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THE RETURN OF THE WOLF TO IDAHO: A Cultural Triumph

by MARCIE CARTER

The first time that I sat and watched wolves play was the first time I had seen wolves in the wild. It was also my first time in the field and my first time in the Idaho backcountry. We were looking for the Landmark pack, a pair of wolves and their pups. The adults had paired after being released in winter 1995. After a day of hiking, we climbed a hillside to get a better view of a large meadow that we hoped was a likely place for wolf pups to play. We watched that meadow for hours, hoping they would come.

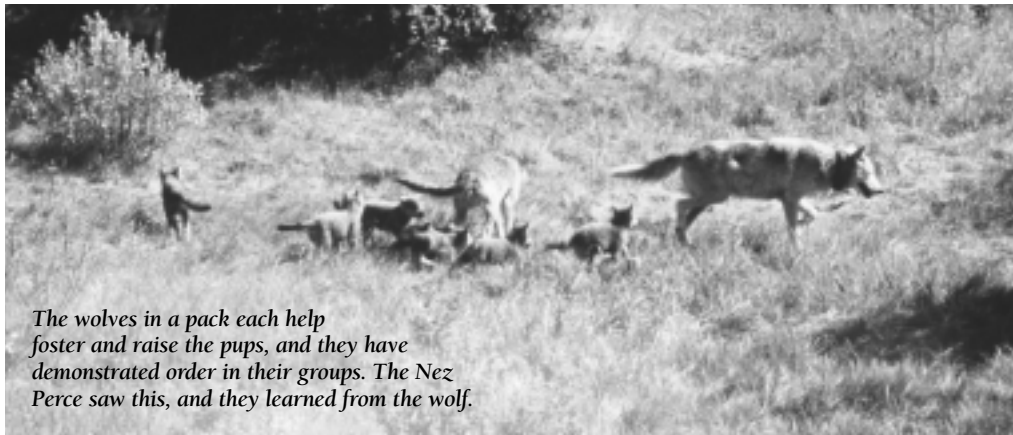
Our patience finally paid off. Just as the sun was going down, four small wolf puppies emerged from the tree line. They reminded me of a litter of domestic puppies. They chased each other, tackled each other, played keep away, and chewed on sticks. They played for about 20 minutes in that meadow, and then as fast as they had appeared, they were gone. They returned to the tree line as if they were being called in for supper by their mother. It was that deliberate. We waited for several minutes, hoping they would return, and then climbed off the hillside and headed back down the trail to set up camp.

On our way back, we stopped several times to look at our map and to ascertain our location. We had just crossed a creek when we decided to stop again and look at the map. It was then I heard something that made me shine my flashlight away from us, and there in the darkness were two pairs of green eyes shining back. Then another set of green eyes came into the light. They were standing broadside to us, with heads cocked to one side as my Siberian husky would do if she were listening to my commands. They seemed curious, listening to us argue about which way to go. They were young adults. Had they ever seen a human being before? What did they want? I wondered this as we stood there, frozen in astonishment at the beauty of these animals, and yet with fear flooding into my mind. Then they were gone.



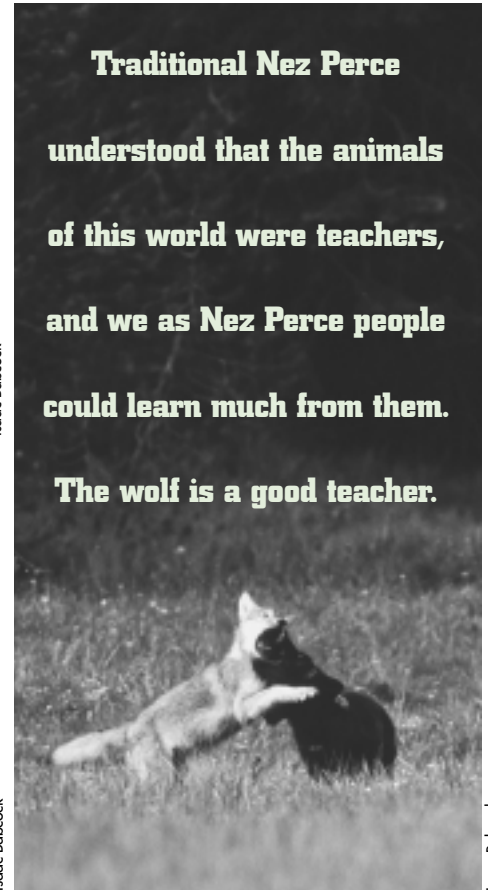
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Isaac Babcock



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As we put up our tents that night, the howling started. First one wolf, then another, and finally the whole pack sang. It was an eerie feeling being that close to wolves and hearing their voices bounce off the hillsides of the mountains and the trees in the valley. It is a feeling that still, to this day, gives me shivers.

I had never thought much about wolves before I started work on the wolf project. My cousin Howard was working on the project as the technician when I first learned that the Nez Perce Tribe was involved with wolf recovery. There were only 35 wolves then. I was still a wildlife student and was quite aware of the issues surrounding wolves and their prey as well as their position in the ecosystem. I was not aware of the social issues that loomed over the tribe or over me as a tribal member working to recover wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains. The Nez Perce Tribe was entering into the arena of endangered species recovery at the state level, an area that no other tribe has ever entered.

The Nez Perce word for wolf is *himiin* (himeen). This word is believed to be derived from the Nez Perce word *hím*, which is the word for mouth. The wolf got its name because it can talk. The wolf communicates with its family group as well as with other wolves. Traditional Nez Perce understood that the animals of this world were teachers, and we as Nez Perce people could learn much from them. The wolf is a good teacher. It is a good hunter,

and it shares its food with its family. The wolves in a pack each help foster and raise the pups, and they have demonstrated order in their groups. The Nez Perce saw this, and they learned from the wolf.

The return of the wolf represents a cultural triumph to the Nez Perce people. The gray wolf suffered the same fate that the Nez Perce did some 127 years ago. Both the wolf and Indian people across the country were considered obstacles for European settlers. Both of us are struggling to reclaim our place.

Today, over 350 wolves inhabit Idaho. They have recovered biologically. Will they ever recover socially? Will they be able to live out their lives and raise their families as their ancestors did before civilization came to their world? This is a question that will remain unanswered until time fades away. There will always be people who are not in favor of the return of the wolf as there are those who do not favor the presence and power of Indian people. It is something that we both have to face and overcome. Our fates will be different this time. The Nez Perce people will triumph. The wolf will also, if we let it. ■

Marcie Carter, an enrolled member of the Nez Perce Tribe, is currently the tribe's biologist for reservation issues, focusing on forest songbirds. She worked as a biologist for the tribe's wolf project for five years.