

Searching for wolves in western Alberta was frustrating until routine poison controls were halted.

The first wolf tracks I ever found date back to the summer of 1960. It was a memorable occasion, for at that time wolves had been poisoned practically into extinction in all of western Alberta, including the national parks. The location of my find was the upper Baker Creek valley of Banff National Park. However, once I got back home after the day's hike and checked the animal track diagrams in a handbook, I wasn't sure anymore of what exactly I had seen. The footprints of cougar and wolverine looked quite similar to those of a wolf. The next weekend I again hiked up the steep Baker Creek trail and carefully measured the tracks, until I was confident that these indeed were made by a wolf.

Finding a second set of wolf tracks had to wait until March 1961, when a naturalist friend and I ventured into the remote forests northwest of Rocky Mountain House. Checking the margins of a snow-covered bush road for tracks, we were elated to locate fresh sign of a pack of eight. It was an important discovery.

On the way in, we had stopped by the office of the regional wildlife officer to inquire about wolves. He had not seen a track in years, but during the 1950s he had personally poisoned 78 wolves in the area. Perhaps to please us, he added that he had nothing against the wolf. "In fact, I like them better than people."

Before driving back home to Calgary, my companion suggested that we report our find to the wildlife officer. It turned out to be a grave mistake. Two weeks later, back at the same location, I was saddened to find a wooden sign nailed to a roadside tree: "Attention! Poison Baits." Staked on the ice of a nearby lake lay the head and neck of a horse. The meat had been treated with *ten-eighty*, a lethal pesticide commonly used for carnivore control in Alberta.

Later that year, I embarked on a summer of exploration to the Yukon and Alaska. Finding wolves was paramount on my list of things to do, and in that regard the trip was a success. However, my wilderness adventure ended abruptly in a canoe accident that could easily have cost me my life.

The long-held dream of closely observing wolves in the wild was eventually realized in Jasper National Park. But the first

time Irma and I hiked into the park's remote Willow Creek district, in June of 1965, we were shocked to find out what was still happening to the region's wolves.

Upon our arrival at the backcountry station, warden Norman Woody, who lived all year in his log cabin, said that he had seen eight wolves on Rock Lake last winter, when he set out on snowshoes to walk the nine miles back to his cabin. But the next day, he got a phone call from the district forest ranger, who reported that seven of the wolves had died on a poison bait.



Photo by Brian Genereux

For more details on Dick Dekker's wolf observations, see his books:
1985. *Wild Hunters*. CWD publication, Edmonton. ISBN 0-919091-16-4
1997. *Wolves of the Rocky Mountains: From Jasper to Yellowstone*. Hancock House Publishers, Surrey, BC. ISBN 0-88839-416-0
2002. *Wildlife Adventures in the Canadian West*. Rocky Mountain Books, Calgary, AB. ISBN 1-894765-36-2

Some time after our trip, I met with the Rock Lake ranger. Apart from the wolves poisoned on the lake in the winter of 1964/65, he said that a trapper, who had been hired by the Alberta Forestry Department to set out wolf baits, had been shocked by the number of animals poisoned near Eagle's Nest Pass in adjacent Wilmore Wilderness Park. Due to deep snow, he had been unable to collect and remove the lethal carrion until well into spring. When he finally got there, the number of dead wolves was a surprise. "We did not know there were so many," said the ranger. In addition, the ground was littered with the carcasses of other carnivores and scavengers, including wolverines, grizzly bears, and eagles.

This was the way wolf control was handled in the poison years. However, things improved after 1966 due to widespread public protests against the wolf kills, coupled with a change in thinking among wildlife managers. Routine poison controls were all but stopped, and the wolves reacted with a vengeance, so to speak, by becoming more common than ever.

Unfortunately, in recent years, the pendulum has swung back again to control, particularly in western forests where caribou have been in decline, mainly as a consequence of ever-widening habitat destruction. Wolves became an expendable scapegoat. In my view, the sad thing is that there has been very little opposition to the use of poison baits, not even from provincial naturalist organisations.

Dick Dekker

Finding wolf sign in central Alberta is rare, and their footprints can be difficult to tell from those of a large dog.

Partly because of my long and often frustrating quest for wolves, as related on the previous pages, coming across their sign is always a thrill. Like other naturalists, I used to think of the wolf as a symbol of unspoiled wilderness, a place where indigenous animal and plant associations are still intact and have not yet been disrupted by human activities, an increasingly scarce environment in today's world. However, if given the chance, wolves are ever ready to expand their range into settled regions, including farmland and towns.

After the termination of routine poisoning, the wolves of western Canada have greatly increased in number and yearlings are known to disperse over long distances. So, it should not be surprising that some roam far south and east of their usual breeding range. This is indeed the case, but to recognize them as wolves can be difficult because they come in a variety of pelage colours and may resemble a coyote or domestic dog, and size is an unreliable criterion in field sightings.

Personally, I have yet to see an animal that looks like a wolf in the Edmonton area, but others have. On April 22, 2005, the *Edmonton Journal* carried a detailed letter from Paige Hacking, who lives on an acreage just north of Devon, not far from the North Saskatchewan River valley. Under the title "Trust me, there are wolves out there," her story gives a very plausible account of a close encounter with two wolves.

More recently, a wolf-like canid was photographed at Big Lake, and there are a number of current reports from Elk Island National Park and the adjacent Blackfoot grazing reserve. In 2012,

according to information supplied by the wildlife officer stationed at Vegreville, a pack of seven or eight was active in a grazing lease near Two Hills. Eventually, three wolves were trapped and two others shot near the carcass of a calf they had killed. Wolf control measures also have been taken in the Buck Lake grazing lease near Wetaskiwin.

My records of wolves in central Alberta are limited to finding their tracks, which resemble those of their domestic cousin. However, the front foot of a large male wolf leaves a bigger print than that of any dog. Oval in shape, it can spread to 9–10 cm wide by 11–13 cm long. Tracks of that size can be attributed with certainty to a wolf, particularly if they are not associated with the presence of people.

I have found the odd track of maximum size near Wabamun and on the southeast shore of Cooking Lake. Some years ago, wolf-like tracks of a smaller format were common on the banks of the North Saskatchewan River between Edmonton and Fort Saskatchewan. One day I met the local coyote trapper and asked whether he had ever found wolf sign. The answer was positive. He had actually seen one. In reply to my question whether the animal's colour was black or grey, he replied, "Both! There are actually two wolves around here."

Although I have continued to walk the same river bank trail, I have not come across any more wolf sign for a while. But I keep on looking.

Dick Dekker

Photo by Wes Bradford

