

# Wisconsin Wolf Season Report

February 2021

Randy Johnson and Anna Schneider

## Summary

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) from the federal list of endangered species on Jan. 4, 2021, returning management authority to the lower 48 states and tribes. In Wisconsin, state statute 29.185 requires the implementation of a regulated wolf hunting and trapping season whenever wolves are not listed as a threatened or endangered species. The law also identifies much of the framework for the season including season dates, license issuance and methods of take.

Ahead of the delisting on Jan. 4, 2021, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) announced in December 2020 that a wolf harvest season would begin in November 2021. On Feb. 11, 2021, a state circuit court judge ordered the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to schedule a wolf harvest season in February. The Wisconsin Department of Justice filed an appeal and requested a stay, which was denied on Feb. 19. The DNR complied with the circuit court order to implement a wolf harvest season in February 2021. State statute closes the wolf season on Feb. 28 or earlier to achieve harvest goals. The season began on Feb. 22 and officially ended at 3 p.m. Feb 24 resulting in a total of 218 wolves harvested.

## Background

Wisconsin requires state-licensed hunters and trappers to obtain a wolf license to harvest a wolf. Licenses are issued through an application and a two-stage drawing process. The initial drawing for 50% of the available licenses is orchestrated through a random lottery in which all applicants are entered. The remaining 50% of the available licenses are issued based upon the cumulative preference points of applicants, providing unsuccessful applicants from prior years a greater chance to obtain a license. Each license allows the licensed hunter or trapper to harvest one wolf by any legal method. Legal methods include trapping with foothold traps and cable restraints, hunting with the use of electronic calls, bait and with the aid of dogs to track/trail wolves. Each of these legal methods are subject to specific regulations regarding use including when each method is allowed within the overall season. For the February 2021 season, all methods were available for the duration of the season.

The state is divided into six wolf management zones (Figure 1). Wolf harvest licenses authorize hunting and trapping in any open zone. State statute 29.185 (5)(c) provides the DNR with the authority to close wolf zones as zone-specific harvest quotas are reached and zone closures become effective a minimum of 24 hours later following being announced publicly.

Given the short time to implement this season, the DNR Wolf Advisory Committee did not meet to develop a harvest objective and quota recommendation for the DNR. The DNR considered several factors in developing science-based harvest quotas, including the most

recent wolf population estimate, the population's response to harvest in the 2012-14 seasons, the current wolf management plan, the scientific literature and estimated impacts of various quotas from population model projections. DNR biologists, research scientists and other staff, along with a representative from the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC) met to discuss the relevant information. Following this discussion, the representative from GLIFWC elected not to participate further in the final harvest quota deliberations. DNR staff proceeded to develop a final harvest quota recommendation based on the available information. The final quota recommendation of 200 wolves was estimated to result in no annual population change while allowing a sustainable harvest and was approved by the Natural Resources Board with the directive to issue harvest licenses at a rate of 20 times the quota. The DNR recognized Ojibwe harvest declarations, and in accordance with their treaty rights within the Ceded Territory, the portion of the quota within the Ceded Territory was equally divided between the state and tribes resulting in 119 wolves allocated to the state and 81 wolves allocated to the Ojibwe Tribes.

## **Methods**

Wisconsin requires state-licensed wolf hunters and trappers to register their harvested wolf using a two-stage registration process. Within 24 hours of harvest, license holders are required to inform the DNR by phone or internet of the harvest location, sex and method of harvest. This information is used to track harvest by unit and make unit closure decisions. By the seventh day of the month following harvest, hunters and trappers are required to present the pelt and skinned carcass to the DNR for final registration, tagging of the animal and collection of biological data. Hunters who intend to have the wolf mounted by a taxidermist may exhibit the wolf to the department for registration without separating the pelt. The skinned carcass must still be exhibited to the department within 30 days of registration.

## **Results**

### **Wolf Season**

The application period for either a preference point or harvest license began at 12:01 a.m. Feb.16 and concluded at 11:59 p.m. Feb. 20. A total of 27,151 people applied for either a preference point or harvest license (Table 1). Of these applicants, a total of 18,503 applied for a harvest license, and 8,648 purchased a preference point only. Based on the state harvest quota of 119 wolves, a total of 2,380 successful applicants (12.8% of license applicants) were authorized to purchase a wolf harvest license. A total of 1,548 licenses (65% of those awarded) were sold.

