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## **Reported wolf observations in New Mexico, Texas and Mexico**

### **Introduction**

The goal of this research was to determine whether Mexican wolves survive in the wild in New Mexico, the Big Bend region of Texas, and northern Mexico. The objectives of the research were threefold:

1. To conduct uniform evaluations of wolf observations and assess their reliability using the point system developed by Weaver (1978).
2. To locate reported observations on maps, and determine patterns from these maps.
3. To determine the status of state and federal land management agency files on reported wolf sightings in their jurisdictions.

### **Methods**

I collected information on all known wolf observations since 1983 from various agencies and individuals in Texas and New Mexico, and from US citizens reporting wolf observations in Mexico. Most people I called referred me to other agency employees or individuals. For each agency and sighting lead, I followed through until I reached a dead end or spoke with someone who had files of sightings or who claimed to have seen a Mexican wolf. This work was done May-August 1993.

The federal agencies contacted were the US Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service Division of Animal Damage Control (ADC), White Sands Missile Range, Ft. Bliss US Army base, and Big Bend National Park (Big Bend). State agencies contacted include the New Mexico Game and Fish Department, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and New Mexico and Texas Natural Heritage Programs. I also called The Nature Conservancy, Big Bend Natural History Association, ranching operations, and individuals.

I contacted 80 agency personnel and individuals. Of these, I interviewed 23 individuals about their observations, and 5 agencies sent their files of observations. Rumors or other information about wolves were discussed by 25 agency personnel and individuals (5 of these are also among the 23 who claimed to have seen wolves). I did not contact 13 leads. These dead ends consisted primarily of individuals who had moved since they reported observing wolves, did not return my calls or left no address or phone number. One other lead was not pursued because of unreliability.

I conducted phone interviews with 21 individuals who observed a wolf-like canid or wolf sign (scat or tracks), using a standard evaluation form adapted from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (1987). Two of these individuals each reported two observations, for a total of 23 observations. Each interview consisted of questions about the location and description of the animal observed, the distance of the observer from the animal, the time period of observation, and the observer's prior experience with wolves and coyotes.

The observations were evaluated and categorized (Table 1). Weaver's (1978) point system was modified slightly for Mexican wolves by eliminating potential points for the descriptive criteria of color and short ears, as Mexican wolves have never been described as having distinctive white or black coloration and their ears appear relatively longer than northern wolf subspecies. A numeric grade was assigned to each observation. The grade depended upon the reliability of the observer, the description of the animal, and the distance and length of time of the observation. Totaling the points received for each criterion, observations were categorized as either possible (<16 points) or probable ( $\geq 16$  points).

Using information obtained from the phone interviews, the location of the New Mexico observations were plotted on U.S. Geological Survey contour maps (scale 1:250,000) and quadrant maps, on a tourist map of Big Bend for Texas observations, and on a road map for Mexico observations.

## Results

*Observations.* The evaluated wolf reports (N = 23) revealed that 7 (30.4%) were probable wolf observations, 14 (60.9%) were possible observations, and 2 (8.7%) were unreliable (Table 2). We discarded as unreliable the information given by one interviewee of two observations, based on conflicting information given during the interview.

The evaluated reports indicated no apparent trends in time, possibly due to the small number of reported observations (Table 3). All evaluated reports involved lone animals or single pairs. Four reports were of pairs (all possible). Each observation of a pair occurred in a different area, with observations in Nuevo Leon and Chihuahua, Mexico, Big Bend, Texas, and Otero County, New Mexico. No observations were of pups or juveniles.

Geographical concentration for 3 of the 5 Texas observations (1 probable, 4 possible) was found in the southeastern portion of Big Bend (Figure 1). The three Mexico observations (1 probable, 2 possible) were distributed widely (Figure 2); however, these observations must be supplemented with research being conducted by Mexican biologists on the status of Mexican wolves in Mexico before conclusions can be made.

Fifteen observations occurred in New Mexico (5 probable, 8 possible, 2 unreliable) (Figure 3). Five reported observations are loosely clustered in the bootheel region of southwestern New Mexico (2 probable, 3 possible). In addition, 4 observations (all possible) are clustered in the Lincoln National Forest and Timberon in Otero County, New Mexico.

