

Where the Wolves Roam Again

By Jesse Ashlock

FOR THE BETTER PART of an hour I'd been watching through a long-range scope as a tightly clustered herd of more than a hundred elk milled about on a distant ridgeline, alert to some unseen danger. Suddenly, the moment arrived: Eight—no, maybe 10 gray and black wolves descended from the upper right, fragmenting the herd. The elk fled in disorganized ribbons that moved like dye in a glass of water, their mottled coats streaks of brown against the wheat-colored mountains of Yellowstone National Park in October. In the melee, an elk yearling was left exposed. The wolves pounced.

On my second day of wolf-watching in northern Yellowstone with the tour operator Travel Montana, I'd been lucky enough to witness a kill. It was a visceral reminder that Yellowstone is a place where nature's sometimes brutal laws still rule the land—a fact that too many selfie-mad visitors ignore, unfortunately, instead seeming to believe they're vacationing in a theme park. The very presence of the wolves, who were controversially reintroduced to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem in 1995 after being gone for nearly a century, is about restoring nature's balance. As apex predators, the wolves have helped bring the elk population under control, in turn reducing the overgrazing that for decades prevented aspen, cotton-

wood, and willow trees from flourishing in the park's saddles and valley floors. Yellowstone is more beautiful because of them.

I was visiting the park with a small group led by Jon Trapp, a conservation biologist who flew fighter jets in the Air Force before studying landscape ecology on the G.I. Bill and then working with wolves for the federal government, states, nonprofits, and various tribal entities. His experience as a pilot comes in handy for aerial wolf monitoring, as well as in his other job as a firefighter and fire-behavior analyst. He frequently draws comparisons between wolves and fire, both of which humans have tried to eradicate, with disastrous consequences. "Wolves have an ecological role to play on the land, as does fire," he said. "It isn't good or bad. It is what it is."

But there are entrenched camps that do see wolves as either good or bad, with very little nuance. This is a dichotomy that goes back centuries, even millennia: There's the myth of Romulus and Remus suckling on the she-wolf before growing up to found Rome, and there's the Big Bad Wolf scheming to eat Little Red Riding Hood. And as with so many things in American life, this tension has been exacerbated by partisan rancor. Anti-wolf constituencies compare the animals to illegal immigrants; their defenders accuse the neighboring ranchers who want to protect their livestock and livelihoods of being unfeeling killers. Hunters complain about the competition the wolves have created for elk, while proponents point to the estimated \$65 million a year created by the wolf-tourism economy and the good-paying jobs as guides that now keep young people from leaving the region. "There's over four million visitors to Yellowstone a year," said Rick McIntyre, a retired National Park ranger and one of the world's foremost experts on wolves, "and, for most, their number one or two goal is to see a wolf."

When you go wolf-spotting—usually in the northern part of the park, where it's easier to see them from the roadside—you likely won't get close enough to behold their beauty with the naked eye, as you might the animals on an African game drive, or even the bison and moose right here in Yellowstone. But that's part of the magic of watching them; it's like peering through a keyhole into their private world. On our first morning, we set up on a bluff in the Lamar Valley near the Slough Creek Drainage to watch a half dozen members of the Junction Butte Pack, including a couple of pups. Across the great

expanse, they rolled on their backs, nuzzled noses, jumped onto and off of boulders. When they wandered across patches of snow, they suddenly became much easier to make out, especially the grays, whose tawny coats blend with the earth. Winter, I realized, must be prime time for wolf-watching.

But all this carefree frolicking belies a difficult life. “Wolves are routinely getting stabbed and jabbed,” Jon told us. “So their immune systems are pretty bomber.” Even so, the average life span of Yellowstone’s wolves is 3.9 years. They are at risk from other packs, disease, starvation, cars, and hunting. That last threat has become more pronounced since Montana’s governor relaxed the quota of one wolf per hunter and district. Now an unlimited number can be killed on private property; the management strategy in the areas just beyond the park’s northern border, according to Jon, “is basically a free-for-all. You can run them down with a car, use night-vision goggles, shoot them from a helicopter.” In response, the Sierra Club, Wilderness Watch, and numerous other organizations have announced plans to sue the state of Montana under the Endangered Species Act.

In the Lamar Valley, Rick McIntyre talked to us about wolves, his voice punctuated by their eerie calls. With his ruddy complexion, twinkly eyes, and lank white locks poking out from under a wool beanie, he looked like a Kris Kringle of the American West. For one 15-year stretch of his career, he went out every day to watch Yellowstone’s packs. When he was still a ranger, Rick told us, he spoke to a local elementary school class that was visiting the park. A few days earlier, O-Six, a revered alpha female, had been killed, legally, by a hunter, prompting a national outcry and eventually the best-selling book *American Wolf*.