Following the drawing, applicants were able to commence the harvest season once they purchased their license and printed their carcass/pelt tag beginning at 12:01 a.m. Feb. 22. The season was scheduled to conclude on Feb. 28 or sooner in order to meet the harvest quota. In response to harvest information, zones 2, 5 and 6 closures were announced Feb. 23 at 10 a.m. and became effective Feb. 24 at 10 a.m. Similarly, the closures of zones 1, 3 and 4 were announced Feb. 23 at 3 p.m. and became effective Feb. 24 at 3 p.m.

A total of 218 wolves were harvested by state license holders. Of the 218 wolves harvested, hunting accounted for 208 wolves (95% of total take) while trapping accounted for 10 wolves

(5% of total take). Of the 208 wolves taken by hunters, 188 (86%) were taken with the aid of trailing hounds, 16 (7%) were taken with the aid of predator calls and 4 (2%) were taken by stand/still hunting. Of the 10 taken by trappers, 7 (3%) were taken with foothold traps and 3 (2%) were taken with cable restraints (table 3).

## **Biological Data Collection**

All successful license holders were required to exhibit the wolf pelt and carcass to the DNR for final registration, pelt tagging and collection of biological data. The DNR collected data from each harvested wolf including sex, estimated age class of the wolf, specific harvest location (latitude/longitude) and a visual inspection of the carcass. The DNR did not require hunters to submit wolf carcasses to the DNR for further data collection, such as a premolar for cementum aging analysis, as done in previous wolf seasons. This change was made for several reasons. First, cementum aging analysis of wolves harvested in previous wolf seasons indicated the majority of harvest (>75%) of both sexes consisted of individuals 2 years old or younger, suggesting that primarily both male and female wolves younger than breeding age were harvested. Second, the age structure of harvest can be estimated by tooth eruption and wear characteristics allowing for classification of harvested wolves into biologically relevant age classes without the need for cementum analysis. Third, female reproductive tracts collected during previous seasons indicated most females age 2 years and younger did not exhibit placental scars that would suggest they had reproduced. Fourth, pack-based breeding by wolves reduces the usefulness of placental scars to index breeding propensity (i.e., lack of scars may indicate harvest of a sub-dominant female from a pack that successfully produced pups). Finally, many successful hunters and trappers value the skull and other carcass parts as part of the overall outdoor experience associated with the harvest and collection of the skull or other parts can negatively impact that experience. Therefore, the data needed to satisfy DNR management objectives can be collected in ways that do not require the DNR to take possession of the carcass.

At the request of the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC), DNR provided information to hunters at the time of in-person registration that GLIFWC was interested in collecting wolf carcasses for their own research purposes. Submission of carcasses was voluntary. This effort resulted in 21 harvested carcasses being voluntarily provided by hunters/trappers to DNR on behalf of GLIFWC. Those carcasses were transferred to GLIFWC following the season.

The total harvest of 218 wolves consisted of 102 females (47%) and 116 males (53%); (see table 4). Age class of harvested wolves was estimated by visual inspection of tooth wear and eruption of the cementum enamel juncture of an upper canine tooth (Gipson et al. 2000; K. Laudon, pers. comm.). Estimated age of harvested wolves consisted of 20 young of the year (9%), 110 subadults (51%) and 85 adults (39%). Age data was not collected on three wolves (1%). The estimated age of harvested wolves by sex is provided in Table 4. Wolf harvest was distributed across the 6 harvest zones (Table 2, Figure 2 and Figure 3).

At the time of final registration, both the pelt and carcass were available for visual inspection by trained DNR personnel conducting the registration. DNR staff completing the registration were asked to record any noteworthy observations related to the condition of the carcass

and/or pelt. This resulted in a total of 93 comments as described below (some wolves received multiple comments):

- 24 comments indicating the wolf appeared in healthy condition, nothing significant to report;
- 14 comments related to poor fur quality (rubs on the pelt, mange, missing patches of fur);
- 11 comments indicating multiple gunshot wounds present on the carcass;
- 7 comments related to an old/healing injury (not related to harvest);
- 2 comments indicating poor body condition (skinny carcass);
- 1 comment indicating trauma consistent with canine bites (the hunters confirmed these injuries resulted from interaction between the wolf and their hunting dogs);
- 20 comments were unrelated to carcass or pelt condition (supplemental info such as weight, method of take, etc.); and
- 125 wolves with no comments recorded.

