

DNR investigating wolf incident with Friendship man

By [Paul A. Smith](#) of the Journal Sentinel

Oct. 7, 2015

Matthew Nellessen of Friendship was scouting for a deer hunting spot Sept. 23 in Colburn Wildlife Area in Adams County.

His account of what happened about 5 p.m. on that sunny, warm day could put him down as a first in Wisconsin history.

It also could help educate people about the relative risks of living in a state with a growing population of large predators.

Or it could earn him further scorn by a segment of the public and potentially a charge from law enforcement agents.

This much is already true: His story has fanned the flames of debate over one of the most controversial wildlife species of our time, the gray wolf.

On that late September day, Nellessen claims he was attacked by three wolves.

"It was terrifying," Nellessen, 34, said by phone on Wednesday. "I had to switch into self-defense mode."

If confirmed by law enforcement officials, it would be the first wolf attack on a human in the state.

Nellessen was traveling alone when he encountered the wolves. He had parked his truck along a main access road at Colburn Wildlife Area, a 4,965-acre property in north-central Adams County. The wildlife area is mainly lowland brush and sedge marsh with some higher areas of aspen, pine and oak forest.

An avid deer hunter, Nellessen thought the day was too warm to hunt and decided to scout for a new hunting area on the public property.

He had traveled about 1,200 yards from his truck, generally going north to south. He was wearing blue jeans, a black T-shirt, combat boots and a camouflage cap. He also had a .38-caliber pistol on his hip.

Nellessen said he was following deer trails on a ridge covered with small pines. At about 5 p.m., he turned down a trail and moved east, into the light wind and through a densely-vegetated pocket.

"All of a sudden I was facing wolves," Nellessen said. "I think I stumbled into their bedroom. They were only 30 feet away and they started coming at me."

Nellessen, who served in the U.S. Army from 2002-'04 and 2006-'13, said his firearms and self-defense training kicked into gear. He pulled out his pistol.

"I kicked the wolf coming from my right, and when the closest one on the left was about five feet away, I fired and hit it," Nellessen said.

At the sound of the gunshot, all three wolves moved off. The wounded wolf "hunched up," Nellessen said, before disappearing from sight.

He retreated in the direction of his truck, with pistol ready, he said. He phoned his wife when he made it about halfway to the road.

"I thought if I was going to get attacked again, at least she'd know where I was and what was happening," Nellessen said.

When he made it home, he called the Department of Natural Resources hotline to report the incident. The next day he visited the site at Colburn with a DNR and U.S. Department of Agriculture employee, Nellessen said.

Nellessen said they found a blood trail where the wolf had been shot, but the trail vanished after a while and no wolf was recovered.

"I hope it's all right," Nellessen said. "The thing is, I love wolves. I wouldn't ever shoot one if I didn't feel like I was in danger."

Officials with the DNR and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are investigating the incident. When contacted Wednesday, both agencies declined to release any information until the investigation is complete.

Todd Schaller, DNR's chief warden, said the incident shouldn't be referred to as an "attack" until the work was finalized. In a statement from Jim Dick, DNR communications directory, the agency said Nellessen "was not physically attacked and was unharmed."

The USFWS is involved because a federal-court decision in December placed the western Great Lakes population of wolves under protections of the Endangered Species List.

If it is determined Nellessen tried to poach a wolf or acted in another illegal fashion, officials say he could be charged. The penalty for illegally taking a specimen protected by the Endangered Species Act is a Class A misdemeanor, punishable by up to a year in prison and up to a \$100,000 fine, according to USFWS supervisor Patrick Lund.

Wisconsin had 746 to 771 wolves in 208 packs in late winter 2014, according to the DNR.

Since Nellessen was alone, was not physically injured and had no torn clothing or other evidence of an attack, his verbal account forms the basis of the investigation.

He first provided the story to the media by contacting American Hunter, a publication of the National Rifle Association. He did so because the publication runs stories of self-defense, Nellessen said, and because he's an NRA member.

The publication ran a headline of "Worldwide Exclusive: Wisconsin Deer Hunter Fends Off Wolves with Walther PK .380."

The story has generated criticism and accusations from wolf supporters.

In an Oct. 3 blog post, Rachel Tilseth of Wolves of Douglas County said the piece has "all the makings of a fictional story spun to sell guns. Or is it a

cover up of an illegal hunt?"

"I'll let people say what they're going to say," Nellessen said. "Some people have contacted me and wished the wolves had killed me. Others wished I had killed all three wolves. It really stinks."

Wolf experts are clear on the issue: wolf attacks in North America are extremely rare, but not unprecedented. Two fatal wolf attacks on humans have been recorded on the continent over the last 100 years, said Adrian Wydeven of the Timber Wolf Alliance.

"As a threat to human safety, wolves are way down the list," Wydeven said. "We have millions of people out hiking, hunting, birding and other activities in Wisconsin each year and so far no confirmed wolf attack."

David Mech, a researcher with the U.S. Geological Service who has studied wolves for more than 50 years, said wolves typically avoid humans.

"In most cases, it's rare for a human to even see a wolf," Mech said. "When a wolf senses you in any way, it typically disappears. They are generally afraid of people."

A man sleeping outside a tent in Minnesota was bitten by a wolf in 2013, Mech said.

But no wolf attack has been verified in Wisconsin.

Although he said it was impossible for him to classify the incident, Wydeven said it's possible Nellessen walked into a rendezvous site, used by wolves to protect young members of the pack, or the wolves had a kill nearby, or it was near a bear baiting site where the wolves were feeding.

Nellessen is aware his story will fuel age-old, irrational fears of wolves.

"The whole debate thing, I never got into it," he said. "I believe wolves have their place in the wild."

But he feels he did the right thing by reporting and publicizing it.

"I could have walked away, said nothing and washed my hands of it," Nellessen said. "But that would be hanging over me. If someone else walked out there, wasn't prepared or able to defend themselves and got attacked and hurt I would never get over it."

The DNR and USFWS put no timeline on the investigation, saying only it was "ongoing."

Send email to psmith@journalsentinel.com

Find this article at:

<http://www.jsonline.com/sports/outdoors/dnr-investigating-wolf-incident-with-friendship-man-b99591857z1-331183371.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

