

# The Fishtrap Wolves

BY JAY MALLONEE



---

**M**Y LIFE IS A PARADOX. As a wolf biologist in Montana, I live in a world of *hatred* and *violence*. Yet, I am surrounded by an infinite network of *beauty* and *complexity*. The Fishtrap wolves I studied for ten years are an example of my contrary existence. They lived in the wilderness of northwest Montana, an area of thick forests punctuated by occasional meadow systems and steep mountains. Amongst the trees are small knolls covered in grass, often places where I sat and listened to the wolves howl. Periodically, we met.

---



**Beauty** My first experience was with a lone and very young black pup. It was no larger than a shoebox and shaped like one. Wolf pups can be blocky in appearance until their bodies morph into young adults. At the time I was looking for the den site but had not yet found the entrance. I did not want to approach until the wolves had moved on for the summer. Instead, as I stood unknowingly nearby, a pup waddled toward me. I reacted by asking myself, “Where is Mom?” Had this been a bear or cougar I most likely would have found out before I asked the question. Wolves protect their young, yet don’t attack, at least when it comes to humans.

I knew the adults were watching but the numerous trees obscured my view. My goal had always been to observe the pack’s behavior, but the dense forests made that impossible. My brief glimpse into the pup’s life was a special occasion. As it padded leisurely through the leaves, I slowly backed up. The pup was not especially interested in me and eventually veered to its left and walked off. It was so young that I was unsure it even knew I was there, although the distance between us had only been about 30 feet. A week later I verified that the pack had moved to their first rendezvous site of the year. I found the den entrance a few days later.

During the summer months, rendezvous sites are temporary living areas where instead of bringing food back to the pups, like at a den site, the adults move the pups to the food. The pack may use each site for perhaps several weeks before moving on to another, which they do throughout the summer. These areas not only provide food but act as training facilities in which the pups learn future social skills, hunting techniques, and in general become functioning members of

the pack. By fall, they will have matriculated into the pack’s social hierarchy just in time for the nomadic part of the year which ends the following spring at the den site.



**Complexity** During the ten years I studied the Fishtrap pack, encounters with pups and adults have been extremely rare. Yet they have given me brief insights into how a wolf pack functions. At one point there was a two year-period in which I surveyed almost every day, under all conditions and seasons. Past scientific studies have shown that wolf packs break into smaller groups temporarily for hunting and social reasons. This activity, however, was not monitored over several seasons or even years. Consequently, to what



extent wolf packs are assembled throughout the year has remained unknown. Therefore the descriptive phrases used in these studies, such as “moves as a group” or “tight-knit year-round,” were either not defined or were just assumed. A group of wolves could consist of the majority of pack members or all of them. Tight-knit could mean the pack was fully assembled or the wolves acted as a cohesive group even though they spent time apart, like a human family. Such language has given the impression that wolf packs do almost everything together as a group throughout the year. The wolves I studied showed that this was not true, at least for them.

Data from the collared wolves demonstrated that the Fishtrap pack was fully assembled in no more than thirty-one percent of the surveys during the two-year period, indicating that pack members spent a minority of time together. Their constant movements precluded a complete pack most of the time. Monitoring, hunting and

marking their territory were full-time jobs, and the work load was apparently shared by all members. To accomplish this, it appeared the Fishtrap wolves were indeed a tight-knit group, but socially rather than physically. The pack was an intricate design of almost infinite complexity. I have learned that rather than a “thing,” a wolf pack is a dynamic process. It is greater than the sum of its parts. The parts consist of pack members interacting with each other and with their surrounding environment. The net result is a force that changes over time as the pack reacts to endless environmental variations such as increasing or decreasing prey populations, prey migration, climatic changes, or when pack members come and go.

**Hatred** So how does one manage beings who live like this? You don’t, at least not effectively. Currently, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) is the agency responsible for wolf management, and its

number one tool is killing. This is done through government control actions and public hunting seasons. Research studies, such as mine, can provide wolf managers with reliable information to help guide their decisions on how to manipulate wolf populations. However, they are not interested in scientific results. Ultimately wolf managers have only one federal requirement they must follow to keep wolves off the Endangered Species List. Montana, Wyoming and Idaho must maintain at least 100 wolves each and at least 10 breeding pairs. The three states now have management and hunting policies that potentially remove all wolves except for the required minimums. This includes bow, rifle and trapping seasons.

Wolves are well known for controlling their own population, but clearly the current number of wolves is not within our society’s comfort zone. Perhaps at some point we’ll just have to accept what the data from ecological and other scientific studies ultimately

indicates: learn to live with wildlife rather than control it. However, to understand wolves is a tedious and time-consuming endeavor. There is no way around this fact. Intolerance by the public and convenience on the part of management agencies impedes our knowledge of these animals, and leads to their deaths.



**Violence** I had always vowed to be there at the end if the Fishtrap wolves were killed by the government, but I wasn't. There was no warning, no call, nothing. They just vanished. The entire Fishtrap pack was eliminated in a government control action for killing someone's cow. This simultaneously ended the longest running behavioral study of wolves in the state's history, outside of Yellowstone National Park. Over their decade or so of existence, the Fishtrap pack depredated on livestock at a rate of one every 2–3 years, low even by FWP standards. Although killing the wolves was not FWP's first choice, they were eventually eliminated to appease the prejudice of the local people.

Wildlife managers often use the premise that they are saving a species, and to do so requires the sacrifice of individuals. Although they tout the success of their

arbitrary management goals, wolf managers neglect to explain that the infrastructure of wolf family groups and their effects on the surrounding environment are also eliminated. Science already understands the serious environmental consequences of removing predators from all ecosystems of the world. Some prey species, for example, such as caribou and other organisms, have co-evolved with wolves and depend on intact wolf packs for their own population's survival and quality of life. Individuals are the foundation of wolf packs. Their needs, wants, and insatiable drive to stay alive affect everything around them. What happens to them matters. This perspective has prompted renowned ecologist Marc Bekoff to state that, "It is individuals not species who personally feel pain and suffer." The Fishtrap wolves have expounded on this fact. Their deaths are another example of how humanity has not yet learned that we are part of a larger system, something science has demonstrated repeatedly.



**Why wolves die** I was recently asked, "Why do you do it?" The situation for wolves is so abysmal and depressing that this woman

could not understand why I continued to study these animals and fight against their needless deaths. She stated that thinking about such things was too painful for her, but before walking off she wanted an answer. I immediately felt the paradox of my life envelope my thoughts. I always try to give positive yet realistic answers to questions, but what could I say? As a group, human beings seem hard-wired to take what they want, without conscience or regard to long-term consequences. Despite our self-proclaimed intelligence and scientific advancements, the environment continues to degrade, even when solutions are available. To help wolves and other wildlife, there will need to be a paradigm shift in how humanity perceives its role in the natural world. Wolves die because few people care enough to stop it. It's that simple. Most people wait for someone else to act and find a solution. So with sincerity and a glimmer of hope, my answer to her was short and to the point. "Who else is going to do it?"



From post-traumatic stress in a captive wolf to breaching whales in the Bering Sea, Jay Mallonee has studied the behavior of numerous animals. Through his business of Wolf and Wildlife Studies, he has researched the Fishtrap pack in north-west Montana for a decade and has written several scientific publications. Jay also wrote *Timber—A Perfect Life*, an account of his sixteen-year relationship with a profound canine companion.