



"Ranchers can't make good management decisions based on myth."

- Andrew Anderson, Montana land-owner and producer

Wolf Hunting Behavior

Understanding how wolves hunt is key to helping prevent wolf-livestock conflict. As wolves circulate around their territory and encounter and test prey under various conditions, they gain information about prey's vulnerability to hunting (finding, catching, killing). Through trial and error, wolves end up with whichever prey they can capture.

Wolves have a strong sense of self-preservation. As such, they are continually weighing vulnerability against risk – this leads to testing prey's vulnerability. Unlike bears and lions, wolves are not ambush predators. Wolves are not physically equipped to take down prey like bears and lions. Wolves generally attack from behind, weakening their target and minimizing their risk of injury or death from a hoof or antler. Thus, wolves will pressure prey to entice them to flee. Getting their prey to run also allows the wolves to evaluate which animal is the most vulnerable, allowing them to single out and put their collective energy toward taking the weakest animal.

If the prey, however, turns and faces the wolves, standing its' ground, the risk to the wolf increases. If the wolves are unsuccessful in getting a flight response, in most cases, the wolves will back down and seek more vulnerable options.

There are other factors that can lead to vulnerability in prey and result in a successful hunt. Wolves are capable of taking healthy, full-grown elk bulls hindered by challenging terrain. When prey becomes trapped or hampered by a landscape feature like deep snow, downfall, fencing, or steep draw, wolves don't need to take the weakest or slowest animal. As long as the vulnerability outweighs the risk, wolves will take advantage of the circumstances.



Wolves pursuing fleeing Elk



Bison in a herd standing their ground

Prey Vulnerability and Surplus Killing

As with all predators, wolves kill to obtain the food needed to survive. Hunting takes a tremendous amount of energy for wolves, and most hunting attempts are unsuccessful. Thus, wolves take advantage of prey vulnerability to procure sufficient food with minimal effort and risk.

Like many predators, wolves can occasionally take more than can be immediately consumed. Though “surplus” killing is uncommon, it does happen, and generally, this is seen in late winter months when ungulates are more physically compromised. As with any predation event, there always exists a set of circumstances that led to the successful kill. It is no different in the case of surplus killing; sufficient vulnerability existed in a group of animals that allowed for multiple kills. Prey in a weakened state due to winter severity, deep snow, challenging terrain, herd illness, or prey behavior are some factors that can play into a surplus killing event.

If the carcasses are left on the landscape, wolves will generally return to a kill site for several days to continue consuming the remains. Surplus kills also provide valuable food resources to other animals via scavenging during the time of year when other carnivores need these resources the most.

Livestock Vulnerability

To reiterate, prey vulnerability is a highly influential factor in determining wolf hunting success. As wolves circulate around their territory and encounter and test prey under various conditions, they gain information about the prey's vulnerability to hunting. Through trial and error, wolves end up with whichever prey they can capture.

Many factors lead to livestock vulnerability. For more details, please see: [Understanding Wolf-Livestock Conflict Risk](#).

Wolves learn and remember the information gained about prey behavior, terrain, locations, and any other physical factors that will help them in their quest for food.

Vulnerability vs. Chronic Depredation

Repeated depredations by wolves on livestock are often referred to as “chronic” depredation. However, more often than not, it is a case of vulnerability that may be addressed rather than actual chronic behavior. If you have one ranch experiencing repeated loss due to wolves while the neighbor has had no issues, this leads to the question of why wolves are killing cattle on one ranch and not the neighbor’s ranch.

This illustrates a classic vulnerability scenario with a specific ranch operation or cattle. There is a window of time, which can vary greatly, in which the vulnerability must be addressed, and most likely can be addressed, to avoid the potential of wolves becoming *chronic* depredators. If not addressed, this can grow into a community-wide challenge, leading to a chronic depredation scenario that is very difficult to reverse. Thus, Working Circle works closely with ranchers to identify conflict risks and support ranchers in minimizing these risks, thus protecting the lives of cattle and wolves.

Serving California, Oregon, and Colorado

[DONATE HERE](#) to support proven, long-term and sustainable strategies to reduce wolf-livestock conflict, thus protecting both cattle and wolves.

For more ways to donate visit our [SUPPORT US!](#) page.