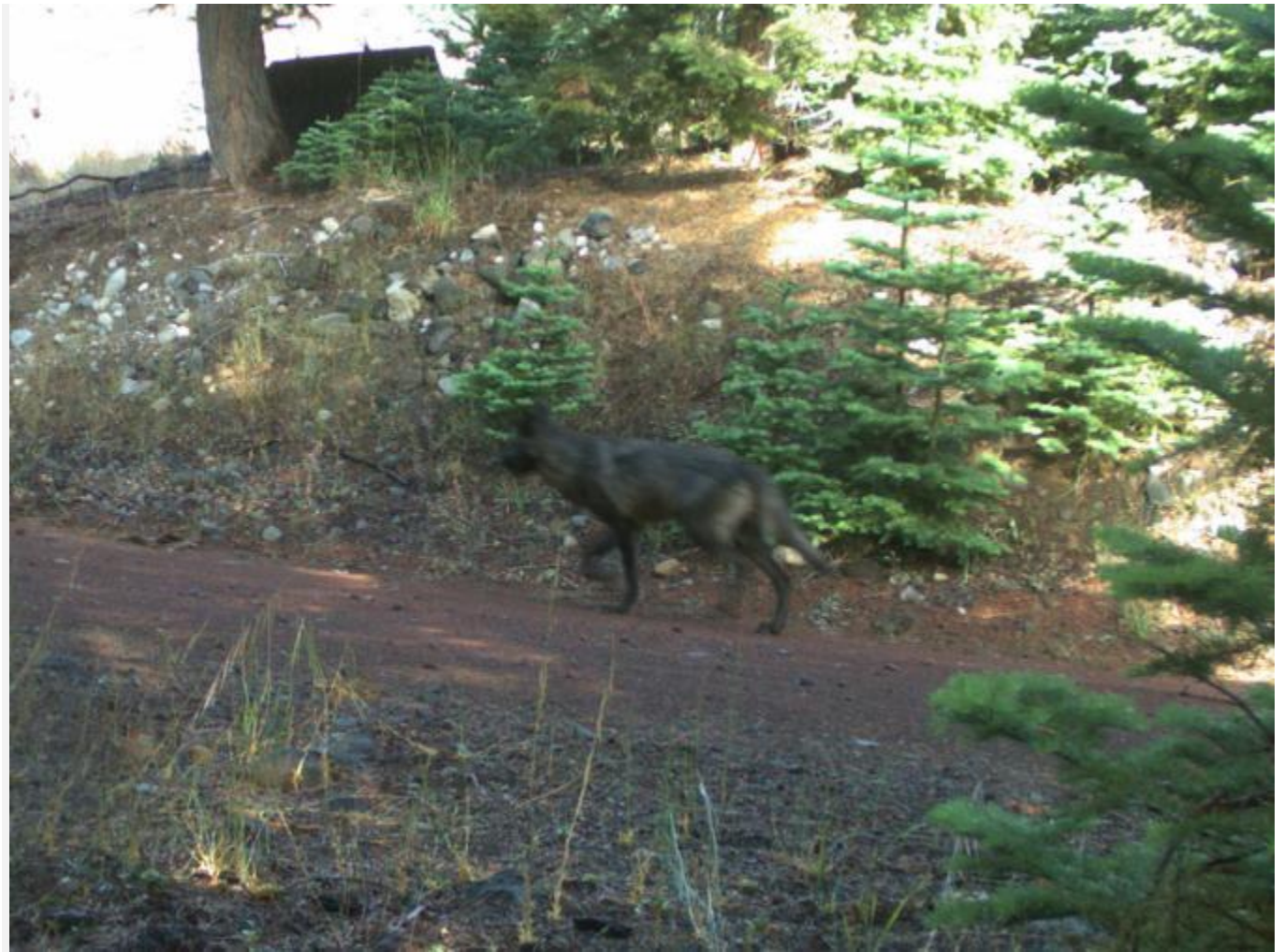


California May Be Home to a New Lone Wolf

The animal was photographed in a forest near Oregon, but state biologists await DNA confirmation. It would be only the second gray wolf known to cross into California since 1924.

By **Jane Braxton Little**, National Geographic

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A trail camera in a Northern California forest near Oregon shot this photo of an animal last month. Biologists say it is probably a gray wolf.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY CDFW

Update: It's not just a lone wolf, but a pack. New photographs show [five pups and two adults living in Northern California](#), according to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The evidence is more than a furtive photo, less than DNA confirmation, but California wildlife officials are almost certain that a gray wolf has moved into the state.

Images captured by a trail camera reveal a "large, dark-colored canid" walking along a dirt track among fir trees in remote Siskiyou County, near the California-Oregon border. State biologists also found fresh wolf-like tracks.

If confirmed, the sighting would mark just the second appearance of *canis lupis* in California since 1924, when the state's last known native wolf was caught in a trap in Lassen County. The first wolf to arrive in nearly 90 years was known as [OR7](#), a male that slipped into California in December 2011 and stayed for 15 months before crossing back into Oregon.

State officials were in the region last week looking for new signs of the elusive animal and collecting scat, which was sent to a laboratory for analysis. "We believe it's a wolf – or wolves," says Jordan Traverso, a Department of Fish and Wildlife spokeswoman. The DNA tests are expected to take months.

Collecting scat and photos is a needle-in-haystack effort, searching a vast backcountry for an animal that can easily cover 30 miles a day. All wildlife biologists really know is that a wolf-like canid was caught on a camera on July 24. By now, the creature may be long gone – to Oregon or beyond.

Once wolves began moving from Idaho into Oregon in the late 1990s, scientists expected them to make their way south through the Cascade Range and into California. They were already evaluating the potential for wolf re-colonization and its management implications when "lo and behold! OR7 steps into California," says Karen Kovacs, a state wildlife program manager. By the time the wolf completed his historic trek through six northern California counties, the department was mid-way through a [wolf management plan](#) that is now in the final stages.

OR7 attracted a rapt public, which could follow his journey on a wildlife department [website](#) thanks to a radio collar placed on him before he left his pack in northeastern Oregon. He acquired cult-like status, inspiring a virtual existence on Facebook and Twitter ("Left family to find a wife & new home. eHarmony just wasn't working for me"). After crossing back into Oregon in the spring of 2013, OR7 found a mate and produced [pups](#) both last year and this spring. Oregon officials list OR7's Rogue pack as one of 10 in the state.

His [ramble](#) through California's high-sage desert and timber-covered mountains embraced only the northern portion of his predecessors' territory. Historically wolves roamed as far south as San Diego and from the Coastal Range east to the Nevada border. Bounty laws enacted by the state legislature combined with habitat loss to decimate the population, and by the 1920s "we'd killed them all," says Traverso.

The attention OR7 drew during two California winters and a fire-filled summer contributed to a California Fish and Game Commission decision last year to list the gray wolf as a state endangered species. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed the species from its endangered list in Idaho and Montana, but the agency continues to [protect](#) the gray wolf in California and most of 41 other states.

Wolf advocates have hailed the wolf sightings as evidence that California has ample habitat to support a wolf population. Scientists are not so sure. The requirements of one wolf on the move are substantially different from a settled pack, says Kovacs. "When a dispersing wolf finds a mate, establishes a pack and a defined territory, that's when we'll know there's suitable habitat."

For scientists, the only near certainty is that other wolves will re-enter California. As long as they are protected from humans, they will be back, Kovacs says.