### **Law Enforcement Activities**

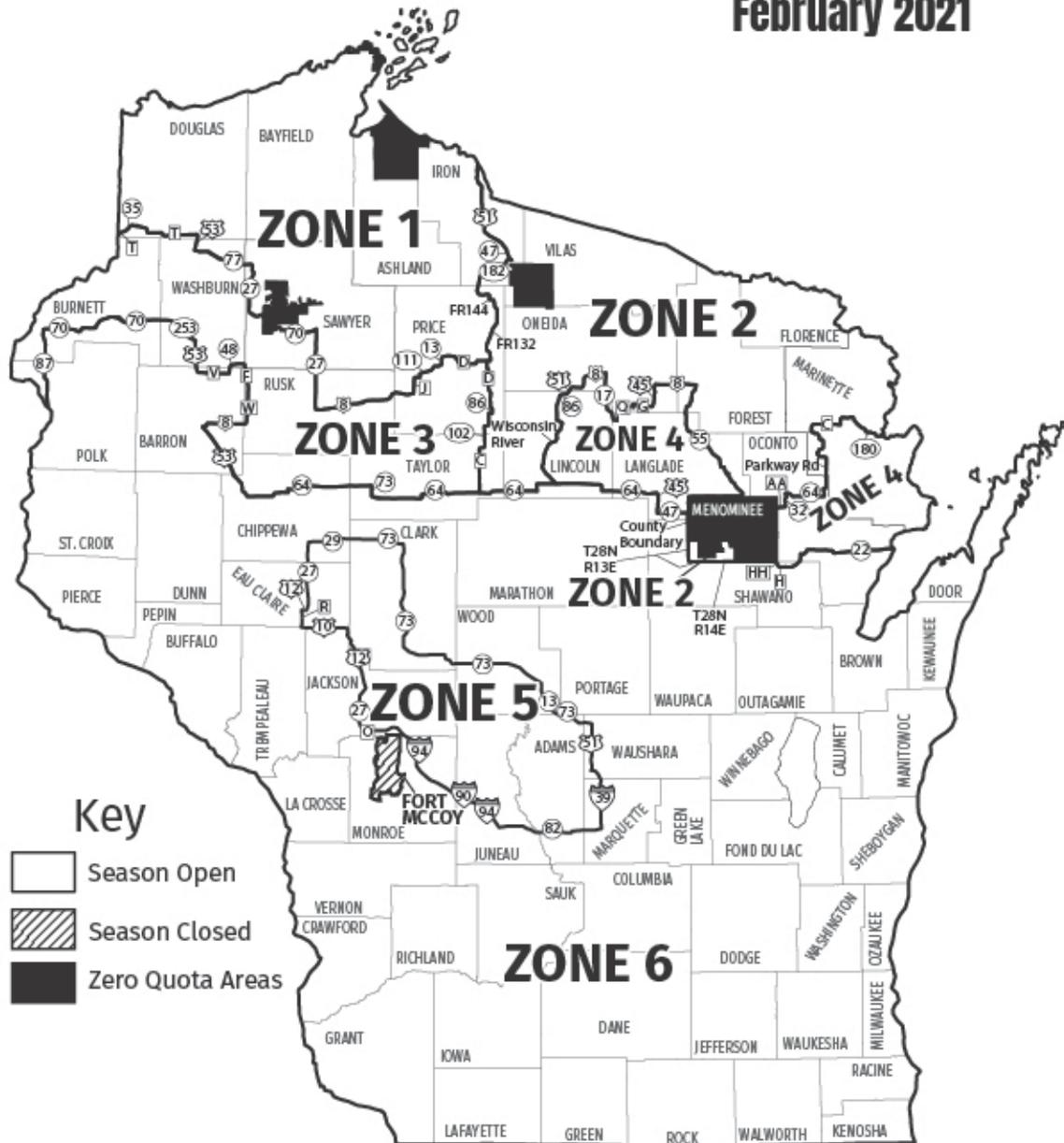
The department's Division of Public Safety and Resource Protection conducted a total of 101 wolf hunting/trapping related investigations and issued 14 citations during the February 2021 wolf season (Table 5). There were four illegally harvested wolves recovered (these four are included in the total harvest of 218).

