

The Mexican gray wolf, “lobo,” is classified as critically endangered.



PHOTO BY DAVID CHUDNOV

## Where Have All the Gray Wolves Gone?

Mexican gray wolves are the most endangered mammals in the United States, and if policies don't change, the species could go extinct.

By **Zoe Helene**

Wherever wolves run free, indigenous cultures have revered them as symbols of loyalty, free will, fearlessness and unity. But wolves haven't had it easy in North America, where negative myths prevail. Fear-based stereotypes and use of public lands for cattle ranching have resulted in Mother Nature's dogs being persecuted to the point of near-extinction.

Mexican gray wolves, a subspecies known as lobos, have been hit particularly hard. Driven to extinction in the wild by 1970, and currently deemed “critically endangered,” lobos are now nurtured in captive breeding programs with the ultimate goal of reintroducing them into the wild. The first lobos were released 17 years ago, but only 83 survive. Lobos are the most endangered mammals in the United States today.

“Wolves cannot speak for themselves,” says Maggie Howell, executive director for the Wolf Conservation Center (WCC), the preeminent captive breeding and release facility in the eastern United States and home to about 13 lobos and 7 red wolves, who live off-exhibit at the 26-acre facility in South Salem, NY. “We teach about 40,000 people a year (mostly kids)

about the importance of wild wolves in the wild landscape.”

Howell and a coalition of wolf-advocacy groups are attempting to reverse the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) designation of critically endangered lobos as “experimental non-essential,” which means that ranchers and hunters are allowed to kill reintroduced wolves if the wolves kill cattle. USFWS deems this acceptable because the lobos' genetics are represented in captivity, but experts are concerned that the wolves' adaptation to captivity is resulting in smaller litters, less successful breeding and decreased pup survival for the species.

For that reason, Howell says, “it's crucial that the species be allowed to survive in the wild and that more wolves be released into the wild to increase the genetic health of the entire species.”

The WCC and a consortium of wolf-advocacy groups have declared March 22-30 #LoboWeek, in an effort to get the “experimental, non-essential” designation changed and allow wolves to establish new packs and populations in additional wild areas that are essential to their recovery. [nywolf.org](http://nywolf.org)