

*With great surprise I realized what  
I was doing. My eyes were staring  
100 feet away. And then, I heard  
a muffled half-bark followed by  
a deep, smooth, heavy sound rising  
in the air. None of the crew*

# Personal Encounter

## Wild About Yellowstone

by Pete Nettrour

**N**ortheast of Old Faithful with its tourists and motor homes is Yellowstone National Park as few people have experienced it. It is also Yellowstone as President Theodore Roosevelt meant it to be—unbridled nature preserved for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations.

Nearly 3 million tourists visit Yellowstone annually, most of them flocking to the well-known sight-seeing spots between June and September. Even though Yellowstone is open year-round, only 140,000 visitors witness the grandeur of the park in winter. I was fortunate to be among this minority when I joined a wolf wilderness trip to the Yellowstone area in March 2002, sponsored by the International Wolf Center.

My wife, a biology professor, stumbled upon information about the trip on the Internet while researching an upcoming lesson. She logged onto the International Wolf Center's Web site ([www.wolf.org](http://www.wolf.org)), and news of the upcoming adventure caught her attention. The Center hosts several ecotourism wilderness trips a year to various locations, such as Yellowstone and the central Arctic in Canada's Northwest Territories.

Due to the small size of the wilderness trip groups, reservations tend to fill quickly. Ordinarily, the trip would have been filled by the time we learned about it, but one member canceled and left an opening for me. A few short weeks after making the necessary arrangements, I was on a plane heading to Bozeman, Montana, to rendezvous with the rest of the group.

The mild Pittsburgh winter did not prepare me for winter in Yellowstone. In March the weather can vary from extreme cold to almost springlike. During our trip, we experienced the former. Near-zero morning temperatures were our wake-up call, and pushing our 15-passenger van through deep snowdrifts added to the adventure.

March is a busy time for wolves and wolf researchers in the Yellowstone area. During this time, park biologists and technicians monitor wolves daily from both air and ground. Their objective is to determine the maximum kill rate during the period when prey is most vulnerable.

Up before sunrise, our group spent each day the way the park's biologists do—searching for wolves



that are often on their own search for prey. We were out in the Lamar Valley in the northeast corner of the park by dawn each morning after a hearty breakfast followed by a radio check-in with Rick McIntyre, one of the wolf project naturalists. We set up scopes and waited patiently beside the technicians monitoring the activities of the wolves. Our goal was to position ourselves where the wolves were most visible. Though the wolves we observed were typically seen from a distance of 150 yards to 2 miles, they were dramatically magnified through spotting scopes (45–60x), and we could clearly view the wolves in their natural habitat.

By 6:30 a.m. on our first day in the field, we had watched a variety of wildlife foraging through the snow, including bison, elk, mountain sheep and a rare cow moose. Within minutes of these observations, our scopes and cameras were focused on four wolves: the alpha male, alpha female and two yearlings of the Druid pack, the largest pack of wolves in Yellowstone. They passed within yards of two bison before bedding down in a snowpack. Bison, especially healthy bulls, are rare targets of wolf predation, which explains the wolves' apparent lack of interest as they passed by.

Distinguished wolf biologist and International Wolf Center

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Photos left to right: Christopher and Miranda Bly, Pete Neltrour, International Wolf Center

Left to right: a wolf, an elk on a ridge, and a bison in the Lamar Valley.

founder Dave Mech was one of the trip leaders, and he discussed the wolves' hunting behaviors. Because it is difficult and dangerous for wolves to attack and kill large prey, they select animals compromised by age or physical weakness. How wolves determine such weakness is a subject of current investigation by biologists in Yellowstone. With its abundant prey and thriving wolf population, the park is a living laboratory for this type of research.

We continued to watch the wolves as they bedded down for most of the day. They rose just before sunset and passed within 200 yards of our party before disappearing into the twilight. Our group was pleased with the day's activities, and we returned to our lodgings for dinner and discussions with the experts about the day's observations and about the ecology of Yellowstone.

