

Personal Encounter

With great surprise I realized what I was looking at. My eyes were staring back at me, only 100 feet away. And then, I heard a muffled half-bark followed by a deep, smooth, heavy sound rising into the air. None of the other...

Walking on the Wild Side with Wolves

by Tom Wharton



Monty Sloan/WolfPhotography.com

This article originally appeared in the Salt Lake Tribune.

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK
The wolves were gone. But we knew they had been there. Blood-soaked snow surrounded by ravens revealed a recent kill.

Even Yellowstone Association Institute instructor George Bumann and a plethora of veteran, scope-wielding wolf watchers could not spot one of the newest stars of Yellowstone's wildlife galaxy.

There were times when the gray and black rocks on snow-covered hills seemed to move. Distant bison and elk caught our attention. Bumann spotted what he affectionately called wolf rocks—wolf-shaped boulders wildlife watchers desperately wished were the real thing.

Still, we scanned, listened and waited on a quiet and clear January afternoon.

There are an estimated 118 wolves inside Yellowstone, Bumann explained. Their average age is 3.8 years.

Jerry Myra, a houndsman from Oregon, sleeps in the back of his ancient pickup in Cooke City each night so he can drive this road, the only one in the park open to cars in the winter.

"I like to watch wildlife," he said. "Anything four-legged is fun... I am interested in wolves. They may be bringing them back into Oregon. You want to know as much as you can."

Lois Lyman moved to the Yellowstone area from Southern California, where she taught school. She says a bit of wildness lives in everyone and the wolf represents that feeling she has inside.

At times gray and black objects on snow-covered hills are wolves, as in this photo, but sometimes they are "wolf rocks," wolf-shaped boulders that wildlife watchers desperately wish were the real thing.

Bumann, an artist and a naturalist, talks fondly of Wolf No. 21. He has sculpted the charismatic animal—now dead—of the original Rose Creek pack introduced in 1995, a wolf believed to be the father of Druid Peak Wolf 253 that has ventured into northern Utah's Cache Valley.

The sun was getting low in the sky. No one spotted a wolf.

Then, following a gut instinct, Bumann took us back to a spot where we spent time earlier in the day. I expected to see more *Canis mineralis*. Instead, the naturalist spotted a single black wolf, appearing and disappearing like a ghost.

Soon, as if on cue, we saw five other members of the Slough Creek wolf pack, one light gray. My heart pounded as I watched them in the scope—another of my life's goals now a reality.

There was more drama to come.

The wolf pack suddenly organized

itself. With five of the animals in front and another in back, the wolves stalked a huge, six-point bull elk. I gasped, not knowing whether to watch what appeared to be a sure kill. The elk resisted and the wolves, perhaps wary of being kicked, quickly gave up and faded into the trees.

I returned to the area the next morning with Bumann and others.

The Yellowstone sky at dawn was "ice cream colored," as one companion described it. A large bull elk lounged in the snow, its antlers covered with frost. Bison, their huge brown bodies dusted with snow, woke and began searching for food.

In the distance, the distinct sound of a howling wolf pierced the morning silence. Coyotes joined in the chorus, offering a more high-pitched yip to a symphony of wildness.

"My friend has a theory," said Bumann. "The coyotes start howling at dawn and the sound goes all the way across the country."

Wolves remain a controversial addition to Yellowstone and surrounding areas where the animals have migrated. Elk numbers are down, making more than a few hunters unhappy. Ranchers watch the big predators nervously. The restoration of a predator eliminated in the early 1900s has changed the dynamics of life for wild creatures and humans.

Yet, the sighting of the Slough Creek Pack and the howling of wolves and coyotes gave me the sense that Yellowstone remains wild and whole. A Yellowstone ecosystem missing wolves would be like a Beethoven symphony without violins.

Tom Wharton has worked for the Salt Lake Tribune since 1970, covering sports, the outdoors and travel, and writing columns. He is past president of the Outdoor Writers Association of America and has co-authored numerous books on Utah subjects.



Packs in Yellowstone make frequent kills.

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