

Personal Encounter

Thump

by Michael S. Smith

*Fourth night on the trail,
30 minutes before sunset. Alone.*

I'm dozing in my tent at my campsite in the southwest corner of Isle Royale, a remote spot on a remote island in Lake Superior, 20 miles from Minnesota and Canada, and 70 from Michigan. It is 40 degrees, threatening to rain, and the 25-mile-per-hour cold north wind makes me wonder if it is really May.

I awaken to a thump, and as I lie quietly on the ground, listening to the wind in the balsams and white spruces near me, I hear it again. The nearest person is at Siskiwit Bay or Windigo, both 10 trail miles away. Nobody has been here in seven months; it is the early season on the Big Lake. I look out the vestibule of the tent and see nothing of note.

The thump is an odd noise, neither the scurry of a mouse nor the patter of a squirrel. One more thump, I tell myself, and I'm going out to take a look. *Something* is out there. I put on my camp shoes, thinking I know what will happen next.

Thump.

I bolt out of the tent, first seeing nothing but aspen shrubs and tall grasses behind my campsite. I then turn around, facing Feldtmann Lake and the cold wind. There, 12 feet away, separated from me only by air, stands a fully grown timber wolf, *Canis lupus* himself. Its huge shoulders elevate its front end as if it were standing on a platform. The creature is absolutely magnificent. I've heard that wolves look like dogs. No way. This is pure wolf.

"Oh . . . my . . . God," I say aloud. The wolf and I stare at each other, its dark eyes boring holes in me, its ears erect. It's not going anywhere. Two emotions, thrill and fear, concurrently explode behind my eyes. I've got my wish; indeed, for years, seeing a wolf in the wild has been at the top of "The List" of things to see or do in my life. But as the wolf stares at me, I am afraid, which I tell myself is ridiculous, given my past reading of David Mech, Rolf Peterson and Barry Lopez. Additionally, I am a longtime member of the International Wolf Center, appropriately having the "Lone Wolf" membership category. I know that barring a possible instance in Saskatchewan last winter, there has rarely been a documented attack by a healthy adult wolf on a healthy adult human in North America.

But that's my intellect speaking. It's quite another matter to be really close to a predator that clearly shows no fear, with no other hominids within 10 miles, knowing I'm not dealing the cards here. Wolves are supposed to be reclusive; estimates are that 1 in 900 hikers on Isle Royale ever see one, and the sightings are usually measured in seconds or fractional seconds. I've been given one of the greatest gifts of all: the ability to see something

I've always wanted to see with total, unambiguous clarity. Nevertheless, the gift comes with some serious strings attached.

The wolf trots down the trail and enters my site, moving into the high grasses behind me. It loops around and again is within a dozen feet. "OK, go on now," I say, with a steady voice, although I certainly don't feel that way. The cover has been removed

continued on page 23



Courtesy of Michael S. Smith

Michael Smith encountered a wolf while on Isle Royale, a gift with some strings attached.

Personal Encounter

continued from page 21

from my pack, but my food, in a plastic bag hanging from a nearby spruce, is untouched.

The wolf drops its head, moving it back and forth, neither a sign of submission nor aggression but probably more curiosity. It is definitely sticking around, and its interest in my gear is most disquieting, as if I needed any more disquiet right before sunset. “Get out,” I yell, and the wolf moves back, but only a few feet, arching its tail. I can’t believe that I am actually trying to get a wolf to leave my campsite. What’s going on here?

For five minutes, the wolf and I watch each other. I don’t know what its thoughts are; I keep telling myself it won’t attack and that the many moose on the island, including the bull I was near just two hours ago, are far more a threat to me than a

wolf. Emotionally, however, “Peter and the Wolf” from my childhood and past irrelevant encounters with “campsite bears” win the day. I’m out of here as soon as I get packed. I’ve already covered 10 miles today. I’m going to do another 10 in the dark, batteries permitting. It’s worth it. I start collecting my gear.

I look up, and the wolf has vanished, with nary a thump. Maybe it went to check out the moose I saw earlier in the evening. I’m not at all certain whether it will return. No matter. One way or another, I’m not going to be sleeping much tonight. May as well be walking. I’ll have a lot to think about on the trail—and for a long, long time to come. ■

Michael S. Smith lives in Tucson, Arizona. He has canoed in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness for 25 years, often hearing but never seeing a wolf. He plans to return to Isle Royale again next spring.



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