

## McCleery Ranch update



**Plowing the sanctuary multiple times per day is not an uncommon practice during these Montana winter months.** *Wolf Haven.*

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**I**t has been a busy time here at the McCleery Ranch. We made it through our second winter and though the temperatures were milder than last year, we received much more snow – there were several times that we got over two feet in one day! And although the calendar officially says it's spring, we continue to get snow on almost a daily basis (according to the locals, apparently that's springtime in Montana).

As you can imagine, much of the winter was spent plowing roads and shoveling gates to ensure that we had safe access to the wolf enclosures. We also had to clear the remote gravel road that leads to the highway into town so we could pick up meat for the wolves. Being so remote is definitely a benefit for the wolves but does pose its own unique set of challenges. Even though the snow presented difficulties for staff, it was a good winter for the wolves. As we all know, they are in their element in snowy conditions and this past winter seemed no exception.

We are coming up on our two-year anniversary since the acquisition of the McCleery facility, and one

of the very best things (besides taking care of the wolves) has been getting to know the members of this small community and building relationships. These efforts have paid dividends because this past season we were able to acquire literally thousands of pounds of road-kill deer and elk, hunter scraps, as well as cows, calves, and bulls that passed away from natural causes. This not only benefits the wolves, but as a sanctuary, if we are able to reduce the amount of meat we are purchasing, it is better for Wolf Haven financially. Additionally, it reduces harm to other animals – one of the challenges of taking care of carnivores.

More important

than making it through the winter was making it through another breeding season. If you have been following us, you know that one of the biggest challenges here at the McCleery Ranch has been managing the aggression between the females in the two large family groups. We care for 34 wolves here and though several are in pairs, there are two large family groups, both with multiple reproductively viable females. They are far more prone to aggression during breeding season than males. Also, as you may remember, although we have no plans to breed the McCleery wolves, they all remain intact, which poses a definite challenge. Wolves are seasonal breeders (winter), so in an effort to mitigate tensions, prior to breeding season, we removed some of the females from the largest group, which consisted of ten females and four males. In January, we were able to chemically



**In an effort to mitigate tensions, prior to breeding season, we moved some of the females from the largest group into another enclosure.** *Wolf Haven.*

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**We were able to chemically immobilize four of the females via a remote drug delivery system to move them to the one vacant enclosure onsite.** *Wolf Haven.*

immobilize four of the females from that group via a remote drug delivery system (dart gun) and move them to the one vacant enclosure onsite. This reduced the group to six females and four males and while there was still some aggression between them, it was much reduced from what we saw our first year here.

We also separated out the other family group of nine – mom and three female offspring went into one enclosure and dad and four male offspring into the adjacent enclosure. We kept them separated from January 31 to March 31 and then reunited the group... all seemed

excited to be back to together.

Even though breeding season is coming to an end and aggression levels are starting to subside, as a sanctuary we have a responsibility to provide the highest level of care. Keeping big family groups in confined spaces (albeit large) is not what we consider to be best practices, so we are hoping to build additional enclosures (and expand the perimeter fence) to give the wolves more space. Wolf Haven is currently working to acquire bids (as well as funding) and hope that perhaps construction can begin this summer.

One last note: because some

of the founding McCleery wolves came from the wilds of Montana nearly 100 years ago and because this lineage has remained a closed population, there has been much concern about whether or not there is something genetically unique about these wolves that isn't currently represented in the existing free-ranging population. As previously mentioned, we want to be very thoughtful in how we "manage" these wolves in the future. As such, we have reached out to a well renowned geneticist whose lab is now in the process of performing genome sequencing of the McCleery wolves. We anxiously await the results and will be sure and update you as soon as we have them. In the meantime, stay safe in these very challenging times and as always, thank you for your continued support.



Wendy Spencer, Director of Operations



**Could there be something genetically unique about these wolves that isn't currently represented in the existing free-ranging population?** *Wolf Haven.*