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Hunting the Hunted

Follow a guide as you track wolves through Yellowstone National Park

By Dina Mishev



Northwest Wyoming
Winter wolf pack



Day 1: 4:00 p.m. Lamar Valley, Yellowstone National Park. I can't believe I've signed up for three days of this. *This* being standing around in sub-zero temperatures watching wolves that, despite the assistance of high-powered spotting scopes, still appear to be little more than black and gray dots. Sleeping black and gray dots. Ten minutes into it, all I want to do is sleep. Getting some feeling back into my hands and feet wouldn't be too bad either.

Although Yellowstone's wolves live their lives fully in the wild – they are not fed or taken care of by humans – several dozen wolves wear radio collars that allow them to be tracked. And several of the packs just happen to regularly hang out in areas easily visible from the road. There are numerous companies happy to take wanna-be wolfers on a guided trip, but it's not that difficult to do on your own, provided you have a decent spotting scope or pair of binoculars.

I've opted to go with the pros. There are six of us on the wolf watching tour with the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance, based in Jackson, Wyoming. Four of us (including me) have never been wolf watching before. The other two are seasoned pros from Los Angeles who have been following the Yellowstone wolves for years and call watching them "an addiction." While I'm ready to take a nap, they're glued to the scopes, breathlessly talking about the sleeping wolves like they're long lost friends.

Day 2: 5:00 a.m. Lamar Valley. Our van lumbers north into Lamar proper and I see we're not the first. Nowhere near the first, in fact. The community of Yellowstone wolf watchers, both those who get paid for it and those for whom it is just an addiction, is obsessive, to put it mildly. But they're obsessive in a

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In the 1840s and 50s, nearly a half million pioneers, gold rush Forty-Niners and Pony Express Riders embarked along the Oregon Trail during the greatest overland migration the country has even seen.

Rodeos

"The Cowboy State." Yup. It sure is. Not only is Wyoming's history and culture *cowboy* history and culture, but the very skills, values and strengths of the

harmless, helpful way.

The evening before, Rick McIntyre, a Yellowstone wolf researcher who hasn't missed a day of watching in nearly five years and the wolf watchers' alpha male – more for his extensive knowledge than for any machismo – gave us a radio. This morning, Rick calls Franz Camenzind, the executive director of the JH Conservation Alliance, a wildlife biologist and captain of our tour to tell him the Druid Peak Pack is hanging out on the flats below Jasper Ridge.

We arrive and join perhaps a half-dozen other wolfers, all longtime addicts. The wolves are sleeping. But then a few are up and wandering around. A kill – most likely an elk – is tucked just behind a small, snowy knoll.

We can't see the dead elk, but we can see some of last year's pups playing around it, occasionally jumping in and tearing off a hunk of flesh. It's not quite as exciting as actually having seen the pack take the elk down, but still much better than a slumbering pack. Not only are the pups cute, but each, as well as the adults who get up to watch over them, has a distinct personality and place in the pack. And neither takes long for us to figure out. Thirty minutes later I've pretty much hijacked one of the scopes (there are three for the six of us to share) and am debating whether wolf 375 has what it takes to be an alpha female. I can sense an addiction starting.

After being hunted and poisoned to extinction in the 1930s – wolves were considered varmints and the government actually paid bounties for them – *Canis lupus* brought down from Canada were reintroduced to Yellowstone in 1995 (14 wolves) and 1996 (17 wolves). In the decade since, they have multiplied to more than 300 animals, about 250 of which live in Yellowstone National Park (the remainder have made their homes in the national forests and wilderness areas surrounding the park). They are an amazing success story and Yellowstone has become one of the best wolf watching destinations in the world. While I happen to be here in the winter, the rest of the year works as well, although the black and gray wolf coats do happen to stand out nicely against the snow.

Day 2: 1:20 p.m. I've decided wolf 302 – they all get numbers rather than names – is one of my favorites. According to Rick, 302 is the Don Juan of the Druid Peak Pack. He isn't the alpha male and has outted himself as a scardy cat more than once, but still he manages to be quite a favorite with the pack's ladies. Not unlike how such things work in the human world, that means 302 isn't too popular with the guys.



Winterscapes



A few years ago 302 decided he wanted a pack of his own. He took wolf 301, his brother, and three females from Druid Peak and set off to find his fortune in the world. He mated with all three females and got each pregnant. Things seemed to be going well for him. But then this new pack had a bit of a run-in with the Slough Creek Pack, the Hell's Angels of the wolf world. There's film footage of the Slough Creek wolves taking down a bison. Wolves weigh from 90 to 140 pounds each. A bison can weigh 3,000 pounds.

302 didn't even stick around to see how things went; he hightailed it out of there leaving his brother and his pregnant women to defend themselves. The women returned to the Druid Peak pack within days. 302 came skulking back shortly thereafter.

Now back with the Druids, 302 isn't at liberty to mate with whomever he pleases. In fact, he's so far down the pack's hierarchy he's not really allowed to mate with anyone. I'm watching as wolf 375, a tasty little tart of canis cuteness, teases him though. She walks up, bites his tail, sniffs his butt, tackles him – all signs of interest in wolfdom. 302 ignores her. He knows that if he doesn't,

cowboy are still celebrated throughout Wyoming.

trouble in the name of Alpha Male 480 is headed his way. But 375 is persistent. No beast, especially such a Don Juan, could resist. At the first sign of interest on 302's part, 480 is up and headed in his direction. Shut down. Both 302 and us wolfers hoping to catch some real wolf action.

It's a soap opera, but better. National Geographic plus 100. Animal Planet in real life. We're not just seeing a still shot or a highlight reel – but the ins and outs, the good and bad, boring and exciting of wolf life. I can even appreciate the sleeping wolves now. It's reality television, Mother Nature style.

And a true highlight is about to happen. 302 must have inspired alpha male 480 because 480 now turns his attention to 286, the alpha female of the pack. They mate.

286 does not seem to appreciate her predicament at all. The wolfers are going crazy. Radios erupt. "Penetration at 16:45." "They mated? You saw that?" "Man, that was heavy."

Day Three: 11:00 a.m. We head up Slough Creek on snowshoes and cross country skis and plant ourselves and our scopes on a knoll above some bison, elk, and most of the Slough Creek pack. I can't believe the bison and elk are so calm. Some more of the Slough Creekers descend from a butte to our right, half-heartedly chasing a few of the smaller bison en route. Counting, we all get different numbers, but everyone has more than 10 wolves. But then, for a few minutes, we close our eyes. The wolves have begun howling. Two, three, four at a time, all at different pitches, but each escalating up and down. The sounds are much lower – almost like a great yawn after a power nap – then I expected. And much more cow-like. But mooing cows don't celebrate their reestablishment back at the top of Yellowstone's food chain after a 70-year absence. And cow moos don't send prickles up your spine.

If you want to learn about what's going on with the Yellowstone wolves but can't make the trip, or if you've already made the trip and want to see what your favorite wolves are up to, there are any number of web sites to choose from. My favorite is: www.forwolves.org/ralph/wolfprt.html.

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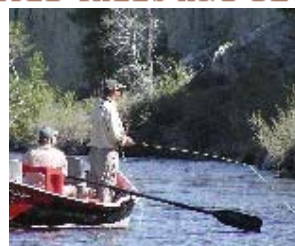
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