The area's herds of wildlife are so abundant in the Lamar Valley that this region has

been nicknamed the Serengeti of North America. In 1907, long before the establishment of the present Yellowstone Association Institute (YAI), this beautiful valley was chosen to be the home of Buffalo Ranch, a federal effort to turn around the drastic decline of the West's bison population that took place toward the end of the 19th century. Today, the old bunkhouse building that remains from the original structure houses the YAI's education facility: classrooms, a large kitchen and bath facilities. This year

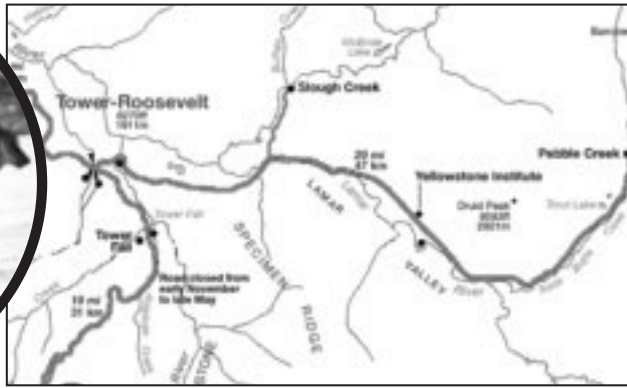


Pete Neltrour

Left to right: Dave Mech, Jerry Sanders and George Knotek use spotting scopes and binoculars to observe wolves and other wildlife in the Lamar Valley.



Christopher and  
Miranda By



Located in the northeast section of Yellowstone National Park, the Lamar Valley has been nicknamed the Serengeti of North America because of its abundant herds of wildlife.

the institute will offer over 125 diverse courses, and more than 60 instructors will share their expertise with over 1,000 students.

The institute's facility at the Buffalo Ranch, where our group stayed, creates a comfortable, retreat-like learning atmosphere. The International Wolf Center made arrangements with a Bozeman, Montana, caterer so that we would have delicious meals during our stay at the ranch. Lunch was usually brown bag in the field, but the prepared breakfasts and dinners brought a touch of luxury to our rustic accommodations.

The mournful hooting of a great horned owl summoned us wolf watchers to breakfast in the pre-dawn hours of our third day. After finishing another hearty morning meal, we received a radio call from the field,

alerting us to the whereabouts of the Druid pack's alpha pair along the Lamar Valley Road in an area called Little America. The wolves' long moaning howls greeted us as we set up spotting scopes and scanned the snow-covered hillside with binoculars.

Soon, several members of the Druid pack, including the alpha male and female, emerged from a cluster of trees and set off together out of sight. As they disappeared from our view, a radio call reported 11 yearlings several miles farther west on the Lamar Valley Road. We missed their pursuit of a bull elk but arrived in time to witness the young wolves turn the hillside into a giant playground as they engaged in elaborate tag games and wrestling matches. This group of young wolves is the subject of intense interest among the researchers. The parents had separated from the

youngsters nearly a week before our arrival, and the young wolves seemed to be developing their hunting skills by trial and error.

Later in the week, these yearlings took down a cow elk only to have a herd of bison force them off the elk. The bison continued to protect the wounded elk from the wolves and ravens for several hours as it struggled to get back on its feet. The Yellowstone researchers had never seen such behavior. The elk eventually died, and the bison gradually lost interest. The wolves and bison singularly or in groups charged each other on many occasions. The patient and hungry wolves soon won the contest.

As the young wolves finally began to eat, Dave Mech explained that sometimes a wolf consumes as much as 22 pounds of meat at a feeding. Because digestion is rapid, the wolves return repeatedly to the carcass to eat. Meanwhile, smaller carnivores, birds and insects all have their turn at the kill until nothing is left but scattered bones.

All too soon, the week was over, and it was time for our group to head in different directions. We did not go home disappointed. The week of wolf watching in Yellowstone provided a unique opportunity to witness research in the field, to quench an amateur—or professional—wildlife photographer's thirst for natural habitat shots, and to participate in educational discussions with some of the world's most renowned researchers. After traveling the world extensively and visiting nearly every continent, I can say that this was as great as any adventure I've had. The International Wolf Center welcomed me into the pack. ■

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