

Note from your webmaster :

This strongly interesting and revealing interview, on this descendant of Anthoyne Cottenoyre was realised by David Skates from the Yellow Stone Science publication in 1992. Leo was 83 at that time!

Any information on his family tree would be strongly appreciated. Please contact us so we can make the link with our general family tree.

Yellowstone Science Interview: Leo Cottenoir

The Last Wolf, 1943

A remembrance of the last verified wolf killed in Greater Yellowstone



In our Winter 1993 issue, we reported on a possible wolf killed by a hunter in Wyoming just south of Yellowstone National Park in the fall of 1992. DNA testing has since revealed that animal to have been a wolf, closely related to the Nine Mile pack in northwestern Montana. Thanks to friends in the U.S.

Fish and Wildlife Service, we can provide you with a firsthand account of the last previous verified wolf killed in greater Yellowstone. Leo Cottenoir, now 83, was working as a shepherd on the Wind River Reservation in 1943. Mr. Cottenoir's tribal affiliation is with the Cowlitz tribe in southwestern Washington, but married a member of the Shoshone tribe as a young man and thus lives on the Wind River Reservation.

This interview was conducted on September 28, 1992, by Dick Baldes, Wind River Reservation Project Leader, and David Skates, Assistant Project Leader, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Our thanks to Leo, Dick, and David for their cooperation in completing this fascinating oral history project.

DB: How did you happen to kill this wolf?

LC: If any lambs were out late in the evening, we left them out with a lantern or flagging so that coyotes wouldn't bother them. We were cutting out lambs this morning, and we heard this coyote *Summer 1993* yipping, and the herder said, "You'd better get on your horse and ride up there and see if they're bothering those ewes and lambs." So I rode my horse about half a mile up Muddy Creek.

They were all right, but then I heard some coyotes yipping further up country, so I got on my horse and rode up on a ridge, and looked down on an old reservoir the Soil Conservation Service had put in years before, and it looked like an old coyote and two pups down there. I thought they might have got a lamb down, and were feeding on it, so I rode back down the hill and into the draw. As I got close to the reservoir, the coyotes took off through the rocks, and I took a shot at them (I had my rifle) and missed them, and this wolf came out of the rocks. It was a wolf and two fullgrown coyotes, instead of a full-grown coyote and two pups.

DS: Did you know that it was a wolf at the time?



LC: Well, he started down and I knew it had to be a wolf because it was so much bigger than the rocks. It was going through my mind about the wolf stories I'd heard, and I shot at him. He was coming toward me. I shot and missed him twice on the hillside, and I shot [again]. I knew I'd hit him, because you know when you've hit an animal with a rifle [because of the sound of the impact]. He went around a little knoll where I couldn't see him, so I reloaded the rifle, and [saw that] he was lying there on the hillside. I watched him a while, and he didn't move, so I went up there and he was dead.

I'd shot him through the lungs—I'd torn his heart and lungs up. He got away probably 50 or 60 yards after he was hit. So I went to put him on my horse, but the horse wasn't going to stand still, because he smelled that wolf and that was something strange. I got the saddle blanket back on, and took him back to camp. The old sheep herder seen him, and he said, "My gosh, where did you get the lobo?" Of course, he'd seen wolves when he was younger. He was a man, oh, about in his sixties—in his late sixties.

DS: This wolf was killed in May?

LC: In the twenties. The 23rd or 24th of May. There was an article in the [Wyoming State] Journal about it in the fifties, it was 1953, I guess, because it had been 10 years before that I brought 11 this wolf in.

DS: So it was May of 1943. Did you realize at the time that this was probably the last wolf killed in Wyoming?

LC: I never had any idea. I thought if there was this one, there would be more of them. I don't have any idea where he could have come from. I know he did come from Owl Creek, over the mountains. My father-in-law had seen his tracks when he came over.

DS: At the time, did you think it was a wolf with those two coyotes, or did you think it was a coyote?

LC: No, [at first] I thought it was a full grown coyote and two pups. Probably a half mile from where I'd seen them, they circled down in the draw there. But, boy, he sure looked big when he did come out of there. It went through my mind, I'd read stories about wolves attacking people, or something like that. I completely missed him twice [laughter].

When he turned sideways, I got him.