Of the 14 citations issued:

- 6 were due to having a loaded firearm in a moving or stationary vehicle;
- 2 were due to failure to immediately validate the wolf carcass tag upon harvest;
- 2 were due to failure to carry a valid carcass tag while hunting/trapping;
- 1 was due to an illegally placed cable restraint;
- 1 was due to operating a snowmobile on public trail without a valid trail pass;
- 1 was due to discharging a firearm within 50 feet of the center of a roadway; and
- 1 was due to hunting wolves without first purchasing the required license.

# Wolf Harvesting Zones

February 2021



Zero Quota Areas - Wolf harvest is not allowed within the exterior boundaries of the Bad River, Lac Courte Oreilles, Lac du Flambeau, Menominee, and Red Cliff reservations nor within the designated Stockbridge-Munsee wolf zone except with DNR depredation permits.

Access to Fort McCoy is by special permit only. Wolf harvesting will not be allowed in Fort McCoy during the February 2021 season.

**Figure 1.** Wolf harvest zones for the February 2021 wolf season.

<b>Table 1. Drawing And License Summary For The February 2021 Wolf Season.</b>			
	<u>Resident</u>	<u>Nonresident</u>	<u>Total</u>
Preference Point Applications	8,211	437	8,648
Harvest License Applications	17,660	843	18,503
<b>Total Applications</b>	<b>25,871</b>	<b>1,280</b>	<b>27,151</b>
	<u>Random</u>	<u>Pref. Point</u>	<u>Total</u>
Resident Successful Applicants	1,140	1,184	2,324
Nonresident Successful Applicants	50	6	56
<b>Total Successful Applicants</b>	<b>1,190</b>	<b>1,190</b>	<b>2,380</b>
	<u>Resident</u>	<u>Non-resident</u>	<u>Total</u>
Harvest Licenses Awarded	2,324	56	2,380
Harvest Licenses Purchased	1,526	22	1,548

<b>Table 2. Harvest And Zone Summary For The February 2021 Wolf Season.</b>				
<u>Wolf Harvest Zone</u>	<u>Total Quota</u>	<u>State-licensed Quota</u>	<u>State-licensed Harvest</u>	<u>Zone closure date and time*</u>
1	62	31	53	Feb 24 3pm
2	33	18	43	Feb 24 10am
3	40	20	42	Feb 24 3pm
4	9	6	4	Feb 24 3pm
5	28	27	31	Feb 24 10am
6	28	17	45	Feb 24 10am
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>218</b>	
<p><i>*Successful applicants could initiate hunting/trapping beginning Feb. 22 as soon as they purchased and printed their wolf harvest license and carcass/pelt tag.</i></p>				

**Table 3. Method Of Take Summary For Wolves Harvested During The February 2021 Wolf Season.**

<u>Method</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>%</u>
Aid of Dogs*	188	86%
Hunting/Predator Call	16	7%
Foothold Trap	7	3%
Cable Restraint	3	2%
Stand/Still Hunting	4	2%
Total	218	100%

