to livestock in the area and are also blamed for low deer numbers.

Recently, Gloria and Paul have submitted a research proposal entitled the *Southwestern Manitoba Wolf Project* (2000). This project aims to develop interim wolf management policy and guidelines based on current knowledge of wolf status and threats of extirpation. A significant component of the proposed research would be the continued collection and analysis of wolf tissue DNA to evaluate genetic structure of the populations, patterns of wolf movement, and degree of isolation. Collection of carcasses would assist in the identification of diseases that may adversely affect wolf populations. This research would ultimately lead to the development of wolf habitat effectiveness and connectivity models to identify areas where human activity may encroach upon high quality wolf habitat.

Reaction to the research proposal by the Manitoba government has been slow. Consequently, much of the current research and associated wolf awareness activities have been completed by volunteers. Some of Gloria's research has been supported through fundraising activities such as 'Women Howling for Wolves' spiritual retreats at Riding Mountain. Additionally, Gloria and Lindy Clubb, a Manitoba writer/researcher, orchestrated a campaign to quash the attempted use

of strychnine poisoning for grey wolf control by the Manitoba government. Gloria and Lindy have also been instrumental in building a coalition of hunters, trappers, park wardens, and environmentalists that meet yearly to discuss wolf issues in the region. For their part, the trappers have been submitting tissue samples saved throughout the year for genetic analysis. As time progresses, a more complete picture of southwestern Manitoba wolves is being revealed.

I find it very interesting that two populations of wolves in such close proximity can be so different. By all accounts, the wolves of Duck Mountain seem to be thriving, despite the increasing pressures of recreational and industrial use in the area. Wolves have been spotted near cottage subdivisions within Duck Mountain Provincial Park and one wolf that was seen taking a beaver was shot by a local for its pelt. The situation at Riding Mountain is less clear. Although these wolves are protected in the park they appear to be threatened and may fast be approaching endangered status. More information is required to determine the status of the wolf populations at both mountains. Recently, there has been a glimmer of hope. A letter by Gloria to the Manitoba government outlining the status of Riding Mountain wolves has struck a chord; a moratorium has been placed on wolf hunting outside of the southern boundary of Riding Mountain and park staff has reported that wolf numbers have risen over the past year (Clubb, pers. comm.). Although this is a hopeful sign it may not be enough. Gloria feels that the gray wolves of Riding Mountain may not survive as an isolated population. What may be needed is an influx of new blood. To determine this would require a comprehensive research initiative that includes cooperation among volunteers, government, aboriginal, NGO, and university researchers. In the meantime, time will ultimately reveal the viability of the populations of mountain wolves of fragmented southwestern Manitoba.

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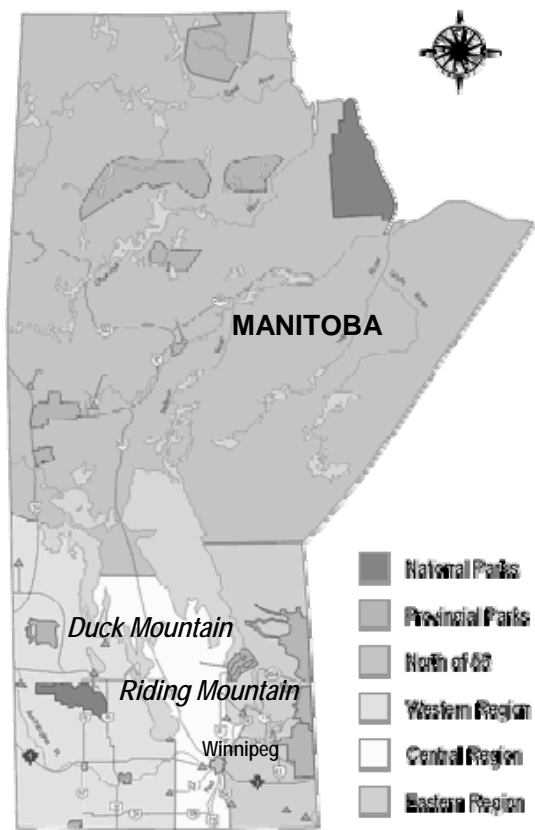


Figure 1. Duck and Riding Mountains, Manitoba



Figure 2. Skull of moose cow preyed upon by wolves in a peatland.