

Personal Encounter

An Arctic Expedition: Adventurers Come Face to Face With Thriving Wolf Culture

by Debbie Reynolds



A wolf pup breaks from its pack and curiously approaches Debbie Reynolds's party.

It was a race against time! Who was going to make it to the top of the ridge first—Will, a fellow adventurer, and I with our cameras, or those two adventurous arctic wolf pups we were trying to ambush? Even now, as I sit and reflect on the best trip I have ever taken, I have to smile as I recall those two small wolf heads popping up over the ridge just before we made it to the boulder we had chosen to hide behind. We had to stop dead in our tracks right where we were, and start shooting pictures!

But let me take you back to the beginning of this marvelous trip. Ten of us were fortunate enough to have signed on with IWC board members Dave Mech and Nancy Gibson, and Dean Cluff, the northern regional biologist for the Northwest Territories, to travel 250 miles northwest of Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories into the “Barrenlands” to

look for a wolf pack. We expected to see at least one or two wolves, because Dean had radio-collared them earlier and knew they were still in the vicinity.

Our float plane flew us over a landscape filled with what seemed to be equal parts water and land to Aylmer Lake, our base camp for the week. What a base camp it turned out to be—great food, wonderful hosts, and cozy accommodations. All we had to worry about was finding those wolves—so immediately after landing, we headed off to look for a good vantagepoint for seeing the two wolves Dean had located with his tracking equipment.

We belly-crawled to a ridgetop about half a mile from where we thought the wolves might be resting for the day. As we scanned the opposite hillside with our binoculars and spotting scopes, eventually we began to see boulders and rocks come to life! Instead of two lone female wolves that Dean knew were there, we counted 12 pups and seven adults, for a total of 19 wolves! We realized then that our wolf adventure was going to be about as good as any adventure could get! When we returned the next day to count 15 pups and nine adults on that hillside, we found that we were in for the best wolf week of our lives!

Our days evolved into a routine based on wolf activity. Wolves are most active in the mornings and evenings, so we chose to arrange our days around the wolves' nighttime behavior. One of the many highlights of the trip for me were the nightly debriefing sessions given by Dave Mech that combined his and Nancy's insights with our observa-

tions. I learned more about wolves and their behavior during this one week than I would ever have learned from any classroom experience.

This was a week of many firsts for me. I had never seen a wolf pack in the wild before. We not only observed a record setting pack of 24 wolves, we also found another wolf pack some distance away with at least four pups and three adults. At least one of the adults began bark-howling while we were there! Since we did not want to stress this small pack, we checked out the den site and quickly left. We went back to observe the original pack, and we did not seem to alarm its members.

Another first for me was hearing a wild wolf pack howl. One night at dusk as we walked back to our boats, we heard the deep voice of the alpha male begin to howl; then the varied voices of the eight other adults chimed in, the pups adding their own high-pitched notes. We heard that chorus at least four more times, but none as beautifully haunting as that first evening's song.

During our week there, we saw wolves everyday and it became almost commonplace to observe them regurgitating to their pups. My favorite observation happened early the last evening we were there. The adults had just left for the hunt and must have found something rather quickly, as they began to return almost immediately. The first adult came over the ridge heading to the rendezvous site, when all of a



Nancy Gibson

sudden, the earth seemed to just erupt puppies—it was a veritable train of little bodies streaming to meet the adult! We laughed at the sight!

The Arctic is a special and beautiful place, and during the summer, this part of it certainly doesn't personify its "Barren Lands" nickname—it is teeming with life! The tundra was just loaded with edible berries of all kinds (blueberries, cloudbberries, bearberries, cranberries and crowberries), a veritable feast for anyone willing to slow down and pick them, which I certainly did! We observed all

Debbie Reynolds taking a moment to relax between adventures on a trip to the Northwest Territories.



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manner of wildlife besides wolves, including caribou adults and calves, a small herd of musk-oxen, several rough legged hawks, two nests of almost-fledged peregrine falcons with their noisy parents, several kinds of loons, plovers and sparrows, arctic hare, sik-siks (the arctic ground squirrel), and the ever-present black flies and mosquitoes (they only annoyed us a few times when the wind died down).

Perhaps the most beautiful memory I have of our time spent in the Arctic is of the aurora borealis, or northern lights. We had left the wolves later than usual this particular evening and experienced the uniquely Arctic occurrence of the moon rising and sun setting at the same time as we traveled home for our nightly discussion. At midnight, as our discussion was wrapping up, we heard cries of “ooh, ahh” that I associate with fireworks displays. We hurried outside to watch a full hour of the most beautiful northern lights that even our Canadian group members had ever witnessed! With sunspot activity particularly high this year, we were able to see multiple colors snake across a cloudless sky, raining curtains of fire on us from a boiling center during each occurrence. I will never forget that Arctic night.

There were numerous other special moments. We found the remains of two caribou carcasses and learned that, in a few more weeks, even their antlers would be consumed as food by some arctic creature. During a very rainy day spent in comfort at our base camp listening to Dave, Nancy and Dean discuss wolf behavior and their



Debbie Reynolds

Although the Arctic is nicknamed the “Barren Lands” it is teeming with life. This caribou was one of the many animals found roaming the tundra.

personal experiences with wolves, a member of the pack we had been observing all week trotted through camp to check us all out! This wolf could not have timed its appearance any better! And, as luck would have it, there was not a camera in sight!

One evening as we were packing up to leave our observation site, six of the adult wolves moved off to hunt. But instead of going over the ridge behind their rendezvous site, as we had observed on other evenings, this group came right toward us! We stopped packing up to see how this was going to turn out. The excitement was palpable as Dave instructed us to get ready to lie down fast to make ourselves as inconspicuous as a large group of people could on the open tundra should they actually come up to our location; unfortunately for us, the wind had shifted to our backs, pushing our scent toward

the wolves. They must have been quite confused, as our scent mixed with that of a caribou that had passed just a short while before. The wolves stopped about 250 yards from us, teasing us with their nearness until the closing night chased us to our boats for a moonless ride home.

The trip was filled with wonderful wolf adventures, many of them “firsts” for me. The Arctic is a special place, too, impressive in its unspoiled beauty. I will return to the Arctic again. ■

Debbie Reynolds is an International Wolf Center member and the board chair of the Raptor Center in Saint Paul, Minnesota. She is also the board chair of Milkweed Editions, a non-profit press in Minneapolis.



Debbie Reynolds

An arctic hare poses for a quick snapshot.