After the Divorce:
Improving Science at Federal Wildlife Agencies

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As part of a nine-year study of wolves and their prey, a wildlife biologist draws blood from an anesthetized wolf in Alaska’s Denali National Park. Such USGS studies aid FWS management of wolves and other species. One problem: Scientists before the “divorce” and since cannot always convince managers or politicians of their studies’ value. Photograph courtesy of L. David Mech, USGS.

Michael Runge and his colleagues from the US Geological Survey (USGS) and the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) got out of their car, hiked the short distance to Chaska Lake near the Minnesota River, and looked around carefully. Here, at the nearly 14,000-acre Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge in the southern suburbs of Minneapolis, a floodplain forest of cottonwood, green ash, and silver maple trees stretches from the riverbanks to the bulrushes and cattails growing in the marshlands along the lake’s shallows.

Runge, a USGS research ecologist based at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland, was in Minnesota on a cool and drizzly fall day last year to check out Chaska Lake and other sites for possible inclusion in a scientific study. The study will examine about 20 wildlife refuges in the upper Midwest and Northeast. It seeks to help refuge managers determine whether and to what extent adjusting water levels behind impounded wetlands would attract migrating shorebirds, wading birds, waterfowl, and other wildlife.

The study’s importance goes beyond helping FWS better manage its 545 wildlife refuges and shedding new light on bird habitats. It represents a new era of scientific research and cooperation between FWS and USGS. It also represents a renewed effort by FWS to rebuild its scientific credibility and to foster research related to the federal wildlife agency’s program and management responsibilities.

The government agency shuffle

Only a dozen years ago FWS lost its research arm in a Department of the Interior–wide reorganization that more closely resembled what many current and former agency staffers still call a “bit- ter divorce.” The initial reorganization was undertaken by then–Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt to combine all the department’s natural resources research in one science agency. Babbitt wanted an agency that could survey plants and animals to identify endangered species before they became “train wrecks” like the northern spotted owl.

In the 1993 reorganization, nearly all of FWS’s research scientists, plus those from other Interior agencies and laboratories, were transferred to Babbitt’s newly created National Biological Survey (NBS). Two years later, the newly elected Republican Congress, suspicious of federal agents surveying on private lands, refused to fund the Interior secretary’s administrative changes, eliminated NBS, and moved its research programs to USGS.