

# Personal Encounter

with great surprise I realized what I was looking at. My eyes were staring back at me from 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...

## Wolves Give Strength to Deer and Hunter Alike

by Steve Foss

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I packed up and moved toward the howling wolves. It turned out to be my final day hunting this deer firearm season. I'd been sitting in a likely spot for two hours with no action, and when the wolves began howling about 11 a.m. to my northwest, it seemed an interesting thing to do. Maybe they've found something interesting over there.

Wolves and their impact on the deer population have been a topic on the online fishing and hunting discussion board I've been a member of for the past several years.

Many who have posted on the topic complain that, from their stands in the woods, they've been seeing fewer and fewer deer over the last couple of decades as the wolf population has rebounded. Some say they see more wolves than deer. Others say there ought to be some kind of open season on wolves to keep the deer herd from being pushed too far down.

Deer, of course, are at near record populations in Minnesota, thanks to a recent series of warm winters. It's likely that part of the reason for the increased population also is development and agriculture. Development creates deer habitat in many cases, and gardens and corn, grain, hay, soybean and sunflower fields offer fine foods for deer.

In our area here near Ely, it's the development and logging that carve good deer habitat out of thick woods, and the big woods were historically

only fair or poor deer habitat before that development.

And we're thick with wolves up here, and were even when wolf populations in other parts of Minnesota and the nation were nonexistent.

That online thread had begun to descend into a festival of wolf blame, as though wolves weaken the deer herd and rob hunters of their right to see large numbers of deer.

A fellow like me can only take so much of that.

I am, of course, a deer hunter. I hunt in some places up the Echo Trail that only hold higher numbers of deer because man has carved those niches out of the woods. Big

woods deer may travel for a couple miles or more to logging cuts that eventually produce lots of tender young aspen leaves on saplings that put them within reach of deer, and deer focus heavily on such leaves.

Where there are deer in northern Minnesota, there are wolves.

*There are stories about how wolves came on hunters who were dragging out their deer—somewhat hair-raising tales, perhaps made more spectacular in the continued retelling, as is the habit of humans.*

It's something a hunter thinks about, now and then. Because memories are long and stories get handed down. Stories about how wolves came in on hunters who were dragging out their deer. Occasionally, somewhat hair-raising tales, perhaps made more spectacular in the continued retelling, as is the habit of humans.

But I'm sure there's more than a grain of truth to them.

A cold time, hungry wolves, fresh blood trail with a deer at the end of it. Yep, that'd be enough to focus the attention and whet the desire of any wild canine.

And when you've shot that deer at last light two miles from the road and begin the drag-out in the dark, after sundown has removed from us the most important of our six senses, imagination brings possibility to life.

Nevertheless, on that day I walked toward where the wolves were howling, drawn in a way I'm always drawn but have never been able to adequately describe.



Lori Rhodes

I did not come upon those wolves.  
 It was a day of wind gusts punctuated by calm periods, a day of above-freezing temperatures that kept the

*Where there are deer in northern Minnesota, there are wolves.*



Mike Possis

snow wet and made for fairly loud, low frequency thunks every time my boot put weight on the snow. Such noises carry through quiet woods, and as I still-hunted my way to the northwest, I moved very slowly along an ATV trail that was marked with fresh deer sign.

Still for as long as the calm periods lasted, I moved only when wind hissed through the pines loudly enough to mask footfalls.

I'd hoped for more howls, but did not expect them. Daytime wolf howling is uncommon enough.

After 10 minutes in one spot, fairly close to where I'd guessed the howls had come from, and rooted without moving because of the absence of strong wind, I heard a deer snort about 50 yards downwind, on the other side of thick brush.

That figured. Busted again.

The deer stayed where it was, and with nose full of human, continued to snort every 30 seconds or so.

I was about to give up and walk a quick 200 yards along the trail to start hunting again when a flicker caught my eye. It was a deer ear, and it led to the shape of a yearling fork buck. His attention was on the snorting deer, and I only saw him in time because he'd taken a couple steps out of the thickest brush, a prelude to bounding away after being alerted by the other deer.

