

WOLVES OF GLACIER



Jack Lauffer

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CREDITS

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Kim Keating

A SPECIAL PLACE

Located in the northwestern corner of Montana, far from large population centers, Glacier National Park stands as one of the crown jewels of the National Park system. Majestic mountains reach into the heavens. Icy lakes, crystalline blue, dot the land. Wildflowers fill the meadows for the brief summer season. And yet it is a fierce and unforgiving land. Winters are long and hard — snows are deep and last well into July in the high country.

Glacier is home to animals which have faded into folklore in other parts of the world. The grizzly bear roams free here, the bald eagle soars, and now the gray wolf (*Canus lupus*) appears to be staging a tentative return. Recovery is possible here because there are over one million acres set aside for preservation of natural habitat. There is some uncertainty because Glacier borders a number of areas developed in ways that make life difficult for wide ranging wildlife. In pursuit of timber, oil and gas, arable land, and in keeping with the pioneer spirit of taming the wilderness, little space has been left for animals that require wild places for survival. One of the few places that remain is Glacier National Park.



Scot Stewart



Scot Stewart

A RARE EVENT

In 1982 a litter of wolf pups was born near Glacier in British Columbia. Successful breeding occurred there again in 1984 and 1985. In 1986 the wolf pack moved south into Glacier National Park, selected a den site, and raised the first litter of pups born in the park in decades. In 1987 four packs of wolves were known to be in or near the park. Wolves are now in both the North Fork and St. Mary areas. They are generating a great deal of excitement and controversy, as very few Americans have ever seen a wolf in the wild. Chances of seeing or hearing wolves in Glacier National Park are still very slim. It is a large park, there are few wolves, and they are very shy and prefer to avoid humans.



Alan G. Nelson

WOLVES IN FACT AND FANTASY

Popular stories, such as *Little Red Riding Hood*, *The Three Little Pigs*, and *Peter and the Wolf*, left little doubt about the evilness of the wolf. *The Boy who Cried "Wolf!"* has become a classic warning. "The Wolf at the Door" is a phrase meant to strike fear into the hearts of debtors. In this atmosphere Bambi and his friends seemed to require the help and protection of man. We didn't know that nature needed all the animal species for balance.



Jack Lauffer

Legends told terrifying tales of wolf attacks on humans, and fear of wolves was common. Actually, there are no documented cases of attacks by healthy wolves on man. Unproven also are the stories of children raised by wolves in dens in the woods. Despite news reports, researchers have been unable to document such an occurrence. Scientists now think that children who were believed to have been raised in the wild by animals were actually victims of mental disorders which have nothing to do with wolves or other wildlife.

The truth about wolves is somewhere between the extreme perceptions of wanton killer and benevolent babysitter. Wolves are wild animals, and their physical similarity to the domestic dog does *not* mean that they can be approached, petted or hand fed. All wild animals, including the wolf, should be regarded with caution. They prefer to be left alone and will usually avoid populated areas. People have tried to raise wolves as pets with varying degrees of success, and nearly always with a sense of regret. Behavior of wild animals is not adaptable to life in captivity. Captive wolves can do a great deal of damage to valued possessions. Their play can be rough and wounding. When freed, wolves cannot adapt to life in the wild and live in a limbo where often they are hunted as rogues. Man has been slow to learn that wild animals should, in almost all cases, be appreciated only at a distance.

A TRAGIC HISTORY

American history has not been kind to the wolf. Portrayed in popular literature as a cunning and fearsome predator, the wolf was hunted, poisoned, trapped, and driven to near extinction. Various species were once plentiful from the Arctic Circle to the south Florida Everglades, but wolves in the U.S. were scarce by 1900. After one of their main prey bases (buffalo) was destroyed, wolves sometimes killed livestock. Ranchers moved to protect their animals, and records show that over 80,000 wolves were bountied in Montana between 1883 and 1918. In 1915 the federal government passed a law which called for the extermination of wolves on federal lands.



Danny On



Danny On

Between 1915 and 1942, almost 25,000 wolves were killed. In Glacier National Park numbers have been minimal since 1957, when the last sighted wolves were destroyed. With the best of intentions, man tried to protect the "good" animals, such as deer, elk, moose, and domestic livestock, from the "bad" animals, such as wolves, cougars, and bears. It took a long time to learn that when the predators were gone, the "good" wild animals no longer had restrictions on their numbers.



