

Into the Valley of the Wolves

Yellowstone – in the early morning gloom just before the sun breaks over the skyline. The air is cold, crisp, and very still. Sound travels under these conditions. The sound that reached me on that cold, murky morning has thrilled or chilled for centuries. It was the spine-tingling call of the wild: the howl of a wolf.

Freelance photographer, Doug Breakwell, reports

I first visited Yellowstone in 2009 and my, how things have changed, wolf-wise. The famed and much loved Druid Peak Pack was long gone. It disintegrated at the beginning of 2010 due to disease and the death of the breeding female. All its members are now dead with the possible exception of “Dull Bar” who may be still alive but outside the park.

What would I find on the Northern Range without the Druids? Would there be any wolves? Would they be as tolerant and visible as the Druids? I needn't have worried; I was in for eight days of almost nonstop photo opportunities, incident, action and behaviour; a wildlife photographer's paradise.

The pack territories from the northern park entrance along the Gardner-to-Cooke City road (the only road in the park that's open in the winter and does not sound like much, but it's sixty-five miles long) ran like this in 2012: Quadrant Mountain, Eight-mile (whose territory is mostly outside the park), Canyon, Blacktail, Agate and Lamar Canyon. However, there were strangers on the northern range.

THE MOLLIE'S PACK

When I set out, one of my hoped-for objectives was to get a glimpse of and photograph the members of Mollie's Pack. The ancestors of this pack were the first to be reintroduced into Yellowstone in 1995 as the Crystal Creek Pack. They were renamed Mollie's Pack in 2000 after Mollie Beattie, the late director of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, who helped carry the first wolves into their release pens. The wolves for the reintroduction project were chosen from certain areas of Canada for their elk-hunting prowess, but because there are no elk in the valley during the winter months,



Bald eagle

the Mollie's Pack has learnt how to hunt bison. They run the herd into deep snow making the weaker individuals easier to spot and kill. A bison, however – even a sick one – in deep snow is a formidable adversary and to cope, the Mollie's wolves got bigger. The pack now contains some of the biggest wolves in Yellowstone.

I was in luck. The Mollie's had come north following their new leader 686F. They may have left home to find an easier living than their usual winter prey in Yellowstone's harsh snow bound interior, or they may have just followed the dominant female, who may be on the lookout for a new mate. The Mollie's Pack contains some big beautiful wolves. They provided me with some excellent views and enabled me to fulfil another trip ambition: to photograph a hunt, although it was at long range, about a mile, and not pushed to its ultimate conclusion. The wolves backed off, perhaps deciding that the bison were too strong and dangerous. I did manage to photograph the behaviour, both from the wolves and bison, which I had hoped for.

THE LAMAR CANYON PACK

Then it was the turn of the Lamar Canyon Pack, an eleven-strong pack, to provide the photo opportunities. I spent an entire day with the Lamars. Even wading through the snow and climbing up to a saddle half way up Druid Peak to get a closer view. In doing this you have to keep in mind the park regulations: stay at least twenty-five yards away from bison and elk and one hundred yards from wolves, bears and mountain lions. There is another rule that states you must not engage in any activity that causes an animal to change its behaviour. For example, if a bison is lying down and you approach it and it stands up, that is against the rules. If you were to prevent a wolf from crossing the road by standing too close, that too, is against the rules and the law enforcement Rangers are not shy in telling off transgressors.

I was about two hundred yards away when a female, complete with shiny new GPS collar, stared straight at me; a rather unnerving experience to put it mildly. It then occurred to me that the pack could run me down in a matter of seconds if they wanted to. However, that thought passed quickly. Was I in any danger? Of course not!

The wolf's smaller cousin, the coyote also provided some memorable shots. Taking a terrible chance scavenging at a Mollie's kill was one. However, the better behavioural shots came when a pack was scavenging a Canyon Pack Elk kill near to Chinese Gardens, close to the park entrance and only twenty-five yards from the road. One dominant Coyote was keeping all comers – other coyotes, ravens, magpies and both Bald and Golden eagles – at bay.

Although the wolves were the stars of the show, there were plenty of other things happening and things to see: bison, elk, White-tailed and Mule deer, both types of eagle, dippers, Golden Eye ducks, the diminutive Red fox (tiny, compared with the other dogs) and the American badger. There were otters, too – I knew they were about by their tracks along the banks of the



Coyote



Bison bulls fight for dominance

Lamar River – but I never saw them, although others did.

The best time to see the wolves is in the winter. Their prey has come lower down in the valleys and the tree cover is minimal. February is a particularly good month as the breeding season is at its height and the wolves are very active. However, be warned that winter in Yellowstone is not for the faint-hearted and it can catch out the unwary. The conditions are tough and very cold with deep snow. The weather can change from bright sunny days to snow and freezing blizzards sometimes in a matter of hours. A warm winter's day in Yellowstone is around -6°C. On one day the temperature dropped to -31°C. It was so cold my breath froze on the back of the camera and it began to affect the camera's operation.

SPOTTING WOLVES THE EASY WAY

Finding a wolf in Yellowstone is fairly simple. You can use the natural history method: pull into a likely pullout [lay-by?] and scan the surrounding hills and woods with binoculars and telescope, looking for any sign of movement or ravens, and maybe you'll get lucky. Why ravens? The wolf and raven have an interesting relationship and where there are ravens you usually find wolves. Or the Yellowstone method: you can cruise up and down the Gardiner-to-Cooke City road, keeping an eye open for park biologist Rick McIntyre's car; it's easy to spot – a bright yellow Nissan with the roof covered in aerials. Rick has radio tracking equipment and can pinpoint the wolves very quickly even if you cannot see them. He has been called the pied piper of the Lamar Valley, leading convoys of wolfers searching for wolves.

PHOTOGRAPHER'S TRACKING TIPS

Do not try to bring your own radio tracking gear, it is against the law to have radio tracking equipment tuned to wolves' frequencies. Yellowstone also has a dedicated corps of wolf watchers who are in radio contact with each other and Rick. They are a very generous and welcoming bunch, always willing and eager to help you find a wolf, tell you what's happening or let you have a peek through their telescopes. I have made a number of friends amongst them.

You are also going to need some powerful optics – binoculars are a necessity for any wildlife photographer – but in Yellowstone you will also need a spotting scope because of the distances involved. Don't worry if you don't have them, there are numerous places around the park that will hire them to you, or if you go on an organised tour – and there are plenty to choose from – they will have scopes for you to use.

This really is the realm of the long telephoto lens and SLR camera; I was primarily using a 500mm prime lens. You cannot take wildlife photos here with your point and shoot compact unless you have a digi-scoping set-up. One of the wolfers I met, an American called Bill, had an interesting set-up. He had a jig set up on his spotting scope to take pictures with his iPhone. Photographs taken using these methods are generally for your own enjoyment and memories.

Yellowstone in the winter will challenge the visitor: venture out of – or sit back in – a warm SUV and you will not be disappointed; work a bit harder and you will be amazed.

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