

Wolves: when Ignorance is Bliss

Wolves mustn't be coddled if we hope to balance them with modern ecosystems—and to avoid becoming prey

by Valerius Geist

Nothing convinces like personal experience! And I too am slave to it. As an academic I confess to this with some distress, because by training, experience and attitude I should be above it. That I am not alone in this habit is of little comfort. And so it was with wolves.

In my field research on mountain sheep, goats, moose etc. I also observed wolves, and my experience with North American wolves matches that of colleagues. Consequently, during my academic career and four years into retirement I thought of wolves as harmless, echoing the words of more experienced colleagues while considering the reports to the contrary from Russia as interesting, but not relevant to an understanding of North American wolves. I trusted my wolf-studying colleagues to have done their homework and I dismissed light-heartedly the experiences of others to the contrary. I was wrong!

I saw my first wolf in the wild early one morning in May 1959, on Pyramid Mountain in Wells Gray Provincial Park, British Columbia. I spotted an ash-gray wolf, with a motley coat, sitting and watching me from a quarter mile away with an eager, attentive look about his dark face. His red tongue was protruding, while golden morning light played on his fur. In the spotting scope his image was crisp and clear. I do not know if my heart skipped a beat, but it well might have. Whose wouldn't?

Five months prior, in early January, I had had an informative brush with a wolf pack just a few miles from that spot. A friend and I were observing moose. We were in the midst of a migration and some two dozen, mostly bulls who had shed antlers, were dispersed over a huge burn. A few were feeding on the tall willows, but most were resting in the knee-deep snow. Suddenly we heard a low, drawn-out moan. When I glanced at the moose I saw that all were standing alert, facing down the valley. We were green then and perplexed about this unearthly sound.

As if to answer us, a high-pitched voice broke in, and then another and another. We realized we were hearing wolves. Within minutes a chorus was underway—and so were the moose. All were hastily moving up the valley and 10 minutes later the moose had vanished. I opted to stay at our lookout while my friend borrowed my rifle and went to search for the wolves. He saw them at dusk as they walked across a small lake, a pack of seven. Try as he may, the rifle would not fire; it had frozen in the great cold. This may have been kind fortune, **for the first wolf I shot with that rifle instantly attacked me**, but collapsed before reaching me. The second screamed, and that has triggered pack attacks in the past. Had the pack attacked, I would have been minus a friend in minutes. While a large man can subdue an attacking wolf, even strangle it, there is no defense against an attacking pack.

Two years later during my study of Stone's sheep in northern British Columbia, I had exceptional opportunities to observe wolves in pristine wilderness. My closest neighbors, a trapper family, lived some 40 miles to the west, and the closest settlement of Telegraph Creek was about 80 miles to the north. Timberlines were low, and the wolves spent much time in the open, plainly visible. I watched them for hours on end. These were large, painfully shy wolves that on occasion even panicked over my scent. Though they killed a few sheep, their hunts were

largely unsuccessful. However, I began to appreciate their strategies and tenacity as hunters. In traversing the valley I crossed a wolf track about every 50 paces. They were that thorough in scouring the valley for moose.

On rare occasions a wolf would follow my tracks and sit and listen to what I was doing in my cabin at night. (Grizzly bears did that, too.) One evening three wolves began to surround me on a frozen lake. One raced towards me, but scrambled madly to get away once he got downwind of me. Another cut my fresh track, then jumped straight up and raced back. Thus my early experiences with mainland wolves indicated they were shy and cautious. Moreover, they were few compared to the huge number of Osborn's caribou. I then thought that this was normal. Years later a first doubt arose when a student of mine **could hardly find a caribou where I had seen hundreds**, and a wolf pack of 43 individuals was recorded where I had observed for years a pack of seven.

Evidently, my experiences with wolves were anomalous, for a decade earlier there had been massive broadcast poisonings of wolves to control rabies. The "pristine wilderness" had been tampered with; I had experienced a "rebound" of ungulate populations after they had been freed from severe predation. When my wife and I tell of forests of antlers as caribou bulls gathered on the Spazisi Plateau for the rut, colleagues look at us as if we came from another age. Maybe we do.