The Otero County observations, together with information about persistent rumors in this area merit a brief discussion. Located near Timberon, unconfirmed McGregor Range observations have been reported, including an unconfirmed report by BLM employees of seven wolves running together in late 1988 (a subsequent investigation turned up no evidence) (Howard and Von Finger, unpublished data). Three Timberon residents claimed that observations of the Timberon wolf were common among residents between 1989 or 1990 and 1991. Howard (1989) interviewed a Timberon resident who admitted to owning a wolf hybrid between October 1988 and approximately April 1989 that escaped in 1989 and harassed cattle on the Circle Cross Ranch. However, the owner denied that the animal ever escaped to McGregor Range. Collectively, information about alleged Otero County observations between 1988 and 1991 may help clarify the observations reported in this study.

*Agency and organization files.* No ranger district in the Coronado or Lincoln National Forests in New Mexico have files of wolf observations. No files in the Gila National Forest in New Mexico can be found. No ADC office in New Mexico has files of wolf observations, although I interviewed one retired ADC employee about his independent observation (Figure 3, observer 4). Of the Service offices in New Mexico, the Wolf Recovery Program has a file of observations. White Sands Missile Range has never had an observation, but one individual reported observing a wolf on Holloman Air Force Base near the southeast border of White Sands National Monument (Figure 3, observer 5). The BLM Santa Fe, New Mexico office has news articles on the 1988 McGregor Range observation by BLM employees. Mike Howard with the BLM Las Cruces office and Kevin Von Finger with Ft. Bliss Army base compiled a list of 32 unconfirmed wolf, hybrid and wild dog observations in New Mexico, mapped the observations, and interviewed several observers. Some of the observers on this list were interviewed for the present study and comprise some of the 23 evaluated observations.

The New Mexico Game and Fish Department has no files of sightings. I interviewed an employee of the department about an observation, however. Both the employee and another individual stated that they informed the Department of their observations. The New Mexico Natural Heritage Program has a database of pre-1983 observations, but nothing in the last 10 years.

Private landowners and ranchers that I contacted in southwestern New Mexico have no information. The Nature Conservancy has no reports of observations on the Gray Ranch, nor does the current owner-rancher, Drummond Hadley. I interviewed a biologist with The Nature Conservancy who claims to have seen wolf scat (Figure 3,

observer 9). In addition, rumors persist that wolves occur in the bootheel region of New Mexico.

In the Big Bend region of Texas, the National Park has a file of several observations, all made by tourists visiting the park (Figure 1, observers 1, 2, 4). A National Park official supplied additional information about an observation by a park ranger in 1993 (Figure 1, observer 5). None were confirmed by Big Bend officials. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Big Bend Ranch State Natural Area and the Texas Natural Heritage Program have no files of observations since 1983. However, officials at the State Natural Area, which is located immediately northwest of Big Bend, investigated a report of wolf killings and concluded that the animals probably were wild dogs.

Mexican agencies were not contacted because research on the status of Mexican wolves in Mexico is ongoing. Centro Ecologico de Sonora did not respond to a request for information. However, Roberto Lafon, a Mexican biologist working cooperatively with the New Mexico Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit at New Mexico State University, sent a 1985 report on the distribution of Mexican wolves in Mexico.

### **Conclusion**

The sparse data on Mexican wolf sightings and the predominance of lone animals suggest that no established packs of Mexican wolves have recolonized in New Mexico or Texas. Reports on animals in Mexico must be augmented with research being conducted by Mexican biologists before the status of Mexican wolves in Mexico can be determined. Confirmation of reported wolf observations is not possible without tangible evidence.

### **References**

Howard, Mike. 1989. Phone interview with Myra Reed on 21 July 1989.

Howard, Mike and Kevin Von Finger. Unpublished data from Las Cruces BLM office and Ft. Bliss.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1987. Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Denver, CO. 119 pp.

Weaver, J. 1978. The wolves of Yellowstone. Nat. Park Service, Nat. Res. Rpt. 14. Wash., DC. U.S. Gov. Printing Office.

