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WILDLIFE INVESTIGATION

The killing agency: Wildlife Services' brutal methods leave a trail of animal death

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First of three parts

The day began with a drive across the desert, checking the snares he had placed in the sagebrush to catch coyotes.

Gary Strader, an employee of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, stepped out of his truck near a ravine in Nevada and found something he hadn't intended to kill.

There, strangled in a neck snare, was one of the most majestic birds in America, a federally protected golden eagle.

"I called my supervisor and said, 'I just caught a golden eagle and it's dead,' " said Strader. "He said, 'Did anybody see it?' I said, 'Geez, I don't think so.'

"He said, 'If you think nobody saw it, go get a shovel and bury it and don't say nothing to anybody.' "

"That bothered me," said Strader, whose job was terminated in 2009. "It wasn't right."

Strader's employer, a branch of the federal Department of Agriculture called Wildlife Services, has long specialized in killing animals that are deemed a threat to agriculture, the public and – more recently – the environment.

Since 2000, its employees have killed nearly a million coyotes, mostly in the West. They have destroyed millions of birds, from nonnative starlings to migratory

shorebirds, along with a colorful menagerie of more than 300 other species, including black bears, beavers, porcupines, river otters, mountain lions and wolves.

And in most cases, they have officially revealed little or no detail about where the creatures were killed, or why. But a Bee investigation has found the agency's practices to be indiscriminate, at odds with science, inhumane and sometimes illegal.

The Bee's findings include:

With steel traps, wire snares and poison, agency employees have accidentally killed more than 50,000 animals since 2000 that were not problems, including federally protected golden and bald eagles; more than 1,100 dogs, including family pets; and several species considered rare or imperiled by wildlife biologists.

Since 1987, at least 18 employees and several members of the public have been exposed to cyanide when they triggered spring-loaded cartridges laced with poison meant to kill coyotes. They survived – but 10 people have died and many others have been injured in crashes during agency aerial gunning operations since 1979.

A growing body of science has found the agency's war against predators, waged to protect livestock and big game, is altering ecosystems in ways that diminish biodiversity, degrade habitat and invite disease.

Sometimes wild animals must be destroyed – from bears that ransack mountain cabins to geese swirling over an airport runway. But because lethal control stirs strong emotions, Wildlife Services prefers to operate in the shadows.

"We pride ourselves on our ability to go in and get the job done quietly without many people knowing about it," said Dennis Orthmeyer, acting state director of Wildlife Services in California.

Basic facts are tightly guarded. "This information is Not intended for indiscriminate distribution!!!" wrote one Wildlife Services manager in an email to a municipal worker in Elk Grove about the number of beavers killed there.

And while even the military allows the media into the field, Wildlife Services does not. "If we accommodated your request, we would have to accommodate all requests," wrote Mark Jensen, director of Wildlife Services in Nevada, turning down a request by The Bee to observe its hunters and trappers in action.

"The public has every right to scrutinize what's going on," said Carter Niemeyer, a former Wildlife Services district manager who worked for the agency for 26 years and now believes much of the bloodletting is excessive, scientifically unsound and a waste of tax dollars.

"If you read the brochures, go on their website, they play down the lethal control, which they are heavily involved in, and show you this benign side," Niemeyer said. "It's smoke and mirrors. It's a killing business. And it ain't pretty.

"If the public knows this and they don't care, I'm not going to lose any sleep over it," Niemeyer said. "But they are entitled to know."

Agency officials say the criticism is misleading. "If we can use nonlethal control first, we usually do it," said William Clay, deputy administrator of Wildlife Services. "The problem is, generally when we get a call, it's because farmers and ranchers are having livestock killed immediately. They are being killed daily. Our first response is to try to stop the killing and then implement nonlethal methods."

In March, two congressmen – Reps. John Campbell, R-Irvine, and Peter DeFazio, D-Ore. – introduced a bill that would ban one of Wildlife Services' most controversial killing tools: spring-loaded sodium cyanide cartridges that have killed tens of thousands of animals in recent years, along with Compound 1080 (sodium fluoroacetate), a less-commonly used poison.