DS: When was the last one killed prior to that time?

LC: Nobody seemed to know. It had to be, like I said, the last one [killed] by Croskey [a rancher in the Owl Creek Mountains] was 1914 or along in there.

DS: So this was the first wolf killed since 20 or 30 years prior? There hadn't been anything killed that had been documented?

LC: Well, the fact was, the bounty had been taken off them 20 or 25 years before, because there weren't any more killed. That's why there weren't any killed, except for coyotes. I ran into a den of coyotes, a den of six pups, and brought them into the sheriff's office there—they had a bounty on them—and he gave me five dollars a piece for those pups.

DS: How big would you say this animal, this wolf was?

LC: Seventy, eighty pounds—seemed like it, anyhow. Because the horse didn't want to stand still. He was big, two, three times as big as a coyote. You can see he's much bigger, two or three times bigger than a coyote, much bigger, and they have such long legs, and big feet, too.

DS: And the reason you didn't get a full mount is that the hair was slipping pretty badly?

LC: Yes, Engle [a local taxidermist] said he'd like to have mounted the whole thing. I'm surprised, as well as the head's hair is staying on, that he couldn't have mounted the whole thing at the time. The way this has stayed, looked like the whole thing would have stayed right, too.

DS: Looks good.

LC: I believe his [the man who killed the previous wolf] name was Croskey, he used to have a store over there by where Paul Hines store is now, probably about 1912, 1914 or around there. The wolves were bothering the cattle so the stockman put a bounty on an odd-colored one and then they would kill any color of wolf they seen just so they could collect the bounty, and of course it had to be this certain off-color one that the bounty was on, but that's how they got rid of the wolves.

DS: Yeah, they got a whole bunch of wolves for the price of a few.

LC: Yeah, but I guess they did business; the stockmen were leary. Up around Yellowstone they are worried about [wolves] killing calves, but no more than they would kill, I don't think a single wolf [would kill many]; it would have to be a pack like those dog-like animals in Africa, hyenas. They hunt in packs.

DS: Did you hear the fellows prior to your generation talk about wolves being hard on cattle or was it primarily sheep?

LC: Well, I think it was probably cattle, especially calves. Just like most predatory animals will either get the weak or the young because they're easy to get. I still think they ought to have wolves in there. They are a native animal, native to the country and something that has always been there. Fact of the matter, man is the greatest predator there is anyhow, regardless of the predatory animals. Cause he will kill, he's always after something to kill. If it was deer or antelope or rabbits or prairie dogs, he's always shooting at something. If they had their way everything would be extinct, there wouldn't be anymore animals.

DB: Leo, when you first walked up on the wolf and you probably knew that it was something really rare, did that bother you a bit, knowing that, thinking back, that it probably was the last one?

LC: Well, no. But it was kind of sad to think that he was the only one that I'd ever seen and I killed him. Of course, at the time I was thinking there was nothing else I could do. But at the time he was endangering my sheep herd. If I hadn't killed him, he would have been just like the coyotes. Coyotes were a problem, still are a problem. I've killed several of those. You'd use to get up early in the morning. Coyotes would come in about daylight and they would never kill a small or weak one; no, the fattest one was the one they'd get. And the first thing they did was cut it up and eat the stomach out of a lamb and get the milk out of it.

DS: I've heard of that.

LC: And sometimes they would get to chasing an old ewe, and they wouldn't kill it right away, but chew the bag just to get the milk. They are a cruel animal. They say they never get a weak or poor one but always a choice lamb every time. In some ways it's sad to have killed the only one [wolf] that was around, but in other ways I'm glad it was me that got to get him because somebody would have got him, I'm sure.

DS: Do you think there were any other wolves in the area?

LC: That I don't know. I was wondering. He was a mature male and you'd think there would be other wolves, females or pups or something else because he had to come from a long ways to get there and I never have heard of anyone over on the Owl Creek side that saw a wolf either.

DS: During the time after or before you killed this wolf, did you ever hear any howling at night?

LC: I never did, no. But they say this Ralph White, the rancher over on Five Mile Creek, or what we used to call Tea Pot, but it's the Five Mile conservation district, he said he thought he heard them howling at night over there, but nobody ever saw one.

DS: Was this after?

LC: This was after I killed it.