Nothing in my previous studies had prepared me for what I was to experience with wolves on Vancouver Island beginning in 1999. In my student days, in the late 1950s, wolves on Vancouver Island were so scarce that some thought they were extinct. In the early 1970s they reappeared and swept the island. The annual hunter-harvest of black-tailed deer dropped swiftly from about 25,000 to less than 3,000 today. There were incidents of wolves threatening people, and a colleague, treed by a pack, clammed up as nobody believed it. Wolves threatening people? Ridiculous!

According to my colleagues, massive clear-cutting of old-growth forests and the rapid spread and growth of the wolf population caused the carnage. Those who witnessed it tell of deer carcasses everywhere—and then no more deer. The loggers left standing small patches of mature timber as deer winter range. However, wolves, cougars and black bears discovered those patches and cleared out the remaining deer. The clearcuts also led to a population explosion of black bears; some became experts in killing elk calves and deer fawns. Deer are still so few and far between in the mountains that I see about three dozen bears for every deer. However, deer are common in towns, suburbs and about farms, where they are somewhat safe, at least from wolves. The elk population is holding its own, but at a low level compared to the vast amounts of food on the clearcuts. The bulls are huge, with massive antlers, but with a predator-induced silence during the rut. Enough calves perish so that there is little recruitment and we hunters are held to one permit per 40-150 applicants.

I retired to an agricultural area on Vancouver Island in 1995. During walks near our home I explored at all seasons a meadow system associated with dairy, beef and sheep farming. These meadows and adjacent forests contained, year-round, about 120 black-tailed deer and half a dozen large male black bears. In winter came some 60-80 trumpeter swans, as well as large flocks of Canada geese, widgeons, mallards and green-winged teals. Pheasants and ruffed grouse were not uncommon. In the fall of 1995 I saw one track of a lone wolf. I cannot recall seeing any wolf tracks in the four years following. Then in January 1999 my oldest son Karl and I tracked a pair of wolves in the snow, suggesting a breeding pair and thus pack-formation. **A pack did indeed arrive that summer. Within three months not a deer was to be seen, or tracked, in**

these meadows—even during the rut. Using powerful lights we saw deer at night huddling against barns and houses where deer had not been seen previously. For the first time deer moved into our garden and around our house, and the damage to our fruit trees and roses skyrocketed. The trumpeter swans left not to return for four years, until the last of the pack was killed. The geese and ducks avoided the outer meadows and lived only close to the barns. Pheasants and ruffed grouse vanished. **The landscape looked empty, as if vacuumed of wildlife.**

Wolves attacked and killed or injured dogs, at times right beside their shouting, gesticulating owners. Wolves began following our neighbors when they rode out on horseback. A duck hunter shot one wolf and fatally wounded another as three attacked his dog. They ventured into gardens and under verandas trying to get at dogs, and ran after quads, tractors and motorcycles to attack the accompanying farm dogs. My neighbor warded off three such attacks on his dogs with his boots, and his hired man ran back to a tractor in panic after the wolves chased two dogs under it. One wolf approached within about 15 paces of my wife and a group of eleven visitors that were taking an evening stroll about half a mile from our house. The wolf howled and barked at the people. Our neighbor then went out armed with his dogs, and the wolf, a small female, promptly attacked the dogs and was shot at 50 feet. Nine days later my neighbor killed a second wolf that was following and barking at him. This wolf may have been defending a sheep it had dragged half a mile. These weighed between 60 and 70 lbs, small for wolves, a sign of poor nutrition.

A neighbor raising sheep lost many to wolves, so he acquired five large, sheep-guarding dogs. These dogs and the wolf pack had frequent, night-long barking and howling duels at the forest edge. I observed subsequently, on the evening of October 19th 2002, how the last of the pack, a male, fraternize successfully with the sheep dogs. He kept it up and was eventually shot March 12th 2003 while sitting among these dogs. However, before that he visited us when our female German longhair pointer, Susu, was in heat, and barked at my wife in our doorway. That is, he acted like other male dogs that were attracted to Susu in heat, only bolder.