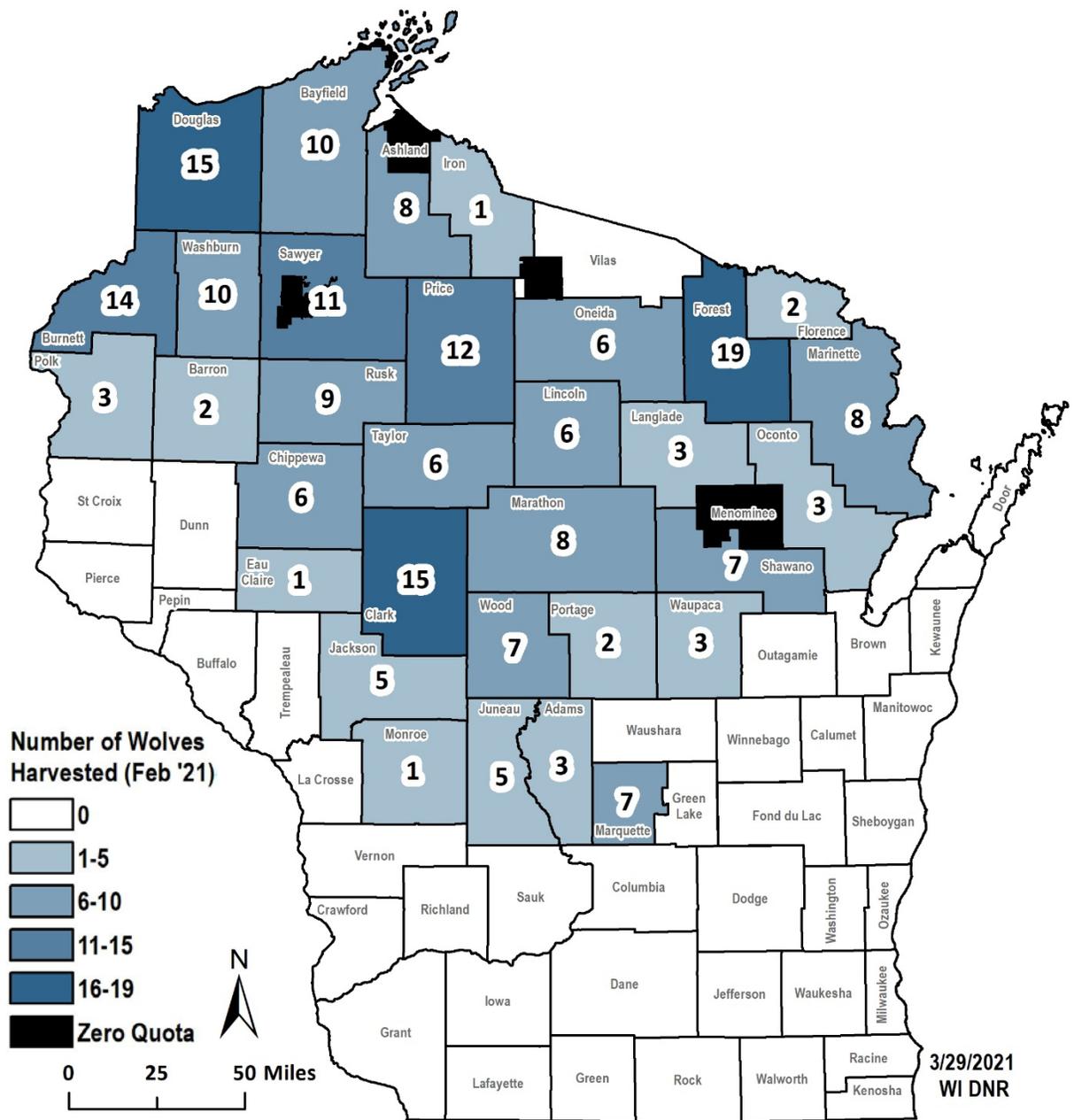
*\*wolves harvested by gunshot with the aid of trailing hounds.*