**Table 1. Criteria and point system for evaluating wolf observations (adapted from Weaver 1978).**

<u>Criteria</u>	<u>Points</u>
Observer:	
Experience with western coyotes	7
Experience with wolves	3
Observation:	
Distance:	
<100 m	3
100-400 m	2
>400 m	0
Length of observation time:	
>10 seconds	1
Optical aid such as binoculars	1
Description of animal and/or sign:	
Body description:	
Large body size	4
Large and blocky head, relatively short muzzle	4
Relatively large, long legs	2
Howl:	
Distinctively different from coyote	10
Track:	
>10 cm long including toe nails (must include evidence to rule out domestic dogs)	10

**Table 2. Evaluated observations. Reports scoring  $\geq 16$  points are probable and those  $< 16$  are possible observations (\*biologist, game warden or park ranger; \*\*observation of animal pair; number beside name corresponds to number on map for that state).**

<u>Name</u>	<u>Location</u> ( <u>County/State</u> )	<u>Year</u>	<u>Score</u>	<u>Result</u>
P. Brown (1)	Catron, NM	1984	17	Probable
P. Pirtle* (2)	Hidalgo, NM	1986	13	Possible
W. Cavalier (3)	Hidalgo, NM	1988	18	Probable
J. Ford (4)	Socorro, NM	1988	21	Probable
C. Taylor (5)	Otero, NM	1988	14	Possible
P. Schnitz (6)	Dona Ana, NM	1988	17	Probable
Anonymous (7)	Hidalgo, NM	1989	30	Probable
J. Farmer (8)	Otero, NM	1989/90	15	Possible
G. Bell* (9)	Hidalgo, NM	1990	10	Possible
Anonymous (10)	Lincoln, NM	1991	18	Unreliable
Anonymous (11)	Lincoln, NM	1991	7	Unreliable
J. Rosenbrow (12)	Otero, NM	1991	12	Possible
C. Watt** (13)	Otero, NM	1991	15	Possible
C. Watt (14)	Otero, NM	1991	14	Possible
H. Smith (15)	Grant, NM	1992	14	Possible
M. McElhannon** (1)	Brewster, TX	1986	15	Possible
M. Wood (2)	Brewster, TX	1988	15	Possible
R. Peace (3)	Maverick, TX	1988	7	Possible
C. Mershon (4)	Brewster, TX	1993	14	Possible
D. Evans* (5)	Brewster, TX	1993	19	Probable
J. Hart** (1)	Chihuahua, MX	1989	8	Possible
D. Craig** (2)	Nuevo Leon, MX	1990	14	Possible
D. Miller* (3)	Chihuahua, MX	1990	18	Probable

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Number observations	23 (100%)
Number probable observations	7 (30.4%)
Number possible observations	14 (60.4%)
Number unreliable observations	2 (8.7%)

**Table 3. Evaluated reports, by year.**

<u>Year</u>	<u># Reported</u>	<u># Probable reports</u>
1984	1	1
1985	0	0
1986	2	0
1987	0	0
1988	6	3
1989	2	1
1990	4	1
1991	3	0
1992	1	0
1993	2	1
Total	21	7

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## APPENDIX 1

In the course of interviewing agency personnel and individuals for information about reported Mexican wolf observations, I received extraneous comments relevant to this study.

### Rumors of rancher observations or involvement with wolves

1. Rumor that the Nature Conservancy (TNC) has had observations on Gray Ranch (Larry Allen, District Manager, Coronado NF, 9 June 93).
2. Rumors of observations on the Gray Ranch (Gary Bell, biologist with TNC in California, formerly with Gray Ranch, 10 June 93).
3. Ranch hand on Gray Ranch (Roberto) saw wolf 2 yr ago (Anon.).
4. Rumors of Gray Ranch observations (Steve Debraught, biologist, Ladder Ranch, 4 Aug 93).
5. Lonnie Moore at the Gray Ranch has information on wolves (Paul Pirtle, game warden, NM Game and Fish Dept., 4 Aug 93)).
6. Ranchers claim to see "red wolves," but will not talk (Kevin Von Finger, biologist, Ft. Bliss Army base, 7 June 93).
7. Rancher Dave Dunigan said he saw wolves (Paul Pirtle).
8. Ranchers know about wolves but will not cooperate. Pendleton Ranch is one (Bill Cavalier, Hidalgo County deputy sheriff, 18 June 93).
9. Ranchers have shot wolves; one rancher talked of shooting two (Joe Rosenbrow, retired, 30 June 1993).
10. Several ranchers confided in anonymous observer on quite a few occasions. They know wolves vs. hybrids and coyotes (wolves are more elusive than coyotes). A ranch hand who works on Canyoncito (old Pendleton) Ranch and Guadalupe Ranch confided that he had seen a wolf 35-40 mi S of Hachita where the Big Hatchet and Alamueco Mountains cross (N of Sierra San Luis), in a scrub arroyo, close to these mountains. Also, Mexican biologists believe strongly that wolves are in Sierra San Luis. No rumors of wolves in packs, however, because water sources are limited (Anon., 9 Aug 93). Tommy Townsend (rancher) knows something (Anon., 6 Aug 93).
11. Ranch hand on Cowan Ranch (just E of Canyoncito Ranch) says that the Cowans have deployed M-44s to kill wolves (Anon.).
12. Charlie, ranch hand on Cascabel Ranch (S of Gray Ranch) observed lone wolf  $\leq 1$  yr old (Anon.).

