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Pictured: the painted "wolves" of Africa—actually, wild dogs that share many behaviors with wolves and are similarly endangered. PAGE 27

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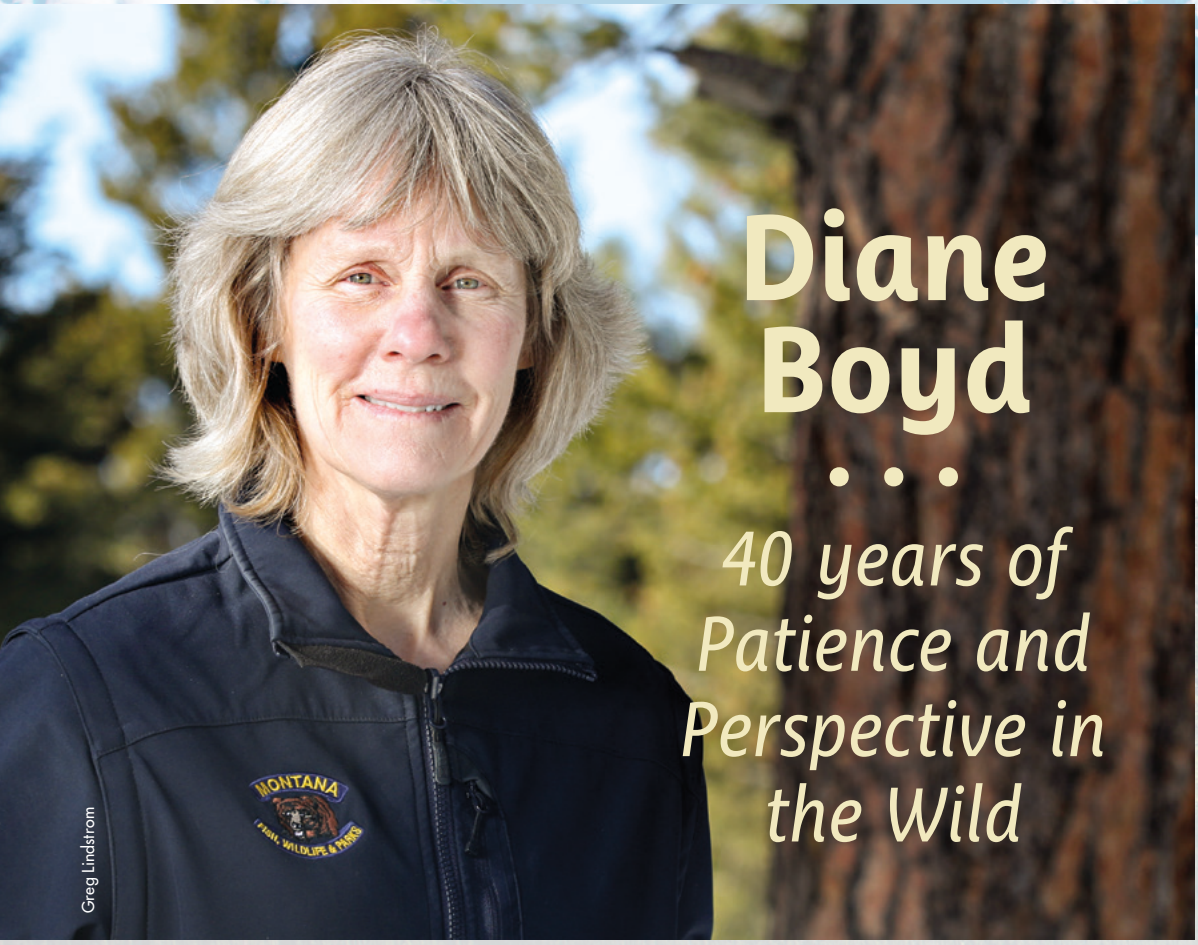

Greg Lindstrom

Diane Boyd . . .

40 years of Patience and Perspective in the Wild

By MYERS REESE

In 1979, Diane Boyd left her native Minnesota and headed west to begin tracking the first radio-collared gray wolf from Canada to recolonize the western U.S. There, humans had effectively eliminated the species by the 1930s through hunting, poisoning and habitat loss. Boyd, a 24-year-old wildlife biology graduate student at University of Montana, was fueled by optimistic idealism and boundless energy. When she pulled up to her new home, deep in northwestern Montana's rugged North Fork Flathead River valley, it was apparent she would need both.

"It was like, 'Wow,'" Boyd recalls of seeing the cabin, which had no plumbing, electricity or means of communicating with the outside world. "I'd spent a lot of time outdoors, but this was true isolation."

Though Montana's wolves had been extirpated, reports of sightings and shootings trickled in during the 1960s and '70s, leading University of Montana professor Bob Ream to launch the Wolf Ecology Project in 1973, the same year that Northern Rocky Mountain gray wolves were listed under the Endangered Species Act. It was through the Wolf Ecology Project that researcher Joe Smith trapped a female wolf, dubbed Kishinena, on April 4, 1979, in the North Fork drainage along the northwestern edge of Glacier National Park.

From a scientific standpoint, the story of gray wolf recovery in the western U.S. starts with Kishinena, and nobody is better suited to tell it than Boyd, who would study and live among wolves, beginning with Kishinena and her descendant "Magic Pack," for the better part of two decades, living mostly without running water or power—and at times, without funding.

