

with great surprise I realized what I was looking at; six sets of eyes were staring at me, only 100 feet away. And then, I heard a muffled half-bark followed by a deep, smooth, heavy sound rising into the air. None of the other wolves

# Personal Encounter

## Locking Eyes with a Lifelong Dream *An encounter on Ellesmere Island*

by Kira A. Cassidy

*It's a few minutes after midnight, the sun is shining overhead and I meet the gaze of a wild wolf less than 15 feet away. The dark brown of his iris surprises me—it matches the rich fur of a bull bison, the bark of a Douglas fir, a bubbling thermal mud pot. But I'm not in Yellowstone National Park, I remind myself, where most wolves have an intense, golden stare. And the reflections I see in his eyes are not Old Faithful and elk, valleys of sagebrush and miles of lodgepole pines. Instead I see icebergs and muskox and tiny tundra flowers, and I see myself—in a place I never imagined being.*



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That place is Ellesmere Island—part of the northernmost Canadian province of Nunavut and closer to the North Pole than it is to the Arctic Circle. In wildlife circles the island is known for its arctic wolves—wolves that seem to have no fear of humans and have been studied by Dr. L. David Mech since 1986. Traveling to the island for a few weeks each summer, Dave observed nuanced behavior nearly impossible to discern in other places wolves are studied. In addition to collecting rigorous data on pup

care and development, Dave was able to record the wolves hunting muskox and arctic hares. Those intimate observations were the catalyst for the BBC decision to travel to Ellesmere Island for its latest natural history program, and the reason I spent the summer of 2014 with Silverback Films, living with a pack of wild, arctic wolves.

Just getting to Ellesmere Island was an adventure in itself; travel took five flights over three days, each on a progressively smaller plane. The last flight

was in the workhorse of the tundra, a Twin Otter. Capable of carrying about a dozen people, this one carried only two of us, and also our 2000-plus pounds of gear. Pressed between containers full of food, fuel, and camping and camera gear, I had my first glimpse of Ellesmere as the Otter broke out of the clouds and circled over the Eureka Weather Station, aiming for the dirt runway.

Because Silverback's goal was to film not only wolves hunting, but also their denning and pup-rearing behavior, we spent several days searching Ellesmere's Foshien Peninsula for a wolf den. Once a den was located, we moved our camp out into the tundra about a kilometer (.62 miles) away. The first evening took quite a bit of set-up, as our camp included sleeping tents, a cook tent and small observation tent overlooking the den area, all on top of permafrost just 12 inches below the surface. It was almost midnight—although the sun hadn't moved from its overhead position—and we were too excited to sleep, so we decided to see what the wolves were up to. As we crested the hill between the den and camp, we could see two wolves at the den area and a third, the breeding female, coming aboveground briefly before going back to tend her subterranean charges. Content to watch from about 500 meters away, we sat with eyes glued to our binoculars. Not content to watch from afar was the breeding male. He spotted us, perhaps the only humans he had seen in his life, and started to travel calmly in our direction. He did not stop until he was 15 feet away.



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*He is now close enough for me to see his teeth, his toes, his eyes. He seems somewhat confused by us, but sniffs to put the pieces of this day together. He can smell all kinds of things, surely: the dinner we just cooked, the laundry detergent I use, spiking levels of dopamine from excitement. We look into each other's eyes, his brown ones with curiosity, my green ones—some of the only green on the tundra in early summer—with awe. He yawns and eventually beds about 20 meters away, facing back to the den, as if we are now recruited into his cadre assigned to den guard-duty.*



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And I took my guard-duty seriously. Working in 12-hour shifts, the three Silverback crew members—Producer Jonnie Hughes, cameramen Mark Smith and Kieran O'Donovan—and I took turns watching the den. Eventually we saw two tiny pups emerge, followed by a third a day later. Far younger than any wolf pups I'd observed before, they could barely walk; they rather crawled around the entrance of the den. Their mother, now accustomed to our presence, nursed and cleaned them while we watched. Whenever the adults left the den to hunt we would split into pairs—two of us following the wolves on ATVs and two staying near the den to film the pups. Like a well-practiced fire drill, we were on ATVs following the wolves within five minutes of the wolves' decision to leave. Sometimes, sitting on the ATVs, we were tricked by a false start as the pack decided the timing wasn't quite right and promptly went back to sleep. Our bipedal figures did not seem to worry the wolves, nor did our machinery; they went about hunting as normal even with ATVs following in their wake.

The pack hunted mostly arctic hares and leverets (juvenile arctic hares). Eventually the breeding female joined the other four adults on hunting forays, leaving the pups at the den alone except for their invariably watchful human neighbors. As the pups grew they became more coordinated, running and playing



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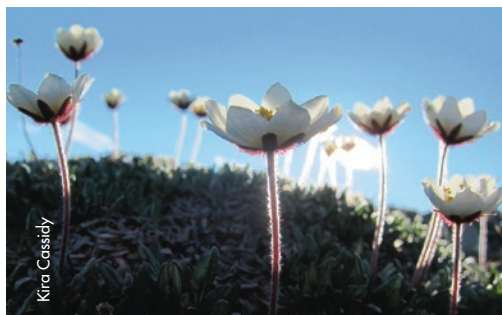


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with each other, though rarely venturing more than 100 meters from the den. The adults regularly visited our camp, sniffing the radio support cords, inspecting gear, once even stealing a sock from my tent guylines. I was able to retrieve the sock after following the beta female as she jauntily carried it away, continually glancing over her shoulder. Such interactions made it easy to understand how humans and wolves formed a partnership tens of thousands of years ago, learning to understand each other like no other two species on the planet.

In addition to the wolves, we often watched herds of muskox travel through camp, their shaggy coats shedding in long strands that were pushed along the ground by the wind and snagged by arctic willows—the only “tree” species on Ellesmere, growing less than two inches tall.



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The arctic hares were a delightful surprise, as the 12-pound adults often stood and ran comically on their hind legs. The leverets were a constant presence around camp; I watched one litter from birth

to weaning. Every 18.5 hours the leverets would appear from their hiding places and gather around the same, agreed-upon large rock. Their mother would come from over a mile away and nurse for less than one minute before leaving again—likely a strategy for keeping predatory attention away from her young ones. Feeling frisky after a good meal, the leverets would run and jump around for a few minutes, over my boots and tripod, even into our tents, before going back to hiding.

Just as we watched the leverets grow, we watched the wolf pups progress from tiny, brown, crawling creatures to creamy-tan, agile wolf pups—two more curious and exploratory than the third, but all three healthy and well-attended by the adults. After six weeks living on the tundra, watching and following that pack of wild, arctic wolves, travelling, eating and sleeping on their schedule, it was time to head home. I’d had an experience like no other and felt incredibly lucky.

*As I locked eyes with a wild, arctic wolf that first sunny night, I saw not only a glimpse of his ancient, canine mind. I saw myself and everything that had led up to that moment—time spent driving the Yellowstone park roads, listening for radio signals or looking through a spotting scope at a new litter of Druid pups; a time when the arctic fascinated me to the degree that I would say it haunted me; a time when I would tell friends that if I planned a trip to Alaska, or anywhere else I considered arctic, my return ticket would likely not be used. I saw even further back, to myself as a child, when every book checked out of the library had an animal on the cover and every school project involved wildlife issues.*

So while I’m happy to be home in Yellowstone with its abundant wildlife, thermal features and dramatic mountains, when I was fixed by an arctic wolf’s stare, I knew, at that moment, there was absolutely nowhere else I would rather be. ■

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