



by Josh Dean

NATURAL INTELLIGENCE

Pack Man

The debate over wolf hunting may grab the headlines, but obsessive biologist Rick McIntyre has the most interesting ideas on the predator's future

RICK MCINTYRE unhinges his convertible wool mitten and grips the plastic handle of an antenna that looks to have been snapped off an old TV. He lifts it high above his head, then out to the farthest reach of his arm, listening for the crude radiotelemetry receiver to beep. When it does, his focus tunnels toward the source of the signal.

On this cold early morning in March, the click is weak, and yet it signifies something powerful to McIntyre, because it's coming from a radio collar wrapped around the neck of a female wolf known as 690—the last collared survivor of the legendary Druid Peak wolf pack of Yellowstone National Park. Formed out of the second group of gray wolves reintroduced in 1995 after a nearly 50-year absence from the park, the Druids—named after a mountain—have starred in three major nature documentaries and



countless amateur videos, since their territory, primarily the TK-acre Lamar Valley, so nicely overlapped with tourist habitat.

As a biological technician for the Yellowstone Wolf Project, McIntyre, 61, has observed the pack's ebbs and flows since the beginning. In the first four years, he missed a few days; he wasn't a year-round employee and was working winters at Big Bend National Park, in Texas. But since June 12, 2000, for more than 3,500 consecutive days, McIntyre has risen before sunrise, filled a thermos with coffee, packed some snacks and gear, and hopped into his canary-yellow Nissan Xterra for the 30-minute commute from his cabin into Yellowstone to observe the wolves.

By his own choosing, McIntyre is one of the lowest-ranking members of the Yellowstone Wolf Project, but he is certainly one of its most important. He has observed more hours of wolf behavior over the past decade than anyone in the program and has developed some profound theories about the predator's character and instincts. He has also become the ruddy, bearded face of wolf science to Yellowstone tourists. As the park's director of planning told me, "Rick is as known as the wolves."

McIntyre has long obsessed over the Druids, which reached a peak of 37 wolves in 2001, making it the largest pack ever recorded

anywhere. (The average size of Yellowstone's TK current packs is TK.) But by the early months of 2010, researchers were seeing the Druids less and less often. When wolf 690's last living sister, White Line, died a few days before I arrived in the park, 690, a black female afflicted with mange, became the last known Druid. If she were to die, the era of the Druids would be over, an event McIntyre likened to "the fall of the Roman Empire."

Doug Smith, a wildlife biology Ph.D. and the head of the Yellowstone Wolf Project, recently observed 690 from the air during a survey and described her as "wandering around aimlessly," and said she "looked terrible." He felt bad—for the loss of the pack, but more so for McIntyre, who he said followed the Druids "like a soap opera."

"One reason that Rick is so attached to them," said Smith, "and I mean this as a slight joke, is that they're his family!"

GIVEN THE VITRIOLIC debate over the hunting of wolves since they were removed from the Endangered Species List in 2007, you might guess that the Druids were brought down in a spray of bullets. You'd be wrong.

Gray wolves were "de-listed" in the Northern Rockies in 2008, and by 2009, Idaho and Montana had set up hunting seasons for wolves outside of Yellowstone and



feels good.

Illustration by Jason Holley



Grand Teton National Parks. (In Wyoming, the issue was tied up in courts.) With ranchers already allowed to kill wolves that harass cattle and sheep, conservationists claimed the predators would be driven back to the brink of extinction.

It hasn't played out that way. That's partly because the states had to meet federal guidelines designed to maintain a sustainable population. But it's mostly because the reintroduction program worked so well. According to Ed Bangs, the Northern Rocky Mountains Wolf-Recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, wolf numbers have reached a point at which there's no longer a need to worry about them. He estimates that there are at least 1,700 wolves in the West, connected and interbreeding with another 12,000 in the Canadian Rockies. Last year, hunters reported 206 wolf kills—the actual number may have been much higher—and the overall population actually increased 4 percent. Bangs insists it's good policy to manage wolves like bears and mountain lions, both of which are hunted to control population growth. Part of the logic here is that hunters will kill the least shy animals, the ones most likely to range into human habitat. Over time, hunting will help reinforce an innate distrust of people that will only help future populations.