Now, nearly four decades after she first arrived in Montana and following years of non-wolf work, Boyd has orbited back to her professional origins with her new role as wolf management and carnivore specialist for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) Region 1. She brings a uniquely qualified, long-view perspective to a public discussion that often gets bogged down in short-sighted squabbling. This is a woman, after all, who still melts snow or treks to the river for water. She's patient.

"I've come completely full circle," Boyd, now 62, said from her Kalispell office in January. "This is where I want to be."

Boyd grew up near Minnesota's Twin Cities. That state's northeastern lake and sub-boreal forest region held the last remaining, viable population of wild gray wolves in the lower 48. There were also wolves living on Michigan's Isle Royale and periodic sightings in Wisconsin, but Minnesota was the true final American frontier for the species.

"Wolves were kind of the mystery animal, the essence of what was wild," she said.

Boyd enrolled in the University of Minnesota's wildlife management program as a starry-eyed 18-year-old freshman and immediately began pestering Dr. L. David Mech to give her field work. Mech is one of the leading figures in modern gray wolf research and the founder of the International Wolf Center. He didn't have much time for starry eyes. But Boyd would not be denied.

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Mech finally relented and gave her a summer position. After graduating college, Boyd worked in Alaska and then accepted a trapping job with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service back in her home state. She wasn't aware of a single other female trapper, in Minnesota or anywhere else.

"It was a time of huge growth for me, personally and professionally," she said. "I gained a lot of perspective. Here I was, a girl in this male-dominated field, walking up to farmers to talk about wolves killing their livestock."

After wrapping up her Minnesota USFWS job, Boyd enrolled in University of Montana's wildlife biology graduate school and showed up in Missoula in September 1979 with everything she owned stuffed into her car. Ream, the founder of the Wolf Ecology Project, greeted her and let her stay at his home the first night.

At the time, wolves were novel—almost mythical—and not yet a heated political football. Loggers would take photos of them and share information about sightings with Boyd. One woman who had shot a wolf up the North Fork in 1970 had apparently reconsidered her actions and implored Boyd not to harass her furry neighbors.

"They had been gone so long, there wasn't the hatred," Boyd said. "It's been an amazing evolution of cultural perspective."

Boyd huddled up in her rudimentary cabin in a region known for brutal winters. She became part of the landscape, a resident of the wild not unlike the animals she was there to study. Her

Photos courtesy of Diane Boyd

Kelly Godfrey

Dr. Diane Boyd speaks to a rapt audience at the International Wolf Center's 2018 wolf symposium.

cabin in Moose City, a former homestead settlement along the Canadian border, was built in 1909. As for amenities, "… it barely had walls. It was very, very rustic," Boyd said. "I shared it with mice, chipmunks, packrats, weasels and my dogs."

Boyd melted snow or retrieved river water, boiling it on a wood stove, a way of life she would continue at a different cabin she built later, up the North Fork, and still calls home.

"You learn to depend on your brain," she said, "and not technology."

Boyd monitored Kishinena's movements from a distance that would not disrupt the wolf's natural behavior. She spent many days tracking the radio-collar signal—in summer, afoot or in her pick-up, skiing or snowmobiling in winter, or in airplanes when she could, and plotting her findings on a map.

Then, Kishinena disappeared. The radio collar quit transmitting. With only one wolf documented in the Flathead drainage, interest in research declined and funding evaporated in 1982.

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But around the same time, Glacier Park rangers discovered the tracks of a three-toed male wolf. It had presumably lost its toe in a trap. Those distinctive tracks merged with a familiar set: Kishinena's. In the spring of '82, Bruce McLellan, a biologist who had been with Smith when Kishinena was captured, located the two wolves' litter of seven pups. But the male died the same year, leaving the pups' future in serious doubt.

"A female with seven pups and no male…we thought they would die," Boyd said. "But we were still seeing the tracks of eight wolves in winter. It was amazing."

After more than a half-century of absence, a wolf pack roamed Montana's wilderness, spending much of its time in Canada. Its descendants would be dubbed the Magic Pack.

After funding resumed in 1985, Boyd and Mike Fairchild, another biologist, returned to full-time wolf research. The following year, biologists discovered the Magic Pack was denning in Glacier National Park—the first time in more than 50 years a wolf den had been documented in the western U.S.

Boyd still has not lost the childlike curiosity that decades ago compelled her to venture into the Minnesota wilderness. Last winter, she set out alone on skis to the frozen North Fork to research wolverines, relieved to get out of the office and into the timber where she feels most at home.

Nor does she speak of wolves with any hint of professional fatigue. They remain majestic animals continually capable of astonishing her with their intelligence, their personality and their tales of redemption. There may be nothing scientifically special about a Washington wolf venturing 700 miles to central Montana's Judith Gap, or another trekking 540 miles in seven months through all sorts of terrain, because wolves routinely make epic voyages. But in Diane Boyd's telling, the story is shrouded in wonder.

It's not just that she sees an incredible creature; she sees herself. And sometimes a journey ends where it should.

"This will be my last stop," Boyd said of the FWP job. "I'm doing what I want to do. I was kind of like that wolf—moving around, trying to find what I wanted. And I found it. I'm here. I'm happy." ■

Myers Reece works for the Flathead Beacon *newspaper in Kalispell, Montana, where this story was originally published in 2017.*