

Wandering Oregon wolf's tracks to be retraced

By Jeff Barnard, AP

GRANTS PASS, Ore. – Wildlife advocates are preparing to retrace the 1,200-mile path of a wandering wolf whose trek in 2011 across Oregon and California attracted worldwide attention, hoping their upcoming journey will help build greater acceptance of wolves as they reclaim lost territories across the West.

The wolf, dubbed OR-7 and wearing a GPS-equipped collar, became a celebrity at 2 years old after leaving a pack in northeastern Oregon in September 2011, just days after the state issued a kill order for his father and a sibling for preying on livestock.

“It is only through walking it that anyone can truly understand that journey,” said Jay Simpson, who plans daily blog posts of panoramic photos and interviews with people the Wolf OR-7 Expedition contacts along the way. “It’s not a thing you can understand on Google Earth.”

Using traditional storytelling, real-time multimedia blogging, time-lapse photography and a documentary film, they hope to offer new insights into what the spread of wolves across the West means for the people who live here, inspire new attitudes that ease conflicts in ranch country and recognize conservationists working to protect wolves.

On his route, OR-7 passed through where the last Oregon wolf was killed by a bounty hunter in 1946, and where the last known California wolf was killed in 1924.

OR-7’s trek is standard procedure for young wolves trying to establish new territories. That’s how wolves came to Oregon in

the late 1990s from Idaho, where they were re-established as part of a federal endangered species program.

“OR-7 is really a pioneer,” said David Moskowitz, a wildlife biologist, tracker and photographer. “He is offering a first glimpse of the new story unfolding about what it is going to be like for wolves returning” to a changed landscape.

Unlike five Oregon wolves that migrated east to Idaho, OR-7 has not been shot, noted Amaroq Weiss of the conservation group Center for Biological Diversity. Idaho has allowed wolf hunting since Endangered Species Act protection was lifted in 2011.

The expedition was the brainchild of Portland storyteller Rachael Pecore-Valdez. She was in Berlin, where her husband was studying renewable energy, when she talked to a South African friend, Galeo Saintz, about a trek he had done to raise awareness for endangered rhinos. She decided to do something similar for OR-7.

“For me the expedition is really about learning by talking to other people and asking questions and less about my opinions and thoughts about wolves,” Pecore-Valdez said.

Saintz is founder of the Wild Peace Alliance, which uses expedition adventure to ease conflicts between people and wildlife and celebrate successful work by conservationists.

“Wolf OR-7 inspires me, because he highlights that the ordinary is often remarkable if we just give it the right attention and appreciate what it means,” he said in an email. “He is the ultimate lone wolf on an unknown quest to make the most of his one precious life, and I just love that.”

Pecore-Valdez contacted Moskowitz, whose wildlife tracking class she had taken, and they were rolling.

Filmmaker Daniel Byers is shooting a documentary along the

way.

The core of the expedition – 300 miles of hiking and 900 miles of biking in 40 days – is sponsored by a \$5,700 grant from Sculpt the Future Foundation. It was matched by Xplore, which funds projects that exhibit passion with aspects of play. The expedition launched a Kickstarter campaign to raise \$21,000 for a documentary and multimedia.

They plan to start at a spot overlooking Hells Canyon in Northeastern Oregon in mid-May, and follow OR-7's general route, biking where they can, hiking where they have to, taking note of landmarks, such as where the wolf crossed Interstate 5 north of Yreka.

None of them wants to actually stumble across OR-7, who now resides in Southern Oregon, for fear of putting more stress in his life.

“These creatures are living very close to the bone,” Moskowitz said. “As humans add more challenges to the landscape, it makes that proposition even more amazing.”