### Reports of observers turning their information in to agencies but agencies reporting no knowledge or files

1. Rumor that the NM Game and Fish Dept. hid the files on 4-5 wolves that were killed by ranchers a few years ago (Gary Bell).
2. Reported Timberon observation to NM Game and Fish Dept (Charlie Watt).



3. Reported observation to NM Game and Fish Dept (Paul Pirtle) (later reported by Jim Gonzales, NM Game and Fish Dept).
4. Reported observation to Smokey Bear RD in Lincoln NF (Anon.).

#### Knowledge of coyotes, dogs or hybrids in connection with observations

1. Gila NF may have a file of sightings of abandoned german shepherds when the sawmill by Collins Park moved out (Bruce Anderson, district biologist Gila NF, 7 June 93).
2. Someone in Precidio, TX said a rancher killed wolves on his ranch about 18 mi from Big Bend Ranch State Natural Area by Alameda Creek. But Armandeariz checked it out and saw wild dogs there (Luis Armandeariz, Superintendent BBRNSNA, 22 June 93).
3. Two "legitimate" sightings, i.e. not a samoyed or pet wolf, turned out to be coyotes, and the sightings probably were from "city folk" (Pat Morrison, biologist, Luna RD, Gila NF, 27 May 93).
4. A few years ago, Mullis of ADC and Jack Woody with FWS checked out two sighting reports and saw coyote tracks at one site, nothing at the other (Kurt Mullis, NM director ADC, 27 May 93).
5. South of Ft. Sumner, NM hybrids got loose and killed livestock 2-3 yr ago. Lots of hybrids are around now (Larry Kilgo, biologist, ADC, 4 Aug 93).
6. Someone had a hybrid in the area that was never recovered (Peggy Mitchusson, biologist, Bosque del Apache NWR, 22 June 93).
7. About 50 mi from Cavalier's sighting, a lady in Rodeo owned a hybrid. Friends in Rodeo and others have hybrids (Bill Cavalier).
8. John Bedell, Apache NF supervisor, told of two hybrids reported loose near Datil, NM, around 1991 (Peter Jenkins, Mex. Wolf Rec. Program, 17 Aug 93).
9. The Mershon observation was probably a hybrid; rumors of observations in Rio Grande Village area in Big Bend are probably of the same hybrid (Dave Evans, park ranger, Big Bend National Park, 19 Aug 93).
10. Lafon believes Miller's observation may have been coyote or hybrid coyote because the observation was in the desert (Roberto Lafon, NMSU biologist, 1 Sep 93).

#### Skepticism expressed by agency personnel of reported observations

1. Black Range RD, Gila NF has "nothing verified" (Buck Sanchez, 28 May 93).
2. If there were any wolves left, someone would have come in with a "big coyote" in the Riudoso area (Don Delorenzo, biologist, Lincoln NF, 22 June 93).
3. Does not put much credence in BBNP sightings, except maybe Evans (Ray Skiles, resource manager, BBNP, 25 May 93).
4. Rumors other than the two that did not produce evidence of wolves (see above) are not written down and are very old (Kurt Mullis).