"This is an ineffective, wasteful program that is largely unaccountable, lacks transparency and continues to rely on cruel and indiscriminate methods," said Camilla Fox, executive director of Project Coyote, a Bay Area nonprofit.

"If people knew how many animals are being killed at taxpayer expense – often on public lands – they would be shocked and horrified," Fox said.



The program's origins

Wildlife Services' roots reach back to 1915, when Congress – hoping to increase beef production for World War I – allocated \$125,000 to exterminate wolves, starting in Nevada.

Popular among ranchers, the effort was expanded in 1931 when President Herbert Hoover signed a law authorizing the creation of a government agency – later named the Branch of Predator and Rodent Control – "to promulgate the best methods of eradication, suppression or bringing under control" a wide range of wildlife from mountain lions to prairie dogs.

Federal trappers pursued that mission with zeal. They dropped strychnine out of airplanes, shot eagles from helicopters, laced carcasses of dead animals with Compound 1080 – notorious for killing non-target species – and slaughtered coyotes, wolves, mountain lions and grizzly bears across the West.

Their efforts drew protest and calls for reform.

"The program of animal control has become an end in itself and no longer is a balanced component of an overall scheme of wildlife husbandry and management," a panel of scientists wrote in a 1964 report to the U.S. secretary of Interior.



The report was followed by hearings, another critical federal review in 1971, unflattering press and an executive order by President Richard Nixon banning poison for federal predator control. "The time has come for man to make his peace with nature," Nixon said in a statement at the time.

President Gerald Ford later amended the order to allow the continued use of sodium cyanide.

The killing has continued on a broad scale. In 1999, the American Society of Mammalogists passed a resolution calling on the agency, renamed Wildlife Services in 1997, "to cease indiscriminate, pre-emptive lethal control programs on federal, state and private lands." Today, the society is considering drafting a new resolution.

"It makes no sense to spend tens of millions of dollars to kill predators, especially in the way that it's done, to the extent that it's done, when it can have cascading effects through the ecosystem, unintended consequences and nontarget consequences," said Bradley Bergstrom, a professor of wildlife biology at Valdosta State University in Valdosta, Ga., and chairman of the society's conservation committee.

Clay, though, said his agency is more science-based and environmentally sensitive than ever. "We've increased the professionalism 100 percent," he said. "We've also emphasized research to more specifically take target animals. And we work very closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state wildlife agencies."

Elizabeth Copper, a Southern California biologist who has worked with Wildlife Services, agreed. She applauded the agency's work to protect the endangered California least tern from predators in the San Diego area.

"I know the reputation Wildlife Services has and it is particularly inappropriate for the people involved with this program," said Copper. "They work really hard with a focus for something that is in big trouble. And they've made a huge difference."

Unreported killings

But elsewhere, the agency's actions have stirred anger and concern from private citizens, scientists and state and federal fish and game officials.

In 2003, the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources received a tip that a golden eagle – one of the largest birds of prey in North America and a species protected by three federal laws, including the Migratory Bird Treaty Act – was struggling to free itself from a leg-hold trap in the remote Henry Mountains.

Roger Kerstetter – an investigator with the state wildlife division – found the trap, but no eagle. Nearby, though, he spotted feathers poking out of the sand.

"They turn out to be the neck feathers of a golden eagle. And one of them comes out with a .22 bullet attached to it," Kerstetter recalled.

On the trap was another clue. It was stamped: *Property of the U.S. Government*.

"At that point, we started doing our homework," he said.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also joined the investigation. In federal court two years later, a Wildlife Services trapper pleaded guilty to killing the eagle and paid a \$2,000 fine.

"We never did find the bird," Kerstetter said. "He claimed he just buried it."

Nor did a record of the incident turn up in the agency's files.

"They are required to report the animals they take accidentally," Kerstetter said.

"This eagle was never reported."

Strader, the former agency trapper who said he snared and buried an eagle in Nevada, is not surprised.

