



*The first of Jackie Winkowski's sightings of a wolf occurred while she was running her sled-dog team.*

# Subtle

# Return

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In late January 1994, a videographer friend was filming my sled-dog team on a trail parallel to the railroad grade east of Harvey in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. We saw what we thought were two collarless dogs running toward us, down the railroad tracks. We were concerned. What would happen as they neared the dog team? However, the pair of large animals—one black, one white—gracefully, silently ran past us, perhaps 30 feet to our north through the powdery snow, with little more than a glance our way. They appeared to move in synchrony. "I think those were wolves!" my friend exclaimed.

What do people do when they think they may have seen a ghost? Not tell everyone; perhaps tell no one. Although I agreed with my friend's assessment, I told few people about our sighting. That we had seen wolves didn't seem plausible. A decade before, the Upper Peninsula had virtually no wolves. In 1993 a population of just 30 wolves had been verified by Department of Natural Resources biologists.

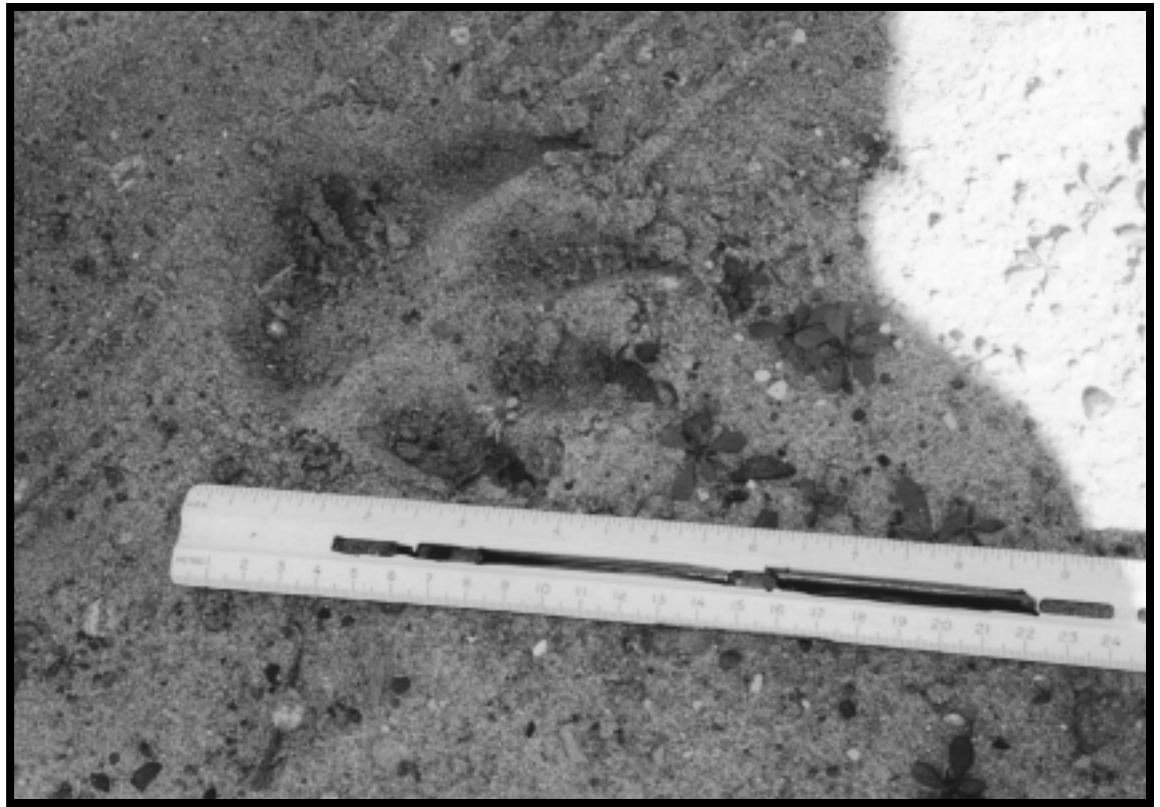
As years went by, signs recognizable even to an amateur surfaced: large doglike tracks in isolated areas and sizable scats containing fur and other remnants of prey. The gray

wolf population had increased to 248 animals by the year 2000. Still, a sighting would hardly be expected.

Eventually, they came to our door—almost literally.