For five minutes he continued to look back at the other deer. He had no knowledge of my presence. Finally, when the wind rose, I took one step back, still having to lean into an awkward stance to get the scope on him, and found a small gap in the brush through which to shoot.

Ten minutes later I was walking back to the truck about a mile away, where the plastic tub sled waited, promising a much easier drag over the snow.

As I was lashing the deer to the sled, I remembered the tales I'd

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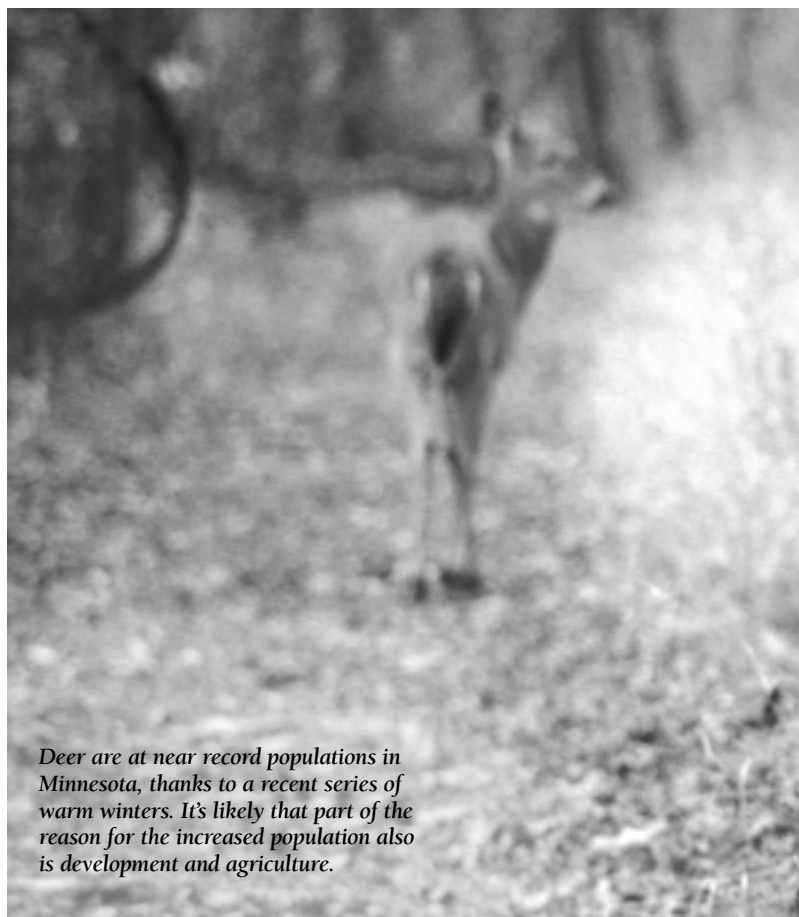
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heard, and blood trail the deer had left as I dragged it to the ATV trail and the sled. Gray jays had found it already, and half a dozen of them were calling in anticipation.

But no wolves came.

It occurred to me as I was pulling the sled back to the truck that it's true, the part about wolves keeping the deer herd strong. Hunting as I do in the heart of wolf country in a place where deer numbers aren't that high to begin with, I've always seen decent number of deer while out hunting.

And if a wolf, or more than one, came upon me while I was dragging out a deer, I guess events would have to take their own course.

If they were determined to have that deer and were continuing to threaten aggressive action, I imagine I'd fire a couple warning shots, and then leave the deer if such were necessary.

In that case, they'd deserve the deer. If I could drive them off, then

the deer was mine. It would make little difference to them who'd killed it. Food is food, and one does not closely ponder the source when survival is the issue.

Likely this never will happen, and it's happened rarely enough anyway in deer and wolf country.

But I posted on that online board that the wolves in wolf and deer country don't only keep the deer strong.

The thought of them out there, coursing through the woods, noses to the wind in search of food. The knowledge that they are the supreme non-human predator of the North Country, that they will be determined when they find prey and not especially choosy where they find it.

Such things add strength not only to the deer but to the hunter. ■

*Steve Foss is an Ely freelance nature photographer and writer. You can view his work at [www.stevfossimages.com](http://www.stevfossimages.com).*



Mike O'Connell



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