"That was not the only eagle I snared while working for Wildlife Services," he said. "I will not say how many. But the one (my supervisor) told me to bury was the first one, and I figured that was what was supposed to be done all the time, so that is what I did."

Overall, agency records show that 12 golden and bald eagles have been killed by mistake by agency traps, snares and cyanide poison since 2000 – a figure Strader believes is low.

"I would bet my house against a year-old doughnut there were more than 12 eagles taken, way more," said Strader. "You cannot set a trap, snare or (cyanide poison bait) in habitat occupied by eagles and not catch them on occasion."

Agency policy instructs trappers "to accurately and completely report all control activities." But Niemeyer, the retired Wildlife Services manager, said the policy is often ignored.

"Trappers felt that catching non-targets was a quick way to lose the tools of the trade and put Wildlife Services in a bad light," Niemeyer said.

Asked about the allegations, Deputy Administrator Clay said: "I certainly hope that is not the case. We track those things so we know what kind of impact we are having on populations and the environment."

In all, more than 150 species have been killed by mistake by Wildlife Services traps, snares and cyanide poison since 2000, records show. A list could fill a field guide. Here are some examples:

Armadillos, badgers, great-horned owls, hog-nosed skunks, javelina, pronghorn antelope, porcupines, great blue herons, ruddy ducks, snapping turtles, turkey vultures, long-tailed weasels, marmots, mourning doves, red-tailed hawks, sandhill cranes and ringtails.

Many are off-limits to hunters and trappers. And some species, including swift foxes, kit foxes and river otter, are the focus of conservation and restoration efforts.

"The irony is state governments and the federal government are spending millions of dollars to preserve species and then (you have) Wildlife Services out there killing the same animals," said Michael Mares, president of the American Society of Mammalogists. "It boggles the mind."

One critical loss occurred two years ago when a wolverine, one of the rarest mammals in America, stepped into a Wildlife Services leg-hold trap in Payette National Forest in Idaho. It was the third wolverine captured in agency traps since 2004 (the other two were released alive.)

"Shot wolverine due to bad foot," the trapper wrote in his field diary, which The Bee obtained through the Freedom of Information Act.

"Oh my God, that is unbelievable," said Wendy Keefover, a carnivore specialist with WildEarth Guardians, an environmental group in Colorado. "Wolverines are a highly endangered mammal. There are very few left. Each individual is important."

Wildlife Services spokesperson Lyndsay Cole said: "We were surprised at this unfortunate incident. As soon as it occurred, we again worked directly with Forest Service officials to take steps that would prevent similar incidents from occurring in the future."

And Clay, the deputy administrator, said traps, snares and cyanide are key tools that nearly always get the right species. "Overall, these methods are at least 95 percent effective," he said.

But environmentalists don't trust the data.

"There is an enormous amount of pressure not to report non-targets because it makes them look bad," said Stephanie Boyles Griffin, a wildlife scientist with the Humane Society of the United States.

Many scientists want the collateral damage to stop. "In times when fiscal constraint is demanded, we believe programs that carelessly kill rare species and

indiscriminately kill a great diversity of non-target species should be defunded and discontinued," Mares wrote in a letter to Wildlife Services in March.

The family dog

Raccoons are most often killed by mistake, followed by river otters, porcupines, snapping turtles, javelina, striped skunks and muskrats. But there are other accidental victims that are often more keenly missed: dogs.

One was Maggie, a tail-wagging, toy-fetching border collie-Irish setter mix beloved by Denise and Doug McCurtain and their four children.

Last August, Maggie's spine was crushed when she stepped into a vise-like "body-grip" trap set by Wildlife Services near the family's suburban Oregon home to catch a nonnative rodent called a nutria.

"How in the heck can a government agent put a dangerous trap out in a residential neighborhood?" Denise McCurtain said. "It's absolutely disgusting."

The family has filed a claim for damages.

"Never once did anyone come to us and apologize," she said. "It was like they pretended it didn't happen."