"Did the Endangered Species Act do its job to restore wolves?" Bangs asks. "Big time. But is it the best tool to manage wolves once the population is recovered? No way." To Bangs, the wolves are back, and "you couldn't get rid of them now except with a massive government poisoning campaign."

Meanwhile, in August, a federal judge decided that since Wyoming has yet to craft an acceptable management plan—the state's Fish and Game Department wants to allow unregulated killing in most areas—all Rockies wolves need to go back on the Endangered Species List. In response, some enraged state officials called for more aggressive means of population control, such as gassing pups in their dens.

For McIntyre and others at the Yellowstone Wolf Project, the ruling provides a reprieve from having their research subjects stuffed and mounted. (Hunters have shot at least three radio-collared wolves that wandered outside the park, including 210, the leader of the Cottonwood pack, another tourist favorite.) Still, Yellowstone wolves are in dramatic decline. From a high of 174 wolves in 2003, the population is now thought to be

less than 100. Why?

One of the biggest factors, says Smith, are the elk, which are more formidable now that the wolves have had 15 years to prey on the weak. Bangs adds that the decline was "absolutely predictable—we knew it would happen." The place was "overrun with grandma elk." Once those elk were culled, the herds got stronger, kills became more difficult, and it was harder for a wolf to survive. Some packs have resorted to hunting bison, at great peril.

The current population is probably "a longer term sustainable number," Smith admits. Data shows that the average pack size is down, and with less game available, wolf-on-wolf violence has increased due to battles over hunting grounds. The number one killer of adult Yellowstone wolves over the past year? Wolves.

Whether or not this is unusual, whether the end of the Druids and shrinking Yellowstone wolf population are part of a natural cycle—to McIntyre, these are open-ended questions and the reason to keep watching, everyday. "What we're trying to do is to use the time that we spend in the field to really understand what *normal* behavior of wolves is like in the wild," he says.

YELLOWSTONE'S WOLF POPULATION is the first to be observed day after day, without interruption. "All the time we are seeing new facets of wolf behavior," McIntyre tells me one day at his cabin. "This is by far the best place in the world to watch it."

As Wolf 690 and White Line lived out their days, they grew increasingly desperate.

"One reason that Rick is so attached to the wolves," said Smith, "and I mean this as a slight joke, is that they're his family."

Shortly before my visit, they killed a coyote, and White Line ate it. "We'd never seen that before," McIntyre says. (Wolves had been known to kill coyotes only because of competition.) A few days later, White Line was killed herself, likely by a mountain lion.

McIntyre agrees with Smith that the smaller, hardier elk population is a major cause of the decline of Yellowstone's wolves, though he notes that in the case of the Druids, "I think the basic reason was a string of bad luck." One precipitous event was the death of their alpha female, 569, in 20TK battle with

a rival pack. "That set off a chain of events," he says, including the alpha male known as 480 "abdicating his position and leaving the pack." The Druids, like many of the park's wolves, also suffered a devastating bout of mange, especially their pups. None of the Druids's 2009 pups survived into the fall. "We're thinking an experience like that really affects the cohesion of the pack," he says.

Since he began his streak in 2000, McIntyre has been to a single town outside of Montana (Cody, Wyoming) and made only a few trips to malls, to see movies. From sunup to sundown, it's all wolves, save for the occasional nap. He is either observing them, helping tourists locate them and understand what they're doing, or preventing tourists from bothering them. When he gets home, he settles into a rolling chair at his desk and begins transcribing dictated field observations. To date, McIntyre has compiled more than 8,000 single-spaced pages of meticulous notes (e.g., "755 stands up, yawns, and lies back down"), many of them printed and bound in three-ring binders. "He was very

proud a couple years ago," says Smith. "He had hit more words than the Bible?"

