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- Part 1: Turf wars in Idaho's wilderness
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Life on the ranch

Sunday, October 29, 2006

Endangered species: The federal government declared wolves an endangered species in 1976 after ranchers nearly wiped them out trying to protect livestock. Bounty records have entries showing wolves roamed northeastern Oregon through 1921, at least, before disappearing. In February 1999, a female gray wolf known as B-45 wandered into Oregon after leaving an Idaho pack east of the Taylor Ranch. Biologists captured and returned it to Idaho. Around the same time, an Idaho wolf made its way into Oregon and was hit by a car, and another Idaho wolf was shot.

Taylor Ranch Field Station: The University of Idaho purchased the 65-acre Taylor Ranch in 1970, but it already had a rich history. A frontier outlaw known variously as "Kid Garden" and "The Yellowstone Kid" hid out nearby in the 1880s between stagecoach holdups. A self-styled mountain man called "Cougar Dave" Lewis homesteaded the site. During the 1920s and '30s, Lewis guided hunts for some of the Northwest's most influential men and was termed "one of Idaho's most colorful characters" by the Idaho Statesman newspaper. The ranch has six buildings, and 17 students and researchers spent part of last summer there. Holly and Jim Akenson "are almost like surrogate parents" to the students, said Sue McMurray, spokeswoman for the University of Idaho. "They are really dedicated to that operation and mentoring the student interns that come in."

The ranch also is a place to gather long-term data as a baseline for future research on projects ranging from anadromous fish to global climate change, McMurray said.

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Wildfire threat: A wildfire nearly destroyed Taylor Ranch in 2000, forcing the Akensons to make a harrowing escape with one horse and four mules. Pursued by flames for much of the way, they rode 22 miles to another ranch. "It was on three sides of us when we were going downstream with our mules," said Holly Akenson. At one point, a sow bear with cubs refused to let them pass. U.S. Forest Service smoke jumpers managed to save the Taylor Ranch from flames.

Akensons' background: Holly Akenson earned a master's in wildlife biology at the University of Idaho, and Jim Akenson has a master's in resource geography from Oregon State University. They worked from 1982 to 1990 at the Taylor Ranch and returned in 1998. In the interim they lived in La Grande, where she was employed as a wildlife consultant and he worked for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife as a cougar and bear research biologist.

— Richard Cockle

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