

The Truth about Wolves

PHOTOS BY JEREMIE HOLLMAN



An Encounter with the Fishtrap Pack

BY JAY MALLONEE

Wolves! Here is a subject almost guaranteed to ignite the emotions of many people. Some view them as perfect killing machines—relentless and ruthless. Others see wolves as nature’s perfect animals, always in balance with their surroundings. Which are they? As a research biologist, I have found that wolves are neither super-beings nor simple-minded organisms programmed by nature to react only through primeval instincts. My personal experiences with these animals, both in captivity and in the field, have taught me they are something quite different from what most people have imagined.

Wolves are complex creatures and more is unknown about them than is known. What science does understand is that like humans they can feel pain, pleasure, fear, and a sense of loss, and they display a remarkable intelligence unmatched by most living organisms. When pushed to their physical and psychological limits, they can suffer emotional disorders similar to those observed in humans. Their place in nature is equally as complex. An encounter I had with the wolves I study in northwest Montana will illustrate this point.

On a warm July evening, as the sun set, I sat hidden in the woods and listened to the howls of the Fishtrap pack. Several months earlier, at least seven pups were born which had made this pack one of the largest in the state. Because of my research, it was also the most studied in northwestern Montana. Several hours earlier the wolves had separated into at least two groups, about a half mile apart, each consisting of adults and pups. One

of these was only several hundred yards away. So instead of standing near my ATV on the logging road as I usually would, I walked about fifty feet into the woods and found a suitable grassy slope on which to place myself and my equipment. On the ground next to me lay a parabolic dish and microphone attached to a tape recorder, which I used to record the wolves’ howls as the two groups communicated. I also had my radio-telemetry equipment so I could hear the continuous signals of the three radio-collared wolves in the pack. There was at least one collared wolf in each of the two groups, and given the number of howls I had heard, most pack members were present.

In northwestern Montana the forests are often thick and observing wildlife for any extended time can be virtually impossible. Therefore, the two government agencies working in conjunction to oversee wolf management in Montana use aircraft several times a month to fly and listen for the signals of collared wolves. Over time, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks can deduce the approximate range of some packs’ territories and arrive at wolf population estimates. The use of aircraft, however, is usually an inadequate technique to learn the details of the wolves’ world such as social interactions, pack structure, utilization of resources, definitive travel routes, usage of den sites and rendezvous sites, and the wolves’ interactions with free-range livestock. Currently, the majority of such information is best obtained from studies on the ground. So

on this particular evening, I sat among the trees to record the Fishtrap pack’s howls and behavior.

Over the years, the pack and I had developed a working relationship: I studied their behavior; they tolerated my presence. I’ve made a conscious effort to keep my distance and not intrude on their daily activities. Nevertheless, by now the wolves probably knew the sounds of my vehicles, although I had no evidence they cared. Because wolves can detect odors thousands of times better than humans, I’m sure they also knew my scent. I’ve even left them an occasional urinary message on which they have occasionally left a scat-like response. Other than that, the wolves have appeared to go about their business as if I was one of the many people who utilized the forest each week. On several occasions we have met by mistake, usually as I drove on back country roads. However, I was now near their first rendezvous site of the season.

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 will 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 can last into late spring.



As in the past, I was again documenting the adults' practice of breaking up the pack into several groups as they trained their pups. By now the pups were about fifty pounds and as tall as medium-sized domestic dogs. When I had finished collecting my data, I slipped out of the forest and back to the ATV. It was almost dark, but I waited before leaving so that the closest group of wolves could move on before I drove by them on the way home. I eventually packed my gear into the equipment box on the back of the ATV and then drove toward the main forest road, the only way out. Apparently I had not waited long enough.

I had driven only several hundred yards when two black wolf pups jumped onto the road in front of the ATV. Barely within reach of the headlights, they stopped and looked at me as I slowed down. They seemed to wonder what I was but quickly decided that running in the opposite direction was the preferable thing to do. I barely saw their outlines as they raced down the road ahead of me and around a corner that gently curved to the right. A small, forested knoll blocked the view of the far end of the corner and the pups disappeared behind it as they ran. At that moment two adult wolves slashed across the road and into the woods somewhere near the knoll.