A commonly cited positive of the wolf's return to Yellowstone is that it enlivened the ecology of the park. One study found that woody plants like aspen and willow were dying off during the seven decades the predators were absent and the elk population boomed. When the wolves came back in 1995, the elk could no longer lazily chew away all the aspen and willow chutes. The plants and trees rebounded, songbird numbers grew, and beavers returned after a 50-year absence.

feels good



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McIntyre's behavioral observations can support such ecological hypotheses. But more interestingly, his incessant exposure to a recurring cast of wolves he can identify on sight allows him to make more creative speculations about wolf biology. One individual that left an indelible impression was Wolf 21, the longtime alpha male of the Druids. "He was a big, tough guy, but also had a very gentle nature with his family," McIntyre tells me one afternoon while staring into a spotting scope over the Yellowstone River. He speaks slowly and methodically, and has the gentle air and wispy white hair and mustache of Captain Kangaroo. "Wolf 21's idea of a fair fight was six against one, with him being the one. And he never lost." But he had a heart. According to McIntyre, 21 would always spare the life of a defeated rival.

One spring, one of 21's pups was sick. "Maybe blind, maybe just developmentally disabled, it didn't know how to feed itself," McIntyre says. He warns me, "I get emotional telling this story," then goes on to say that when 21 would deliver food to the brood, he made it a point to sit with this sick pup. This is not a typical event in wildlife, where parents favor the strong.

McIntyre believes 21's actions help explain why dogs tend to devote extra attention to a sick or depressed person. "We relate that behavior to dogs; we recognize that they're good at that," he says. "But what we don't recognize is that it's a behavior that seems to come from wild wolves."

If you visit McIntyre's cabin, you'll find—in addition to shelves of wrestling videos and stacks of sixties British acid-rock CDs—a

bronze statue of Wolf 21. There's also a photo of one of 21's nephews, 302, also called Casanova for his promiscuous lifestyle. "He arrived from another pack in 2003 and immediately began to woo a number of 21's daughters," McIntyre says. When 21 chased him off, he'd run just far enough to ensure his own safety, but not so far that the females couldn't wander off to mate with him. On occasion, 21 needed to send a message and "would beat him up but not kill him."

Wolf 21 died in 2004, at age nine—old for a wild wolf. "He wandered off and curled up under a tree, looking like he had just gone to sleep," says McIntyre. The death affected McIntyre, he says, much as the death of a human friend would. Following 21's death, Casanova finally made something of himself, helping lead the Druid Pack for a period.

One of McIntyre's more compelling theories is that domesticated dogs inherited their recently proven ability to detect cancer in humans from wolves. "Let's say a young wolf participates in a hunt and the pack kills an elk," he says. "As that wolf is feeding, it's noticing that this elk smells a little funny. Maybe a year later that wolf is leading a hunt. He detects in the air that same scent on another elk and makes a special effort to test that one. Maybe the scent was cancer. In the mind of the wolf, the important thing was this elk that we killed so easily a year ago smelled the same as that elk over there ..." he trails off.

"What's fascinating to me is that a skill that developed evolutionarily as a way to help wolves survive in the wild, their descendants, the modern dog, can use it to aid human beings."

THE END OF THE DRUIDS isn't the end of McIntyre's work. "We have this ongoing series of stories to keep track of," he says as he leads me on an afternoon hike in search of the Blacktail Pack, one of the park's largest packs. Not quite ready to let go of the Druids, he points out that the Blacktails were formed by 302 in his final year, "so you could say it's an extension of Druid pack."

To me, every boulder and dirt pile looks like a wolf, but it's nearing sunset and we've yet to actually see one. Radio collars have teased us all day with beeps of varying intensity. Then McIntyre points to a line of dots moving across the landscape, perhaps three miles away: nine wolves, noses down, on a trail. He smiles: "The last day I know that no one saw a wolf in Yellowstone was February 8, 2001."

As he often does, McIntyre goes into a detailed genealogy of the Blacktails, ticking off ages of the distant shapes. "When I was up in Denali"—where McIntyre worked as a seasonal naturalist for 14 summers, starting in 1976—"you were excited just to see a wolf," he says. "You didn't know any of this stuff."

Whereas many packs rise and fall in a few years, the Druids ruled the most fecund swath of Yellowstone for 13 years. By thriving for so long, the Druids spread their powerful genes throughout the Yellowstone ecosystem, emboldening it so that the wolves that survive what may well be a natural downsizing to a viable population are stronger for it. Maybe, in a more ecologically stable Yellowstone, we'll never again see such a reign. ●

JOSH DEAN WROTE ABOUT ELEPHANT POLO IN NOVEMBER 2009