**Table 4. Sex And Estimated Age Of Wolves Harvested During Feb. 2021 Wolf Season.**

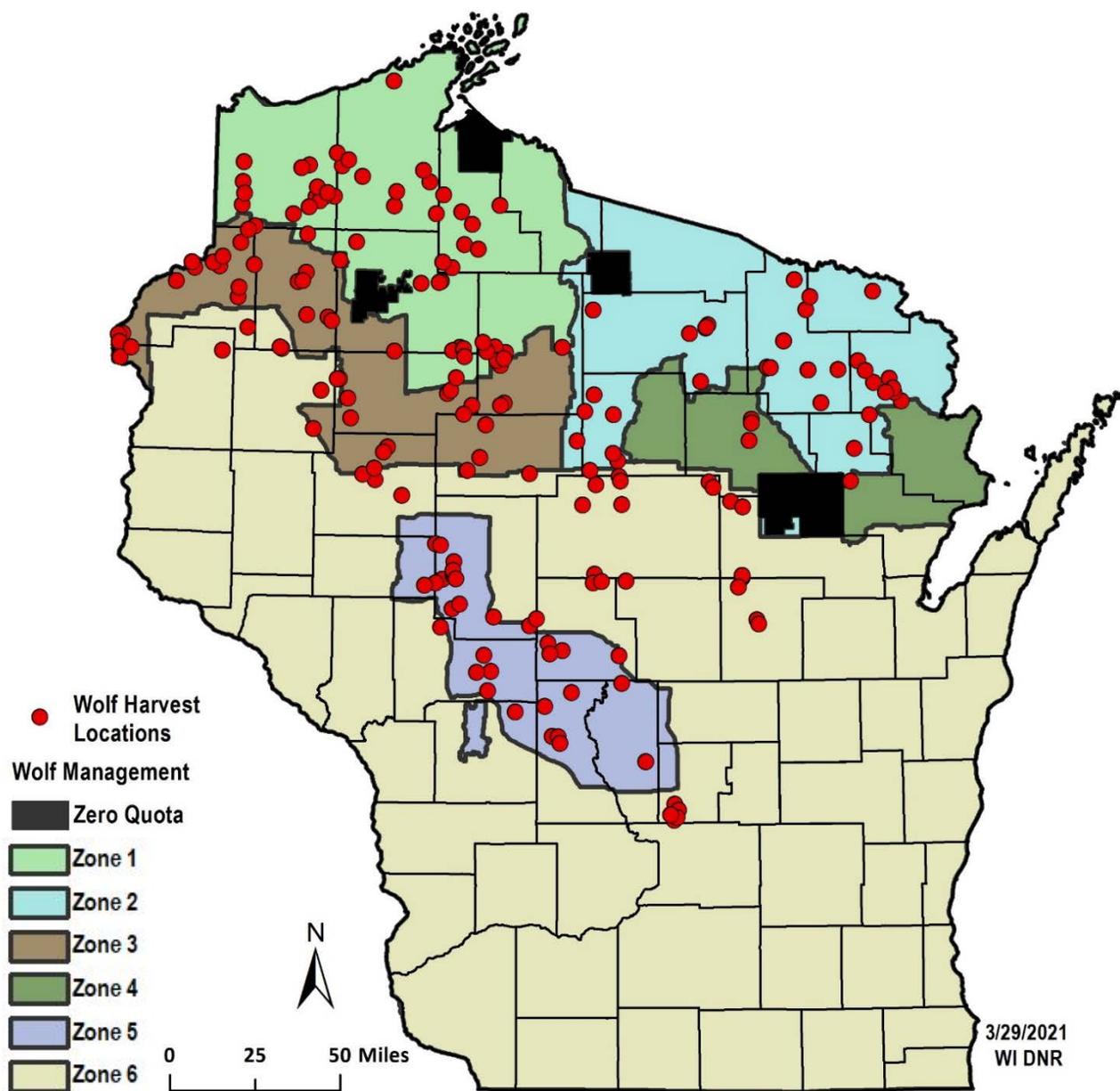
	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Combined Total</u>	<u>% of Total by Age</u>
Young of the year (<1 yr.)	10	10	20	9%
Subadults (~1.5 yr.)	57	53	110	51%
Adults (~2.5 yr. or older)	47	38	85	39%
No Age Data	2	1	3	1%
	116	102	218	
% of Total by Sex	53%	47%		

**Table 5. Summary Of Law Enforcement Activity During The February 2021 Wolf Season.**

	<b>Total</b>
Number of wolf hunting-related complaints received:	84
Number of wolf trapping-related complaints received:	10
Number of user conflict/harassment-related complaints:	6
Number of wolf-related investigations conducted:	101
Number of hunting-related citations issued:	13
Number of trapping-related citations issued:	1
Number of user conflict/harassment-related citations issued:	0
Number of verbal warnings issued:	31
Number of car-killed wolves:	0
Number of incidentally trapped wolves recovered:	0
Number of illegally harvested wolves recovered:	4
Number of shot & unrecovered wolves:	0
Number of unknown cause of death wolves found:	0
Number of other dead/injured wolves recovered:	1



**Figure 2.** Harvest Locations By County For The February 2021 Wolf Season.



**Figure 3.** Harvest Locations For The February 2021 Wolf Season.