Danny On



Danny On



Danny On

LIFE IN THE WOLF PACK

Wolves have a remarkably strong social structure. Pack size varies from a few animals to 12 or more. Adult wolves range widely and trot or run great distances, with 45 miles per day traveled routinely. They apparently need a large and remote territory but can survive in all sorts of terrain and in differing vegetation and timber types. Wolves adopt a number of characteristic postures and behaviors that reinforce dominance, submission, annoyance, friendliness, etc. Even facial expressions, including ear angles and staring, have a part in wolf behavior.

A HOPEFUL START

Montana passed a law protecting wolves in 1973, and Congress added a safeguard by including wolves in the Endangered Species Act during the same year. Field surveys in Glacier National Park around that time revealed that gray wolves were intermittently present in low numbers, but those sighted were alone and not part of a viable population. The few wolves seen in Glacier were thought to be dispersing from populations to the north in Canada.



Mike Fairchild

Field research by the Wolf Ecology Project, University of Montana, has helped us to understand the recovery process and to assess the current status of gray wolves. We need to learn more about social structure, behavior, life cycles, and the relationship that the wolf has to other wildlife.

Wolf recovery here has drawn local, regional, and national media attention. Public interest is high, and various conservation groups are interested in promoting the recovery. Since hunting and trapping are illegal in the park, it is hoped that mortality of the wolves will be as low as possible. Pup mortality in other areas from various causes has been estimated to be as high as 60 percent. Favored prey (deer, elk, and moose) are present in sufficient numbers to ensure an adequate food source. Adult wolves eat 5-12 pounds of meat each day, depending on the season and availability of food.



Danny On



Scot Stewart

Recovery is still uncertain. There are people who feel that the world would be better off without the wolves. Livestock are not always safe in an area where wolves, bears, cougars, and coyotes roam free. In Minnesota, however, in an area where there are over 1,000 wolves and more than 12,000 farms and ranches, the highest cattle losses reported between 1976 and 1985 were .045 per 1,000.

Wolves are effective predators, and their methods of killing for food are repugnant to people who like to believe that nature is gentle and bucolic. Wolves do not recognize the political boundaries men have set between the wilderness and the surrounding ranch land. They kill for food and where prey species are less common, they can kill what is readily available. While wolves obviously pass up many opportunities to kill livestock, ranchers take an understandably dim view of the desire of conservationists for wolf recovery.



John and Ann Mahan



THE NATIVE VIEW

Nearly all Native American tribes have legends and folklore about the wolf. High regard for the animal is evidenced by their use of the name “Wolf” in bestowing honor on a man or group. The Pawnee story of creation features a wolf in a prominent role. Wolf masks have been used in ceremonies, and wolf images appear on totems. Not all Native Americans have viewed the wolf as benevolent, and some legends told of the ferocity of enormous mythic creatures. The Navajo word for wolf is MAI-COH, which means “witch,” and a Navajo “witch” becomes a werewolf by wearing a wolf skin.

Indians native to northern Montana have a number of legends involving the wolf. According to Blackfeet tales, wolves and coyotes should never be shot because they are believed to be “good medicine.” They have a saying, “The gun that shoots at a wolf or coyote will never again shoot straight.” During some Blackfeet ceremonies, the wolf song is sung. It has no words, but imitates the wolf howl. “Wolf Trail” is the Blackfeet name for the Milky Way, or route to heaven.



Scot Stewart

FAMILY LIFE

Packs have an alpha (dominant) male and female. Usually only the alpha male and female mate. Wolves mate in late winter or early spring. Gestation is 62 to 63 days. They usually pick den sites near a water source and near meadows with small rodent prey available, often on a rocky hillside overlooking a grassy area. Litters vary with 4 to 7 pups born in a den dug by the alpha female about 3 weeks before the birth. Newborns are blind and deaf and weigh about one pound. The mother wolf stays with her pups almost constantly, nursing them and keeping them warm for the first few weeks. The alpha male and other pack members bring food to her during this time. At about 3 weeks of age, pups can see and hear and begin to move around outside the den. Pups begin feeding on predigested food disgorged by adults at about one month of age. The mother still remains near, and the den site is quickly changed if any danger to the pups is perceived.