On a warm night in December 2001, a pair of large eyes looked back at my husband, Jim, and me, reflecting green in the light of our headlamps, as we walked our leashed dog Reba near our home in Sands Township, south of Marquette. What we were encountering was unlike anything we had observed in the night before. The eyes followed our every move, but the creature was stationary. More curious than afraid,

*After one of Jackie Winkowski's sightings of a wolf near her home, she found wolf tracks in the mud.*



*One winter Jackie and Jim Winkowski saw possible wolf tracks crossing their dog-sledding trails and running parallel to the dog pens housing their puppies.*

Jim and I remained still, speaking to each other in whispers. We could not make out its form, and there was no snow on the ground for tracking. Then it slipped away noiselessly into the woods. What was it?

Later that winter, we found four- to five-inch-diameter doglike tracks on portions of our snow-covered acreage. The animal had crossed, but not used, our dog-sledding trails. A single set of tracks exited the woods and ran parallel to two dog pens housing our six-month-old puppies. It appeared that the animal had paused, then continued on its way. I thought that if it was a wolf, it might have been seeking a kindred spirit. But after further study, I concluded a wolf's objective would more likely be a meal.

However, it made no attempt to penetrate our six-foot-high fences.

In early April 2002, melting snow had frozen to a crust, and it was evident that a large animal had traveled through our land. I carved out a section of crusty snow with perfect wolf

tracks—they couldn't have been more clear if cast in concrete. I showed Jim. He just shrugged his shoulders.

On a Sunday in mid-April, Reba and I set out for a walk down our county road. Just outside our driveway, I glanced to the south and saw a large all-black animal walking toward us, unaware of our presence. I searched my mind to identify it, ruling out a bear and dog. It had a large head, long legs and straight tail, and was tall at the shoulders. *A wolf!*

I'd waited a lifetime to see one, but fear prevailed. I shouted, "Get outta here!" About 150 feet away, the wolf looked up; its eyes met Reba's, then it ran into the woods. It left perfect tracks in the snow and mud, along with scats, for Jim to study when he returned home from work.

I was pleased about the wolf sighting but disappointed to have scared it away so quickly. I knew it would be unlikely for a wolf to attack a human or leashed dog. Knowing that some professionals who study wolves seldom see one, I didn't expect to encounter another.

The next Saturday, as Reba and I walked down our county road, a snowshoe hare ran across the road in front of us. Reba tugged at the leash in hopes of pursuing it. As we crossed the hare's path, I realized I'd never seen one run faster or appear more frightened. We stopped to listen and heard something substantial running up the ravine toward us. Suddenly, out of the woods and onto the roadway, perhaps 20 feet away, burst a beautiful gray wolf, 6 feet or more in length from its huge head to the tip of its tail. Its facial expression—one of apparent joy in pursuit of the hare—turned to surprise. The wolf hesitated briefly, its eyes fixed on us as it walked across the road, directly before us. I tried to absorb every detail: the animal's size,

its striking face, its lovely, thick coat, its long legs and large feet, its lengthy tail—its beauty and magnificence.

The wolf stopped on a small hill about 30 feet south of the road. Behind the young aspen trees, it turned and exchanged stares with Reba and me for several seconds, then bolted away, continuing its pursuit of the hare.

Though elated after this sighting—how often does a person witness a wolf pursuing prey?—I regretted that Jim hadn't shared these sightings. If he were to see a wolf, it would have to be without me, for surely my "wolf cards" had all been drawn, and another wouldn't be crossing my path again.

A year later Jim and I attended a picnic at the home of a relative near Baraga. A guest there was openly demonizing wolves. Not usually one to debate, Jim spoke from his knowledge and heart in defense of wolves, pointing out that wolves kill not for sport but to survive, that they prey on old, weak and infirm deer, that roadkill accounts for a good part of a wolf's diet, and that they are very unlikely to threaten humans. On the way home, we continued to chat about wolves, a favorite topic. What

occurred next is not how life usually is, but it's true.

A half mile west of the Canyon Falls parking lot, a beautiful gray and white wolf ran directly in front of our car. Jim had to brake to avoid hitting it, and we pulled over onto the shoulder. The wolf trotted beside the highway. Other motorists pulled over to observe the wolf for several minutes before it disappeared into the woods.

Jim and I keep our eyes open as we travel in Upper Michigan, where the population of wolves has grown to over 400. We continue to monitor animal tracks in our area, and although we have seen no evidence of wolves since 2002, we expect they might visit again. The forests surrounding our home have seemed more rich and enchanting since we realized that wolves, once eradicated from the Upper Peninsula, have traveled there. ■

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