

## Travel

# Wolves pack in entertainment

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For the Coloradoan

**YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK** — Arriving at Lamar Ranch in wintry Yellowstone, I got out of the car to see several scopes set up in the snow at the west end of the parking lot. I walked over, peeked through one of the scopes and in 30 seconds I saw seven wolves.

What luck.

This is the Agate Creek Pack. People told me they hadn't seen them up near Lamar Ranch for three weeks. "That's the alpha female 715F on the far left," said a fellow viewer, you can tell her by the short tail. The alpha male 641 M is next to her. He's big."

The wolves, which wore

identification collars, were laying down on a ridge top across the valley. After a few minutes, four got up and started playing around, chasing each other.



Courtesy of Holmes Rolston III

**A wolf walks along a ridge** in the Lamar Valley of Yellowstone National Park in March.

"Those are the pups," another of the viewers said. "Only one has a collar."

The viewer turned out to be Rick McIntyre, a ranger and celebrated wolf watcher.

The pups were nicely profiled against the snow. We could plainly see their playing. That's why I came to Yellowstone in March to see these wolves trapped in Canada and released 16 years ago March 15, 1995. They formed the Crystal Pack and wolves were again in Yellowstone after an absence of 70 years.

These were last year's pups, now nearly grown at 11 months old. They already were hunting with the adults, but still had the youthful energy to want to play in deep snow.

I checked in and found my cabin at the Ranch where I was staying for Wolf Week, hosted by the Yellowstone Institute.

Then I hurried back and set up my own scope. Snow flurries obscured the view for awhile before it cleared. All seven were up and moving around. They came downhill, spectacularly descending a steep hillside to reach the valley. Sometimes, they were breaking through the snow and seemed almost to be

falling down the steepest parts of the slope. Reaching the valley, they disappeared into the forest.

### On the prowl

The next morning, our group drove west in two vans and stopped at Slough Creek. Nothing. Wolf researchers picked up radio signals a few miles farther east. There, we spotted the Agate Creek Pack again, but this time they appeared only as seven specks moving against the snow a mile off. They had moved about 6 miles during the night.

Back to Slough Creek, where we wished we had stayed. We had been too early and now we were too late for the big event. The Lamar Pack had killed two elk, which was unusual because they typically kill only one. One of the viewers had seen it. The elk were much weakened by the winter and poorly able to defend themselves. The pups in the pack had pulled the second one down.

By the time we got our scopes up, the alpha female, 06, was tearing into the first

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carcass. She is famous for killing elk by herself. They ate their fill. Then the pups decided to drag the second elk closer to the first one.

A few dozen ravens gathered, waiting their chance. When only one pup was left at the kill site, the ravens harassed the pup and managed to grab some chunks, carrying meat into the nearby trees out of reach of the wolves. The pup left. A golden eagle and an adult bald eagle came to the carcasses.

Further up the valley, the wolves had killed a bighorn sheep a week ago. That also is unusual because the sheep are more nimble than wolves in the rock crags. But this sheep had been caught in some flats below the cliffs. We snowshoed in to what was left of the carcass, which was reduced to a couple piles of bones. The snow we walked more than 4 to 5 feet deep. We had to take care not to break through. Three bighorn rams watched us from the cliff above.

## Viewing bonanza

By daybreak the next morning, we had driven west to the Soda Butte area and found what others had seen early yesterday. It was a huge grizzly pulling the hide off a bison carcass, again nicely profiled against the snow. The horns of the bison were visible.

This bison seemed to have died of starvation, not killed by the grizzly. Eventually, the

bear lay down on the carcass while a coyote 25 yards away waited for a chance to come in. Bears hibernate but this grizzly was out two weeks earlier than usual.

Far above on a ridge near the top of the mountain towering above, there were two mountain goats no more than moving dots on the skyline.

In a spitting snowstorm, we snowshoed to see a big bull elk carcass, still adorned with impressive antlers. Like the bison, this elk seemed to have died of starvation. Amidst the bones was a full rumen, mostly willow twigs and park, which are of little food value. I was reminded again and again of the harsh winter. The animals we were seeing were on the edge of life and death with only the fittest surviving.

Others spotted a red fox at some distance. Before I could get my scope on it, it had gone over the hilltop. Added to the wolves and coyotes, they had what in Yellowstone is celebrated as a "three canid day."

## Final memory

On our last day, we got the closest wolf sighting. In the narrows of a canyon, we spot-



**Holmes Rolston III** peers through a spotting scope while looking for wolves in Yellowstone National Park in March.

Courtesy of Holmes Rolston III

ted the alpha 06 female about 100 yards uphill. She half-filled the full power, 60x, scope. There was time to set up the long lens cameras, which revealed a dark wolf lying near her, almost out of sight behind a rock.

She was often sleeping but frequently stood up to look around. She would sit and with a back foot scratch the underside of a front shoulder where she had a stripe of mange. She nevertheless seemed to be doing well, still killing elk on her own.

When she stood, she was visibly pregnant with a low hanging belly. I had watched her in June at the entrance to her den, nursing her pups. During that visit, a black bear came too close and she chased it, nipping at its rump. The bear climbed a tree. She waited a bit, then returned to her den and pups.

She chased it again and again. A dozen of us watched. We may be the only people on

Earth who have ever seen a mother wolf chase a bear up a tree five times.

Now she was about to give birth again. I wished her well — this powerful killer and caring mother. She is the fourth generation from the introduced wolves 16 years ago. She is one of the reasons why the Lamar Valley of Yellowstone is the best

place on Earth for observing wolves

Let's hope her descendants are still there for my great-grandchildren to see.

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Courtesy of Hubertus Irlh