Non-breeding pack members help support the pups by feeding and babysitting. Pups remain fairly sedentary until late summer or early fall when they start traveling with the pack. As early as one month of age, wolves begin to determine their social standing in the pack. “Play fighting” for dominance has been documented in very young pups. Predatory behavior begins early, too, and by one month of age they may snap at offered food and begin to chase small animals. They practice “pouncing,” which, when perfected, is a very effective method of catching small mammals. At about 6 to 10 weeks the pups are moved to a “rendezvous site,” which the pack uses as a gathering spot and resting place during the summer and autumn. Their den is then abandoned but is sometimes used in following years.

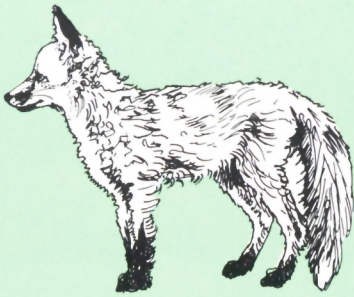
By about 6 months of age, the wolf has attained near adult size and skills for hunting. His adult teeth are present. By one year it is difficult to distinguish a pup from an adult.



John and Ann Mahan

HOW TO IDENTIFY WOLVES

Coloration can vary dramatically. Gray wolves can be black, gray, tan, white, and all shades in between. In Glacier National Park adult males weigh about 100 pounds and adult females about 85 pounds. From nose to tail tip, wolves measure 5 to 6 feet and are 26 to 32 inches tall at the shoulder. A few very large individuals are on record, but the majority are about three times the size of a coyote. Wolves have a larger, more square head with short, round ears. Coyotes are much more common and likely to be seen. They weigh about 25-30 pounds. Foxes are smaller still, weighing only 8-12 pounds.



FOX



COYOTE



WOLF

TRACKS

Tracks like those printed here (in life size) may be seen in the park. To be sure of what you have seen, note dimensions. If the track is about 4-¾” long and 3-¾” wide, the claw marks are visible, and the stride is 26 to 34 inches, you may feel fortunate in having glimpsed a trace of the elusive wolf.

We need to record all wolf sightings and are anxious to hear about wolf tracks you might find. Please note the location and measurements as precisely as possible and report to any park information station.



Courtesy of Child Museum

It is possible that you may hear the howl of a wolf in Glacier National Park. A wolf howl is typically low pitched and long, while coyotes yap and bark in a higher pitch. Scientists think that howling serves many purposes, including assembling the pack, social bonding, and advertising the presence of a pack to other wolves to avoid confrontation and trespass. Wolves can hear the howls of others at distances of up to six miles. Wolves howl more during courtship and mating. Contrary to legend, they do not howl more during a full moon.



John and Ann Mahan



Scot Stewart

Here at Glacier National Park, we believe in the moral expressed in Aesop’s fable of *The Dog and the Wolf*:

THE DOG AND THE WOLF

After hours of unsuccessful hunting, the wolf was very tired and his stomach growled with hunger. Game was scarce that day, and what little there was had eluded his grasp.

Suddenly he noticed a large, well-fed hound loping along the trail. The wolf looked with envy on the shiny coat and bounding energy of the dog.

Curious about what the dog did to remain so well-fed, the wolf began to question him. Answering, the dog said, “I guard the house against intruders, but there haven’t actually been any... I am loving and affectionate to the family... well, I don’t actually do much, I suppose, but in return, I always have a dry, warm bed and plenty of food.”

That sounded heavenly to the cold, tired, hungry wolf, and he decided to try this new life style. He was ready to stop risking his life for meals, to stay warm in winter, and to be able to rest and relax in peace.

As they trotted along toward the dog’s home, the wolf noticed a place on the dog’s neck where the hair had worn thin. “What is that?” he asked. “Nothing, really, just the spot where my chain and collar rub,” said the dog. “What! Do you mean that you are not free to come and go as you please?” said the wolf. “Well, not really,” said the dog, “but occasionally I escape, so what difference does that make?”

“Oh, much, my friend — more than you will ever know,” said the wolf, and he trotted off, still hungry, but proud, wild, and *free*.