5. Kilgo has never seen *anything* in his 15 yr with ADC (Larry Kilgo).
6. Reports are not believable. If the observer does not produce the animal or a picture, confirmation is not possible. Wolves are not secretive, so someone should have produced real evidence if wolves are still in the wild (Curtis Carley, biologist, FWS, 30 June 93).
7. Rumors of tourists who claim sightings are not believable (William Hurt, ranch owner E of Gray Ranch, 4 Aug 93).
8. There are a couple of unconfirmed sightings in SE AZ (Gary Helbing, district biologist, Coronado NF, 4 June 93).
9. Miller is skeptical of BBNP sightings because Mexican wolves are not much bigger than coyotes, and there are too many other weird sightings by tourists (Denny Miller, Director, Chihuahua Desert Res. Inst., 4 Aug 93).
10. How *can* they still be alive in the wild? (John Hart, professor of history).

#### Miscellaneous rumors of observations

1. Someone claimed seeing a wolf by the White Mountain Wilderness in Lincoln NF (Delorenzo).
2. Three weeks ago Gerald Hocks said someone claimed to have seen a wolf (turned out to be Anon.) (Delorenzo).
3. Rumors of wolves in bootheel region of NM (Rick Owens of ADC, now in LA or DC, would know), and of Ft. Bliss observation 2-3 yr ago (probably McGregor Range sighting) (Daisan Taylor, biologist, White Sands MR, 4 June 93).
4. Howling and sighting reported at Mescalero Reservation border, but no names known (Von Finger).
5. A couple of sighting reports are in BLM files (but did not send) (Masinton).
6. Rosenbrow says he has seen several wolves (Rosenbrow).
7. Two weeks after Miller's observation, Alberto Lafan, big game biologist with the Univ. of Chihuahua, said he had a sighting report at Coyume, Mexico (20-30 mi from Miller's observation) (Miller).
8. Mexico: new reports of wolves in Chihuahua and Sonora; one report in Rio Negro in 1992; Lafan observed one wolf, tracks and dead cows in Tres Rios (between Chihuahua and Sonora, heard on in Del Salto Grando, and saw tracks in Lacurada Durango (Roberto Lafon).

#### McGregor range observation

In December 1988, BLM employees reported seeing seven wolf-like animals or wild dogs at McGregor Range. They were sure the traveling pack was not of coyotes. Howard and Ft. Bliss personnel conducted an aerial survey in January but found nothing. Howard believed they were hybrids (Mike Howard, biologist, BLM, 9 June 93; Albuquerque Journal, Dec 88). Howard/Von Finger file contains more unconfirmed McGregor Range observations in 1988-89.

### Timberon observations

1. "Everyone has seen it [Timberon "wolf"]." A lady from Albq investigated the Timberon "wolf" and thought it was possibly a german shepherd (Jeff Farmer, Otero County sheriff, 28 June 93).
2. There was an "invasion of 'em" two yr ago in Timberon (Charlie Watt, retired, 29 June 93).

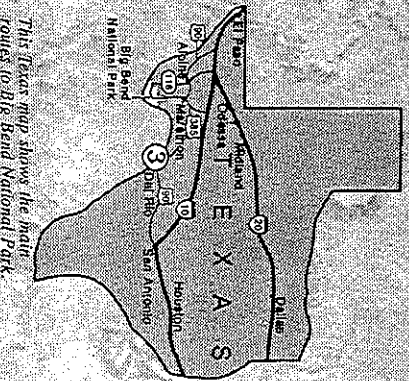
### Historical information

1. In his 27 yr with ADC, Ford used to see lone wolves in Socorro and Grant Counties (about 15 all together) drifting through. Then sightings became fewer and fewer (John Ford, retired ADC, 22 June 93).
2. Schnitz grew up on farm in Gonzales County, Texas. He and his siblings engaged in the sport of chasing wolves when they were young. Dogs would find wolf scent and the family would follow on horseback. He figured there were packs because of way the dogs started out then settled on one animal. He mentioned that sometimes when there was more than 2 wolves they would fight the dogs. He thinks wolves have made a comeback there because no one keeps dogs and hunts them anymore. He also relates a story of meeting up with a trapper at a cattle crossroads. The trapper poured female wolf scent from a bottle and set the trap nearby to catch a male.