On average, eight dogs a month have been killed by mistake by Wildlife Services since 2000, records show. Some believe that figure is low, including Rex Shaddox, a former agency trapper in Texas.

"We were actually told not to report dogs we killed because it would have a detrimental effect on us getting funded," said Shaddox, who worked for the agency in 1979-80 when it was called Animal Damage Control.

"If we were working on a ranch and killing dogs coming in from town, we didn't report those," said Shaddox, 56. "We buried them and got the collars and threw them away. That's how we were taught to do it."

Clay, the agency deputy administrator, said:

"We've got policies that instruct employees that they need to accurately report everything they take. Anybody that's in violation is dealt with immediately."

Two years ago, a dog wearing a collar with a rabies tag disappeared in West Virginia. Its worried owners, James and Carol Gardner, contacted the state police. Only then

did they learn that Charm, their 11-year-old husky, had been killed and buried by a Wildlife Services trapper trying to poison predators with a spring-loaded "M-44" cyanide cartridge.

"We were not notified," said Carol Gardner. "We were very, very, very upset."

"It's terrible," said James, 71. "I think it's a sin. Our tax dollars are paying for this. It should be mandatory that people are notified."

Charm, he added, was not just a pet – she was "a member of the family."

A few days later, he received a letter from Christopher Croson, the agency's state director.

"I must apologize for my employee's failure to recognize that a pet owner could be identified using a rabies tag number," Croson wrote. "This was a most disturbing lack of judgment."

Today, the Gardners watch for missing-dog notices and call the owners when they see one.

"We notify them that, hey, maybe you'd better call the USDA and see if they buried a dog with your description," Carol Gardner said. And she added: "Some day it's going to be a human being, instead of a dog."

Injuries to people

There have already been close calls. Over the past 25 years, at least 18 employees and several private citizens have been injured by M-44 cyanide cartridges. Here are a few examples from agency records.

From 1987: "We will never know but it is very likely the fact that (the employee) was carrying his antidote kit may have saved his life.

From 1999: "The cyanide hit the left forearm of the employee, causing (it) to scatter, with some cyanide hitting his face. He started to cough and felt muscle tightness in the back of his neck. The employee used two amyl nitrate antidote capsules. He used two more amyl nitrate capsules on the way to the clinic. The clinic doctor administered oxygen and two more amyl nitrate capsules. The employee was air-flighted."

From 2007: "The individual kicked or stepped on the M-44 devices and cyanide was ejected into his eyes. Individual reported that his eyes were irritated and burning."

Agency officials downplay the risk. "Although use of M-44 devices has resulted in some human exposure reports, most involved program staff and minor or short-term symptoms," said Carol Bannerman, a Wildlife Services spokeswoman.

"A majority of exposures to members of the public resulted from the involved individual's disregard of warning and trespass signs or intentional tampering with the devices," she added.

In 2003, Dennis Slauch, 69, was hunting for rocks and fossils in Utah when he spotted what he thought was a surveyor's stake. Curious, he bent down to have a look.

"I just kind of brushed it and it blew up in my face and put cyanide all over me," said Slauch, a retired county heavy equipment operator. "I was instantly sick. I was so sick I was throwing up."

Later, he recovered the M-44, which is engraved with the words, *U.S. Government*. Slauch believes it was set by Wildlife Services. The agency denies responsibility.

"If it is stamped 'U.S. Government,' it is probably the property of Wildlife Services," Bannerman said. But she added, "Wildlife Services did not have any M-44 devices set out in the area. No information or review suggests the validity of the claim. No device had been set there for more than 10 days. An investigation conducted by EPA in 2008 did not find any wrongdoing by Wildlife Services."

Slauch said he has not been the same since. "The cyanide hooks to your red blood cells and starves you of oxygen. I can feel that more and more all the time," he said. "I'm getting real short of breath. I went to the hospital the other day, and they are thinking about putting me on oxygen."

"It's awful to put poison out there where people can get it," he added. "Lots of people's pets have got (killed). One woman lost her dog a half-mile from where I was at."

