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STRENGTH IN NUMBERS: A DOZEN YEARS AFTER THEIR REINTRODUCTION, MORE THAN 700 GRAY WOLVES ROAM IDAHO.



The Wolf Watchers

Inside Idaho's largest wilderness, humans and wolves learn to co-exist. *By Jason D.B. Kauffman*

IT CAME FROM THE RIGHT, a pale shape zig-zagging through the trees 100 yards upslope from where we were hiding. Entering a clearing, the fleeting blur materialized into a pure white adult wolf. It paused, glanced back in our direction, then vanished into the forest.

"They're like ghosts," Idaho biologist and noted gray wolf researcher Jim Akenson

whispered as we huddled in a conifer forest 50 miles from the nearest paved road. Tall, red-bearded, and an avid hiker, Akenson has spent 25 years studying wolves and cougars from Montana to Oregon. Together with four undergraduates from the University of Idaho, we were several hours into a three-day backpacking trip to locate and count wolf pups

inside Idaho's 2.4-million-acre Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. Earlier in the day, Jim's wife Holly had dropped off supplies to sustain our search for a pack's well-hidden den and the litter of newborn pups it might contain. Then she'd led a string of pack mules back to Taylor Ranch, the off-the-grid research station that is their year-round home.

To Jim, the appearance of the all-white female was a good omen. He identified her as the omega wolf, the lowest-ranking member of the pack who often serves as a sentry when the alpha female is tending her pups. Find the omega wolf, Jim told us, and the den is likely nearby.

As carnivore biologists at the University of Idaho, the Akensons have conducted census forays in the rugged mountains surrounding Taylor Ranch since 1997, shortly after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) reintroduced 66 Canadian gray wolves to the northern Rockies. Today, wildlife biologists estimate that 700 animals roam the state. As Jim later told me, "We've watched them grow from day one." Because wolves had been missing from central Idaho for decades,

Research in the Rough

The remote world of Idaho's Taylor Ranch

Jim and Holly Akenson have managed the University of Idaho's Taylor Ranch Field Station, a 65-acre enclave in the middle of the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, for more than a decade. Located on the south bank of Big Creek, the largest tributary of the Middle Fork of the Salmon, the ranch is an ideal base for students, interns, and scientists seeking a wilderness setting for their research. This past summer, the ranch hosted projects investigating the habitat and behavior of prairie rattlesnakes, Chinook salmon, and steelhead trout. In May, a dozen high school students from McCall, ID, arrived at the ranch to spend several days assisting the Akensons with their research, including several hikes to track and locate wolves and cougars. This summer's active research season allowed the ranch to live up to its nickname as "American's wildest classroom."

Measured from the nearest road, Taylor Ranch is the most remote permanently inhabited residence in the lower 48 states. The shortest approach routes are a 32-mile jaunt along Big Creek from the west, or a 42-mile trek from the southeast (hiked by the author). Most scientists, supplies, and mail arrive by air, landing on a narrow airstrip maintained by a mule team. Several other grass landing strips lie within six miles of the station. The privately-owned research facility is located at the junction of several hiking trails, but does not provide lodging for recreational visitors. Find out more at www.cnrhome.uidaho.edu/taylorranch.htm.

THE PACK'S
GRAY-AND-WHITE
120-POUND
ALPHA MALE
SAUNTERED OUT
OF THE TREES
EVEN FROM A
DISTANCE, HIS
LARGE SIZE
AND CONFIDENT
BEARING WERE
IMPRESSIVE.

the couple's field research has become the new baseline for understanding pack behavior—and is now producing important findings just as another wolf controversy flares up.

In the 12 years since wolves returned to Idaho, they've generated a backlash from some locals who fear the impact of these predators on the state's economy and customs—ranchers upset about attacks on livestock, hunters who believe the packs are thinning elk herds. The issue heated up again last February when the USFWS proposed removing the Rocky Mountain gray wolf from the Endangered Species List and turning management over to the states. In Idaho, that would place wolves under the jurisdiction of Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, who said earlier this year that he favors culling the state's population to 100 animals. But extreme positions like that have recently started to lose

ground as Idahoans learn more accurate information about the role and behavior of wolves in their state. And the primary impetus for this attitude shift is the pioneering research by scientists like the Akensons.

So far, their findings have overturned one common perception about wolf and prey interactions: Wolves aren't decimating the state's elk population the way many hunters claim. As Holly explained from the living room of Taylor Ranch, elk began to decline five years before wolves were reintroduced to Idaho. "The herds were not at sustainable numbers," she said. In addition, the Akensons believe that the prowling packs are forcing elk to become more cautious. Fearing ambush, the game animals no longer graze in wide-open meadows, but retreat to thick timber and steep-sided canyons where many hunters can't find them. Still, the Akensons are not opposed to a wolf hunt. They believe large wilderness areas like the Frank Church should remain off limits, but agree that a limited cull could be directed at packs that prey frequently on livestock. "We need to target the problem wolves," she said, "not the packs out here."

On the second morning of our hike, we awoke early and staked out two positions on opposite sides of the forested basin where the white wolf appeared. Within an hour, the pack's gray-and-white, 120-pound alpha male sauntered out of the trees, the dark band of a radio collar visible around his neck. Even from a distance, his large size and confident bearing were impressive. Then he stopped, shot a wary glance at one of our hiding spots, and trotted over the ridge and disappeared. We tried to follow him, and staked out several more promising clearings, but saw no more wolves for the rest of the afternoon.

Disappointed, we walked slowly back to camp, hoping for a final glimpse. As we crested the grassy swell

where the alpha male had appeared, four tawny, marmot-sized animals scrambled for cover just 15 yards to our right. "Pups," Jim whispered. For all his decades of experience, he looked as excited as a first-year biology student. Remarkably, we had passed by the den several times, but hadn't noticed a telltale mound of dirt. Not wishing to disturb the pack any more, we dropped below the ridge to return to camp.

Arriving at our tents, we encountered the perfect epilogue: Plainly visible on a tent flap were two dusty paw prints with the distinctive four-toes-and-claw-pattern of *Canis lupus*. We concluded that a wolf, perhaps the elusive alpha male, had visited our empty camp and sat back on its haunches to shadowbox the tent. Despite the mysterious calling card, we all slept well that night. The wolves of Idaho, we realized, were conducting some research of their own. ●