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Length of observation time:	
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Description of animal and/or sign:	
Body description:	
Large body size	4
Large and blocky head, relatively short muzzle	4
Relatively large, long legs	2
Howl:	
Distinctively different from coyote	10
Track:	
> 10 cm long including toe nails (must include evidence to rule out domestic dogs)	10

# The Roads to Big Bend



**Legend**

- Unpaved road
- Ranger station
- Highway road
- Campground
- High clearance vehicles only
- Food and lodging
- 1700 Elevation and above in miles
- Flume
- Private land with observe land permit
- Mileage accumulation points

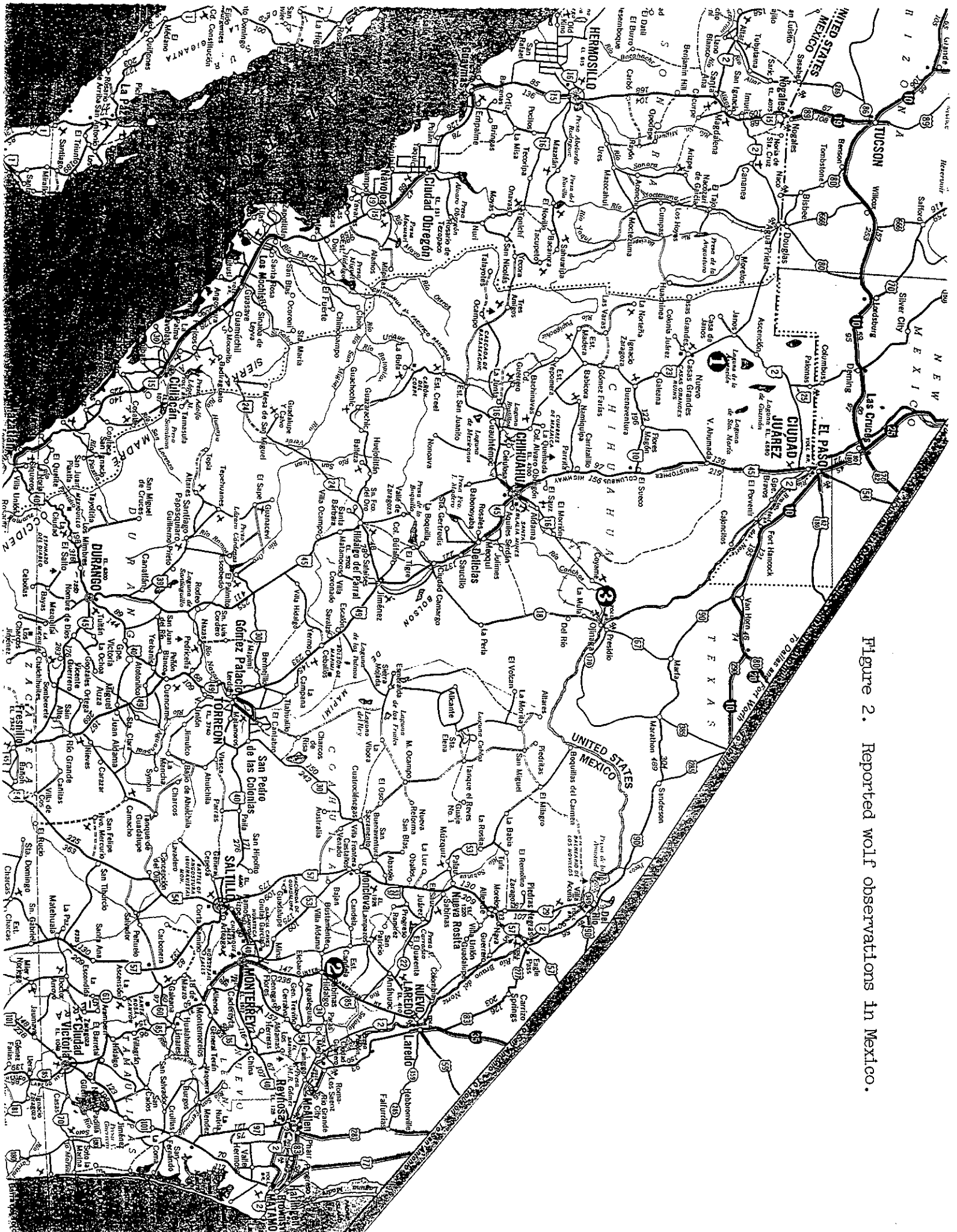


Figure 2. Reported wolf observations in Mexico.