M-44s were banned in California by Proposition 4 in 1998, but Wildlife Services still uses them on American Indian land in Mendocino County.

"Over the past five years, there has been no unintentional take," said Larry Hawkins, the agency's California spokesman.

"I'm deeply shocked," said Fox, who pushed for the M-44 ban as a coordinator with the Animal Protection Institute. "They are a rogue agency that believes they are above the law and can employ their lethal wares wherever they want – regardless of state law."

Poisoning predators with cyanide is not the agency's only risky practice. Killing coyotes from low-flying planes and helicopters is, too.

Since 1989, several employees have been injured in crashes and 10 people have died, including two in Utah in 2007, one of them a good friend of Strader, the former agency trapper.

"I went to the funeral," Strader said. "He was just a real nice guy, funny, joking around all the time. And he got killed for what? To kill a stinking coyote. It don't make sense.

"We ain't threatened by coyotes so much that we've got to lose peoples' lives over it," Strader said.

Concern across California

Other agency records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act reveal for the first time just where the agency kills wildlife, intentionally and accidentally, across California. And in many of those locations, there is conflict and concern.

Inyo County, in the eastern Sierra, is where two Wildlife Services hunters – working under contract with the California Department of Fish and Game – have been tracking and shooting mountain lions to protect an endangered species: the Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep.

Becky Pierce, a mountain lion biologist with the state, said the effort has been marred by unnecessary killing, including, in 2009, when a Wildlife Services hunter shot a female mountain lion with kittens.

"They got left to starve, waiting for mom to come back," she said. "I'm not saying we don't sometimes have to remove lions if they are (preying) on sheep. But everything should be done in a humane manner. And that isn't humane."

Tom Stephenson, who directs the sheep recovery effort for Fish and Game, declined to comment. But Andrew Hughan, a department spokesman, said the kittens may have survived.

"To say that a female lion was taken and her cubs left to die is completely subjective. They are resourceful creatures," Hughan said.

Pierce, who has studied lions for two decades, disagreed. "They were relying on the mother for milk. It would be a miracle if any of them survived," she said.

In March 2011, two more mountain lion kittens, just days old, were mauled to death in the Sierra when a Wildlife Services hunter's dogs raced out of control and pounced on them. Their mother was then shot, too.

"We all want to see bighorn sheep protected," said Karen Schambach, California field director for Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility. "What gives me the greatest angst is how inhumane some of this stuff is. For Wildlife Services to allow dogs to go tear newborn kittens apart is outrageous."

Hawkins, the agency's California spokesman, called the incident "a regrettable outcome over which our specialist had no control."

No mammal draws more agency lethal force in California and the West than the coyote. Records show that most are killed in rural regions, such as Lassen, Modoc and Kern counties, where they are considered a threat to livestock.

"It's a very valuable program," said Joe Moreo, agricultural commissioner in Modoc County. "We have very good trappers up here, and we're fortunate we have them."

But coyotes are also killed where people like to hear their howls and yips, including Alpine County, south of Lake Tahoe.

Since 2007, Wildlife Services has killed more than 120 coyotes in Alpine County.

"Coyotes are part of our magical landscape," said John Brissenden, a former county supervisor who manages Sorensen's Resort along the west fork of the Carson River. "Our primary motivator for people coming here is the wildlife and the outdoors. That's what our business is built on. It's what Alpine County's commerce is built on. To take that away makes no sense."

Many coyotes were killed in the middle of winter, when they are easier to spot and shoot, including 15 in February 2010. Hawkins, the agency spokesman, said the animals were killed "in the protection of livestock." Asked where – public land or private? – Hawkins said he didn't know.

Brissenden would like some answers.

"We are 97 percent state- and federal-owned," he said. "There is very little grazing here. To have a federal agency eliminate these animals without public review is astonishing and appalling."

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Editor's note: This story has been updated to clarify the chemical makeup of Compound 1080, and to more accurately indicate the time period of casualties incurred in aerial gunning crashes.

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