

Moonlight Dinner for Wolves in the Frank Church Wilderness

The following story is co-authored by Mackenzie Shardlow, Troy Hinck, and Corey Shake from one of their many great experiences while working as interns at the UI Taylor Ranch Field Research Station this summer.

Somewhere in the Frank Church Wilderness, mid-June...

Taylor Ranch manager Holly Akenson decided to give one last locator howl before we would move on. This is when the forest lit up with the most amazing sounds I've ever heard. There were answers from down below us! One wolf started howling and soon after the entire pack was singing together, even the pups. Holly and I just looked at each other and smiled. We had found the den.

We knelt down near a tree, just listening and watching. We saw one wolf run out looking for the "new wolf" in the area, and we were lucky that the wind was in our favor. We started hearing the howls move up the hill next to us, like they were on a search. We saw this as the perfect time to drop down and find the den.

We finally saw an old, uprooted tree that Holly immediately recognized as a previous den. We saw freshly uncovered dirt and smelled rotten meat. We were certain it was occupied. Holly grabbed me a

stick for protection, which from that day forth was known as the "Wolf Whacker". We were within 20 yards of the den when we got out our binoculars to look inside. At first, it was just dark, but then we noticed a little gray thing twitching inside--the ear of the alpha female! To our surprise we found her lost in sleep with us so close.

We waited in hopes that we would see the pups and get a pup count that the Nez Perce Tribe wolf managers were hoping for, but the more we waited the more we heard the howling of the rest of the pack. They seemed to have given up the search for the stranger. But as I stood right on the trail between them and the den, we knew we needed to get out of there.

Holly and I quietly climbed out of the draw in the direction of our camp. We were both on an adrenaline rush coming out, with the wolves still howling behind us. We both couldn't wait to tell Troy and Corey (who had left us earlier in the day to survey a different area) what they had just missed.

--Mackenzie Shardlow

The day after Holly and Mackenzie's spectacular encounter, we returned to the airstrip and set up camp. As the shadows grew longer we watched a herd of 39 cow elk feed across the meadow and then out of sight. With the sun setting to the west a full moon arose in the eastern sky on a beautiful Friday the 13th night. The four of us were sitting around our campfire talking about the excellent experiences of the past couple of days, when our attention was suddenly drawn to a ridge across the meadow.

From a stand of old, burned lodgepole pine came a crashing sound that

could have rivaled a freight train. The whole scene is permanently etched in my mind—a group of five elk thundering into sight over the skyline with the glow of the sunset silhouetting them, and a lone wolf crested over on the skyline behind them. As soon as he appeared he quickly disappeared back behind the ridge as the elk stampeded over the other side. We all just looked at each other in amazement with huge goofy grins. We hastily decided we wanted to witness a kill so we grabbed binoculars and headlamps and ran across the meadow.

When we reached the other side of the meadow, we were surprised that we didn't see or even hear anything. Where had they gone so quickly? Then the elk began running again. It appeared that the pack had singled out a small group of elk separate from the main herd. As soon as they began to run we could see a single dark gray wolf laying in ambush only 75 yards from where we all stood. In the fading light we watched with our binoculars as he crawled across the meadow towards where the elk were running. As soon as they reached the meadow the wolf sprang to his feet and bolted toward the elk. But he was too far behind them and the elk once again ran into the timber to avoid him. We listened as the pounding hooves and snapping branches faded further away over several ridges. Again it became silent.

The silence was broken by the deep howl of a lone wolf that was less than a hundred yards away from where we were standing. A small patch of unburned timber blocked our view of the wolf. The howl filled the meadow again, but this time it was joined by six more unique voices chiming in. At one point they all held the same note in unison. The hair on the back of my neck was standing on end and was trying to pull itself out it seemed. That excited feeling ran through my entire body. My legs shook with excitement. Then the howls trailed off

and it was quiet around us. We stood there whispering excitedly to each other and waiting to see what happened next.

