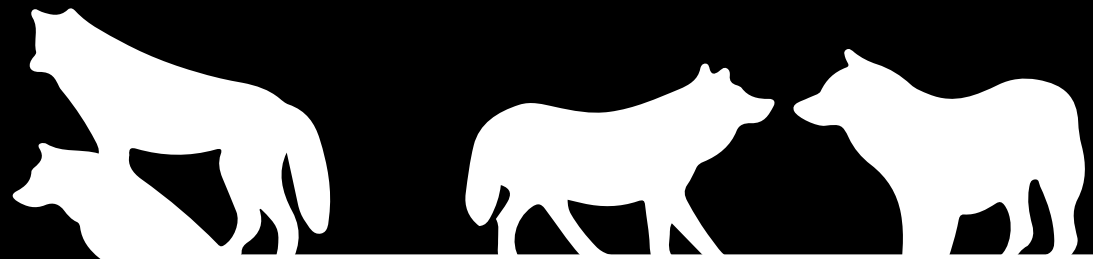


THE WOLVES ARE BACK IN MONTANA

BY JAY MALLONEE



I've been waiting a long time. Years, in fact.

When Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) eliminated the entire Fishtrap pack for apparently killing someone's cow, my decade-long study came to an abrupt end.

Recently, however, another pack has made its presence known. Over the past year-and-a-half, I've documented their occasional visits through the area, but now it's consistent. The elation of once again finding fresh wolf prints offers hope for the future, because the wolves are back. I established Sceyefal Wolf Research in March 2019 to find out more about these unknown individuals, study their behavior and find a way to protect them.

At present, there are at least three adults and their vocalizations have been recorded. There has been no

evidence of pups throughout the denning time of year, but finding such a specific location often takes years. Perhaps rendezvous site season, when pups are trained by pack members at various locations throughout the summer, will indicate something quite different.

In the meantime, I've been able to document at least one major travel route. It stretches over 10 miles and provides the wolves access to three different drainage systems. My black lab Shyla and I have walked every inch of it. During these surveys, we met one of the wolves.

THE NATURE OF WOLVES

This lone wolf had exited a thick patch of forest and stepped onto the path in front of us, about 30 yards ahead. It was a tricolored adult, mostly brown with a mix of white and black sprinkled throughout its coat. I abruptly stopped walking, as did Shyla. She sat next to me on her haunches and calmly watched as the wolf briefly

looked at us, but never stopped moving.

Wolves are funny creatures. Sometimes their indifference to our presence can be startling. It glanced at us fleetingly, as though we weren't actually being acknowledged. It just happened to turn its head that way. The wolf then turned its backside toward us and slowly loped up the path and out of sight. It was in no hurry, never looked back, and displayed an air of complete control.

Several years earlier a similar incident occurred. Two wolves crossed the road about 50 yards in front of Shyla and I during one of our walks. They were just passing through the area. Both had come out of a meadow system to our right. The first wolf didn't bother to look at us and slowly trotted to the other side of the road and back into the forest. The second wolf followed a few seconds later. As it kept its stride, the wolf briefly glanced left to look at us and was in no particular hurry to cross the road. Yet, it was

gone within seconds.

Whenever I encounter wolves in the wild, I am always in awe of their ability to remain poised, at least when no threat is perceived, as if they understand they are in control. Their actions are deliberate, no wasted motion, and carried out with an efficiency that seems as if the entire situation had unfolded as planned.

This is unlike the black bears we often chance upon who immediately show us their rears as they sprint in the opposite direction. Unless you're perceived as an imminent threat, wolves have every intention of getting out of your way, but never seem to be in a hurry to do so. It's this behavior that gives the impression of extreme confidence, whether they have it or not.

As always, I keep a wide berth from all wild animals and respect their space, but sometimes circumstances don't allow this to occur. Over the years, I occasionally have been warned by some wolves not to advance further, although I didn't know they were there at the time. They produced quiet "ruffs" while standing nearby, or deliberately made additional noise as they trotted closer. Wolves are usually relatively stealthy. These were warnings, not aggressive acts. With wolves, there seems to be a healthy tolerance of my presence as long as I'm not too close, although I've had them run right by me at full speed not 20 yards away. Despite chance encounters, I feel very comfortable walking through wolf territory.

In the forest, maintaining adequate distance helps to prevent most potential conflicts with anything. Wolves seem to know how to do this very well. Although I remain attentive, I don't expect to be surprised by one. This is in contrast to walking around a corner and seeing a black bear standing there

with a cub. That's different. Surprise is not a good thing. But for wolves, that's the point. They never seem surprised. They are calm and confident.

These fascinating creatures are who I'm tracking now, as I slowly piece together how they utilize their territory. I'm thrilled to get to know them better.

WHAT IS SCEYEFAL?

Sceyefal is in reference to the James Bond movie of the same name but different spelling. Its meaning is a good moniker for the wolves' situation and my research in Montana. Bond spends most of the movie attempting to protect his boss/mentor from being murdered by a terrorist. He eventually kidnaps her and they drive to the isolated area in Scotland where he grew up. His family's land was named Skyfall, and it now becomes a bastion to make their final stand—much like a wolf pack's territory, which is defended at almost all costs. However, his boss is killed before he can eliminate the threat, similar to when the Fishtrap pack was killed but the threats still remained: hunting seasons, poaching and MFWP control actions.

I've found the current wolves' Skyfall. So along with conducting a science project, Sceyefal Wolf Research will continue my ongoing efforts to eliminate threats to wolves, which results in more than 300 killed, about 50 percent, annually in Montana. This occurs because only a fraction of the U. S. wolf population lives in National Parks which afford full protection, although this safeguard evaporates should the wolves cross the park boundaries. Most live in national forests: natural areas highly manipulated by people. Collectively through the federal government, the American people own national forests

and everything in them. These are your wolves.

When the wolves are destroyed, I feel sadness from their deaths, and because my daily experience in the woods becomes less vibrant. There are no prints where they used to be, no scat, no hair tufts, no evidence of wolf presence. Eventually, after several years, the vegetation changes as well, a final emphasis that the wolves' existence is no longer felt - one which had an intimate interaction with environment. This process is known as trophic cascading.

But now the wolves are back and a new feeling of hope is present. With the public's help and support, Sceyefal will create a situation where such a loss can be prevented. To learn more, please visit www.wolfandwildlife-studies.com and use the email links to contact me. Together we can find realistic solutions to saving our wolves.



Jay Mallonee has studied a variety of animals since 1977, from wolves to whales. His research on wolves began in 1992, and he has written extensively about them in his scientific publications, magazines, newspapers and on his web site (www.wolfandwildlife-studies.com). Jay also wrote the book Timber - A Perfect Life, an account of his sixteen-year relationship with a profound canine companion.