

# A Look Beyond

## Fear Factor

by Nancy jo Tubbs

The summer I was 12 my friends and I savored evenings around the campfire telling ghost stories, then walked each other home in the dark and twitched every time a twig snapped nearby. Since then I've known the power of story and imagination to influence what we believe.

For David Williams, a 38-year-old man hunting in the Paradise Valley in Montana in October 2004, scary stories about wolves set the stage for an unfortunate scenario. He sat at an overlook until dark, waiting for his guide, when he heard a noise. Peering through his rifle scope, he thought he saw a pack of wolves running at him. He fired the .300-caliber Magnum and shattered the arm of his hunting guide, J.C. Davis, blowing him off his horse. A sheriff's detective said that earlier in the hunt people had been talking about wolves, and Williams got scared.

In 2002, Mark McNay, wildlife biologist with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, compiled a report of 80 documented wolf-human interactions in Canada, Alaska and north-eastern Minnesota over the past 100 years. He found that while there is no record of a human being killed by a healthy wild wolf in North America, instances of attacks or approaches by wolves do rarely happen. *Rarely* is the key word.

In these encounters the wolves were known or strongly suspected to be rabid in 12 instances. In 39 cases healthy wolves showed aggressive behavior, and in 29 cases their behavior was only curious or investigative.

What were contributing factors to human encounters with healthy wolves? In several cases, people fed wild wolves, habituating them to human contact, putting themselves and others at risk. In six cases, wolves attacked sled dogs or dogs walking with people, and twice those wolves bit people. Children, who may look like prey to wolves, were seriously bitten in four instances.

To put the 39 encounters with aggressive wolves in perspective, note that in Canada and Alaska wolf populations are currently estimated at 59,000 to 70,000, and the report

covers 100 years. The numbers show that wolf aggression toward humans is truly rare.

The fear factor heavily influences human behavior, however. Ed Bangs, gray wolf recovery coordinator based in Helena, Montana, says it best: "While it's fun and almost a tradition to tell tales of terror in hunting camp, please don't frighten people into being irrational. Deer and horses have wounded and killed hundreds of times more people than have wolves." ■

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