By now I had stopped and turned off the engine. I removed my helmet and entered a world of complete silence. I sat on the ATV patiently waiting for the wolves to

move out of the way so I could continue homeward. When I encounter wildlife on the back roads, especially the larger animals such as bear, moose, elk, and even wolves, I stop and remain quiet inside my truck until they have moved on. In this case, I was exposed to the environment, so I sat there immersed in the tranquil, calm air. Suddenly, sounds of breaking twigs and rustling leaves broke the silence. I presumed it was an adult wolf coming to inspect why I was parked in the middle of the road and had not moved on. Usually wolves are stealthy, quiet creatures and it would be almost impossible to know if one was near you. These characteristics make them extremely difficult to study. Not on this night. The wolf deliberately made noise as it approached from the back side of the knoll. The sounds stopped. Again, I was engulfed in silence.

I glanced at my watch and realized that only two minutes had elapsed since the wolf pups first jumped onto the road. This was not long enough to proceed onward, especially when at least one wolf had approached even closer. I knew then I could be at this stop for a while and wanted to document anything that happened. I quietly slid off the ATV and took out my video camera from the equipment box then walked a few feet away. As I did so the wolf began to bark.

A barking wolf is an agitated wolf. They usually howl. I had obviously come too close to the pups and this wolf had gone far out of its way to let me know that this

situation was unacceptable. Having studied wolves for eighteen years, I knew this was not an attempt to attack me, despite the presence of pups. It was a warning that deserved a respectful response from me so I did not move from where I was videotaping. The wolf didn't growl or act aggressively in any other manner.

As the wolf continued to confront me, I began to laugh. I couldn't help it. This "ferocious" predator sounded like a German shepherd. I also thought how people's fear of these animals was so unfounded. A mistake had happened and the wolves and I were only negotiating our way out of it. So the wolf stayed at a comfortable distance and gave me its opinion of the situation. I also knew that no one was going to believe me, so I used my video camera in an attempt to record the wolf's behavior. The camera had a "night shot" feature and with the infrared beam I could easily see into the surrounding woods, but not the wolf. It stood exposed at the edge of a small clearing about sixty feet away, just beyond the camera's range. As I videotaped the darkness and listened to the barks, I began to understand what was really happening. The wolves simply wanted to extract their pups from a potentially harmful situation, at least from their point of view, and I was there to witness their plan unfold.

After several minutes of barking, the second adult wolf began to howl. It was also fairly close and just on the other side of the forested knoll. The cacophony

of sounds boomed through the forest and echoed off the mountain sides. Presumably the second wolf was howling for the other group, still about a half mile from us. I figured I had about ten minutes before they arrived and I wanted the barking wolf to understand that its efforts were not in vain. Therefore, my plan was to leave while the wolf still barked at me but not until I fully documented our encounter. I didn't want to miss the point of the lesson that had now revealed itself: pack members can cooperate to solve problems quickly, efficiently, and without violence.

When the pups had jumped onto the road, the wolves' resolution to the problem was set into motion. The two adults approached and after several minutes they had covered all the immediate contingencies: remove the pups, confront the threat, and yell for help. What followed was an assessment of the situation by both parties, myself and the wolves, on what was really happening and what to do next. The situation could have escalated or been defused. Neither side seemed too fearful of the other, although cautious. After about ten minutes, I left. I knew then the pups were most likely out of the way and I could still demonstrate my respect for the wolves' wishes—"go away!" My surveys for the remainder of the week demonstrated that the wolves had not moved out of the area because of our interaction and everything was back to "normal."

During the ten years I've studied the Fishtrap pack, encounters like these have been extremely rare. Yet they've given me brief insights into how a wolf pack functions and have supplemented my reams of data about the pack's locations, travel routes, and behavior. At one point there was a two year period in which I surveyed almost every day, under all conditions and seasons. This allowed me to discover a wolf pack behavior not yet documented by researchers.

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. Apparently, the wolves I study did not read the research.

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.

So how does one manage beings who live like this? Current techniques involve reintroduction, management killing, hunting by the public, and behavioral conditioning. Research studies, such as mine, can provide wolf managers with reliable information to help guide their decisions on how to manipulate wolf populations. However, what kind of environmental imbalances do we produce by managing the numbers of wolves and other wildlife? Wolves are well known for controlling their own population, but clearly this 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 ecology and environmental science ultimately indicates: learn to live with wildlife rather than control it.

To understand wolves is a tedious and time-consuming endeavor. There is no way around this fact. Intolerance and convenience on our part only dull the truth about these animals. My glimpses into their lives have given me a new sense of humility—the more I find out the less I seem to know. Some days the Fishtrap wolves' behavior appears infinitely complex, while on other days they are only a family trying to survive, like the rest of us. I have learned, however, 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. The result for me has been a lifelong process of inching closer to the truth about wolves.

From PTSD 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 & Wildlife Studies, he has researched the Fishtrap pack in northwest Montana for the past ten years 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.