



*My favorite encounter occurred on December 14, 1998, in Lamar Valley while watching the Rose Creek Pack.*



**D**uring all my wolf watching in Yellowstone National Park, I never thought I'd almost be run over by a wolf. But that's exactly what happened.

Winter is the best time to observe wolves in Yellowstone. Twice a year, the Wolf Project conducts a 30-day intensive monitoring study primarily to determine, from the air and ground, kill rate of the reintroduced wolf packs. Crews of two people are assigned to each of the three packs on the Northern Range in the northeastern corner of the park. Starting well before sunrise, we work until nightfall, monitoring the wolves' movements, recording kills and behavior, and collecting specimens. Monitoring flights take place daily, weather permitting, to locate the Northern Range packs as well as wolves whose territories in the interior of the park are not visible from the road. I have participated in five such studies, and have been very fortunate to observe some amazing interactions with the wolves. My favorite encounter occurred on December 14, 1998, in Lamar Valley while watching the Rose Creek Pack.

### **The Rose Creek pack**

The Rose Creek Pack at that time consisted of 21 wolves, including the famous matriarch of the park, wolf 9 and her mate, wolf 8. At 7:50 a.m., my partner and I located the Rose Creek Pack by radio telemetry in one of its regular travel routes. Chances of actually seeing the wolves in this area are average, so my partner went to collect specimens from a wolf-kill with another project volunteer, while I climbed up the hill to try to see some wolves. When I reached the ridge, I listened for signals by radio telemetry. This useful scientific tool picks up signals from radio collars worn by some of the wolves. The receiver and antenna were registering loud, clear

# Close Encounter of the "Wolf" Kind

BY AMY JACOBS

beeps, telling me that the wolves were within the line of sight and not traveling. I quickly set up and spread out my gear, then put on extra layers of clothing. Within minutes I spotted the 21 wolves, bedded on a slope about a mile away. I began to record data on my Dictaphone, holding it close to the scope so I could talk and watch the wolves simultaneously.

## The chase

The wolves started to stir and by 8:15 a.m. they were up and traveling toward a big herd of elk cows and calves. A chase began, and I focused on a gray wolf testing a group of elk that had broken away from the main running herd. I was too far away to positively identify any of the wolves. As I scanned ahead of the gray wolf, I saw that a calf had left the main herd and was running with a black wolf hot on its trail. The chase was still about a mile away but headed in my direction. The wolf and calf

disappeared into a gully, and when they reappeared, the calf seemed to trip, and I saw through the scope the black wolf clamp onto its hindquarters.

At this point the plane arrived and was circling the main pack and elk herd. I radioed the aircrew to alert them that I had seen a black wolf attack a calf, but they were now out of sight. Not a second later, the calf was again in my scope and running with the black wolf right behind it. They were heading toward me, about a half-mile away. Again the two disappeared, and I radioed the plane inquiring if they had seen the chase as I frantically searched for the animals in my scope.

Suddenly I heard a noise and looked up to see the calf 50 yards from me and still running in my direction! After staring in disbelief for what seemed like an eternity, I realized that the calf was heading right for me. I jumped up, dropping the Dictaphone beside me. This action startled and stopped the calf, allowing the black wolf to catch up and grab its hindquarters again.

## On the run

Now I really couldn't believe my eyes. There I stood, gear and contents of my pack spread in a circle around me, the elk calf with a black wolf attached closing in. I yelled and waved my arms, but the calf continued toward me. Realizing I had no time to get out of the way, I ran a few steps, then ran back, grabbed the 2-way radio and sprinted to a boulder about 15 feet away and jumped on top. When I turned around, I could see the calf with the attached wolf

running right over my gear and directly under the rock I was sitting on. It happened so quickly, I did not realize I was clutching the radio in my hand, asking the aircrew if they were watching any of this.

By this time, the two animals were right under me. I must have moved, or the wolf must have noticed me then because it released its grip, and the calf escaped down the trail. The wolf, now as stunned as I was, spun around, and instead of rejoining the rest of the



Courtesy of Yellowstone National Park

Researchers collar two wolves for tracking purposes. The biologists are (back, left to right): Wayne Brewster, Ed Bangs, and John Varley; (front, left to right): Deb Guernsey, Doug Smith, the author, Amy Jacobs, and Carrie Schaefer.





Lynn Rogers

pack, ran full speed back to where they had been bedded that morning.

No one else witnessed my experience, except for a coyote that had been sitting behind me all morning. The best part of the encounter was that in all the excitement, I had accidentally left the Dictaphone running. The tape recorded my initial response when the calf first showed up, then the wolf, then the calf bellowing as the wolf grabbed it, me rustling around to get out of the way, and then the chase running right

through my whole set-up. You can clearly hear the calf getting closer and closer and the wolf panting as it ran right over the Dictaphone.

The whole experience lasted about five minutes. In all my time working with wolves in Yellowstone, I have been fortunate to see rare occurrences, like wolves playing with black bears, or killing elk, yearlings sliding down the snow, and pups playing in front of the den, but never before have I almost been run over by a wolf. ■

*Amy Jacobs has been working with wolves, captive and wild, since 1992. She began work in Yellowstone with the Wolf Project in January of 1997. She is currently working on a Master's Degree with Dr. Rolf Peterson, studying leadership behavior in wolf packs in Yellowstone National Park.*

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*The Rose Creek Pack gathers at Slough Creek, Yellowstone National Park.*

Doug Smith