As we stood in the middle of the meadow contemplating, a large white wolf trotted out of the timber and across the open face of the hill. It wore an expired radio-collar, and Holly informed us that it was one of the alphas. Following this wolf were five more wolves of various shades, all smaller than the leader. We watched in awe as they loped up the hill in front of us and over the ridge, once again giving us a beautiful skyline silhouette before they disappeared.

Just as we were getting ready to leave the meadow and return to camp another wolf walked out of the timber. This one was much closer, only about 50 yards and looking directly at us. He was quite large, dark gray, with huge shoulders and head. He had immediately spotted us, but seemed uncertain about what we were. He began to circle around us, sniffing the air, but the wind was in our favor. Finally after making a half circle around us he got down wind and scented us. When he realized what we were, he snorted, whirled around quickly, and then nonchalantly loped up the hill to rejoin his pack. We all looked at each other again with big smiles and walked back to camp.

--Troy Hinck

Later that night, after the excitement had faded, the campfire burned low and eventually was reduced to glowing red coals. I remained sitting next to the fire after the others had crawled into their tents, finishing up my journal entry for the night. Just as I was finishing my last paragraph, the still night that had been so alive an hour ago became active again. The sound of hooves running across the meadow and into the downed timber rang across the airstrip once more. I almost didn't believe what I was hearing—the wolves were back hunting!

It was too dark to see, but the loud crashing and hooves pounding sent my heart racing. I listened in disbelief as the intense chase carried on down the airstrip away from our camp. Holly and Mackenzie had startled awake to the commotion across the meadow, and I could hear their excited whispers. The hunt continued quickly about a quarter mile down the airstrip, where the commotion finally ended. The excitement left me breathing quickly and shaking out of control as I listened for any more action across the meadow.

Although I listened and didn't ever hear it, Holly and Mackenzie heard the sorrowful sound of a successful hunt. The drawn-out squeal of a calf elk was one of the last sounds heard that beautiful night. That is, until after we'd gone to bed, when we woke in the middle of the night to the familiar howls of a satisfied wolf pack after their dinner under the moonlight.

—Corey Shake

Weeds

by Betsy Nelson

For the past two summers I have worked on Forest Service range and botany crews. Along the way I have picked up a lot of information about plants of all sorts, including weeds. I heard that weeds are fiends, ecologically and economically speaking, and that although oftentimes one person cannot make much of an impact without using herbicides, perhaps because the weeds are rhizomatous or have already set seed, or else if the population is too large, sometimes a little bit of elbow grease can make all the difference. That is how I came to feel guilty about some weeds.

One day during the summer, a group of us went out to relocate several populations of a threatened plant species. As we drove along a seldom-used forest road, one of us

noticed distinctive upright leaves on the plants along the roadside. We trooped out of the vehicle and confirmed that the plants were indeed sulfur cinquefoil, a plant listed as noxious in Oregon, where I was working. After identifying the plant, we simply got back in the vehicle and drove off.

No one took any notes about the number of plants present in the population, which was a small one. We did not get out a GPS unit and waypoint the location, either. Neither was it suggested to try to pull the plants. At the time I wondered if the reason we did not attempt to pull the plants was that our supervisors were better informed than I about effective treatment methods and knew that the only effective way to treat the population was by applying herbicides. However, after doing a little research, I now know that pulling is an effective method for treating sulfur cinquefoil and so we could have made a difference.

A fellow crew member and I discussed the incident after work that day and confirmed that we were both bothered that we had not tried to pull and bag the cinquefoil. Yet neither of us had said or done anything. I would like to work there again next summer. I can only hope that I will not return to find sulfur cinquefoil overrunning the area.

Interested in writing for the Snag?

The College of Natural Resources provides opportunities for blossoming Thoreaus, Leopolds, and other naturalists to voice their love of nature, concerns about environmental issues, and news of interest to CNR students. Writers receive 1 credit per semester.

Find out more by emailing Betsy Nelson at nels1173@uidaho.edu, or James Yeary at year6226@uidaho.edu.