Wolves had been seen in the neighborhood sitting and observing people; we know from captivity studies that wolves are observation learners. One male approached my wife, my brother-in-law and myself across a quarter-mile of open meadow and stood looking us over for a very long minute about 10 paces away before moving on into the forest. Along with my neighbors, **I repeatedly saw wolves showing interest in humans.**

However, **the worst incident happened about 350 yards from our house when the second misbehaving pack formed. On March 27th, 2007,** our neighbors went in the morning to inspect their dairy cattle and pastures. Their old dog ran ahead of them. Just as they entered the forest five wolves attacked the dog. My neighbor grabbed a cedar branch and advanced on the wolves, which turned towards him snarling. His wife jumped into the caboose of their excavator that happened to be nearby. My neighbor's energetic counter attack freed the dog, and intimidated all but one wolf that advanced on him snarling. However, he too withdrew, even if reluctantly. While my neighbor ran home to get a gun, his wife ran to us, shouting for me to get a rifle. We did not see the wolves, though they were sighted briefly in the evening, and a neighbor walking his dog had an encounter with two wolves about a mile away. He was able to chase them away. The following morning our neighbors took a rifle along during their inspection trip of their property. **The wolf pack promptly went for them again and my neighbor shot the most aggressive one,** a male weighing 74 lbs. I saw the neighbors' cattle, spooked by a wolf, crash through fences while fleeing for the security of their barn. I found two of the three cattle killed and eaten by wolves; the third was severely injured about the genitals, udder and haunches and had to be put down. I saw the docked tails, slit ears and wounded hocks on the dairy cows.

Our neighbor's hired man saw from a barn a wolf attacking a heifer with a newborn calf. He raced out and put the calf on his quad. As he ran to the barn the wolf ran alongside, **lunging at the calf – and right into the barn!** A predator control officer was called and **13 wolves were removed within a mile of our house from the first, and four from the second misbehaving pack.**

That “tameness,” that “hanging around,” that increasing boldness and inquisitiveness, is the wolf’s way of exploring its potential prey, and the strength of its potential enemies. Coyotes targeting children in urban parks act in virtually the same manner. Two wolves in June 2000 severely injured a camper on Vargas Island just off the coast of Vancouver Island. These wolves became even tamer before the attack, as they nipped at the clothing of campers, licked their exposed skin and ate hotdogs from their hands. Our observations here suggested that wolves, attracted to habitations by the scarcity of prey, shift to dogs and livestock, but also increasingly, though cautiously, explore humans, before mounting a first, clumsy attack.

I reported such at a Wildlife Society conference on Sept. 27th 2005 in Madison, Wisconsin, in an invited paper on habituation of wildlife. **That was about six weeks before wolves killed Kenton Carnegie on November 8th in northern Saskatchewan.** I subsequently became involved along with Marc McNay from Alaska and Brent Patterson from Ontario, investigating this incident for Kenton's parents. Also, a book manuscript on wolves in Russia came across my desk, written by an American linguist stationed in Moscow, Will Graves. It had integrity, and I proposed to edit it and find a publisher. Detselig in Calgary published *Wolves in Russia: Anxiety through the Ages*, in April 2007. We included into Will's book as appendix A the English translation of Mikhail P. Pavlov's chapter 12 of *The Wolf in Game Management*. This work had caused howls of outrage by environmentalists when translated into Norwegian.

Then a review of the Russian wolf experiences by Professor Christian Stubbe in Germany vindicated Will Graves' writing. In the meantime Italian and French historians published papers and books detailing how **thousands of people had died in earlier centuries from wolf attacks. Some historians rightly asked the question, how did North American scientists ever conclude that wolves were harmless and no threat to people?** We now know the answer: In the absence of personal experience or sound language competence, they chose to disregard, even ridicule, the accumulated experience of others from Russia, France, Italy, Germany, Finland, Greenland, Sweden, Iran, Kazakhstan, India, Afghanistan, Korea, and Japan.

Is it not time we paid attention in order to discover how to manage wolves so as to have both, security and abundant wildlife?

The absolutely precious lesson from our North American experience with wolves in the 20th century is that at low wolf-to-prey ratios wolves grow into very large, shy specimens that shun humans, while greatly enriching our landscape and quality of life. Control will be seen as essential to maintain wolves and robust big game populations and minimize intrusions by wolves into human settlements.

There is a French saying that he who desires a beautiful park must have a very sharp ax, and a heart of stone. We should heed it—for the sake of elk, elk hunters, the wolves themselves, and for the future of wildlife conservation in North America.

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