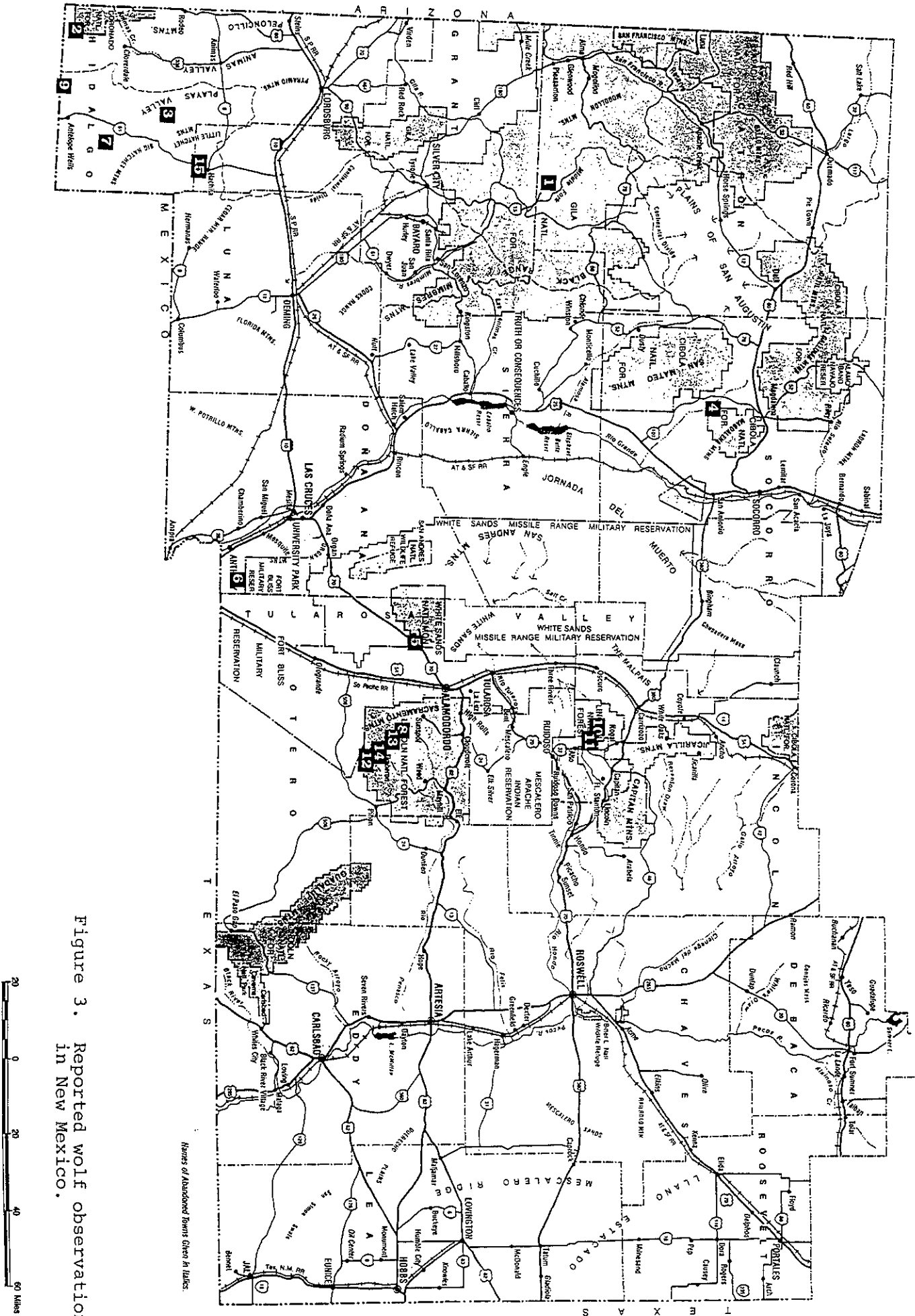


Figure 3. Reported wolf observation in New Mexico, 1963.

Names of Abandoned Towns Given in Italics.