Before he could begin talking, a five-year-old boy piped up: “I know the man who shot that famous wolf.” As Rick considered how to respond diplomatically, the boy added, “My daddy just bought a license to shoot a wolf.” Again, the park ranger pondered the most politic response. The boy, however, had one more thing to say: “But I hope he doesn’t.”

Rick paused as a cold wind rustled through the Lamar Valley. “That’s what gives me hope,” he said quietly. “The younger generation.”

Travel Montana hosts five-day Yellowstone wolf tours of no more than 12 participants in February, May, and October. From \$2,950 per person; travelmontana.com

WHERE TO STAY

IN THE PARK

Nine lodges are scattered across Yellowstone, but it’s the **Old Faithful Inn**, built at the turn of the 20th century, that continues to draw thousands of guests yearly. Its central location, rustic but comfy rooms, and views into Geyser Basin (including Old Faithful itself) make it a winner for wilderness seekers and history buffs alike. *Doubles from \$209, yellowstonenationalparklodges.com; open early May through mid-October*

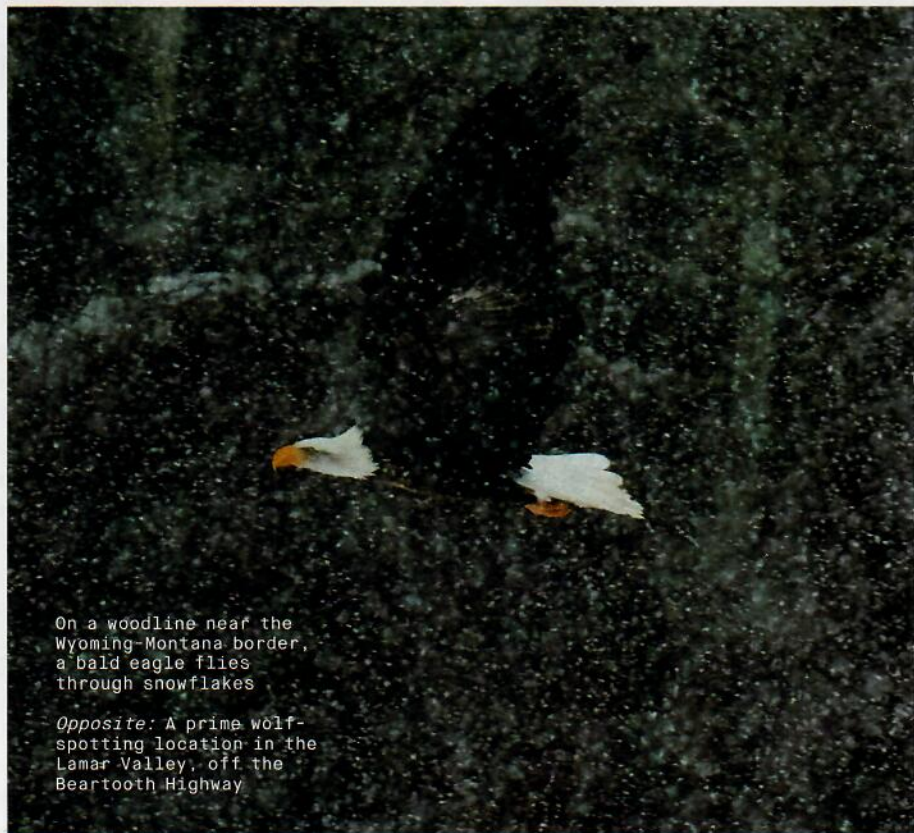
OUTSIDE THE GATES

Only 10 minutes from Yellowstone’s west entrance, the amenity-rich **Under Canvas Yellowstone** nails convenient glamping. Its canvas tents have private decks with views of Montana’s rolling hills, as well as wood-burning stoves with complimentary firewood. Upgrade to a Stargazer tent for night-sky viewing, right from your king-size bed. *From \$439, undercanvas.com; open mid-May through early September*

FOR A SPLURGE

Set in the shadow of the Spanish Peaks, the new **Montage Big Sky** is the ultimate in mountain luxe. There’s a full-service spa with products by Lola’s Apothecary, plus views of Montana’s Spanish Peaks, all just 45 minutes from Yellowstone. In winter, hit the slopes (the resort is ski-in, ski-out); a raclette cart and glasses of Grand Cru make for the perfect après. *From \$1,395; montagehotels.com*

EMILY PENNINGTON



On a woodline near the Wyoming-Montana border, a bald eagle flies through snowflakes

Opposite: A prime wolf-spotting location in the Lamar Valley, off the Beartooth Highway