

L. David Mech

HOW NOT TO FIND a WOLF DEN

by L. DAVID MECH

It had been 40 hours since my assistant, Mary Maule, and I had slept. On this five-day, all-terrain-vehicle trip away from our base camp on Canada's Ellesmere Island, 600 miles (966 kilometers) from the North Pole in early July 1989, our food was almost gone. We were down to one "boil-in-the-bag" lasagna and one beef stew, 2 ounces (57 grams) of cashews, 40 chocolate "pills" and eight licorice sticks. We hadn't eaten anything in a day and a half, and even then we had only split two tiny cans of ham and a few crackers, washed down with glacial melt water. We had been searching for a pack of wolves but had

given up and were driving our all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) back to camp.

Suddenly we spotted our quarry chasing a herd of musk-oxen. The pack killed a calf and then a yearling right in front of us, and we had settled into a small tundra depression to watch the wolves feed and wait for one to start taking parts from the kill back to the den. Our ultimate goal those last five days had been to find the den. We thought that we were on the verge of that now that the wolves had made their kills. Thus it was critical to stay awake while the wolves fed until at least one of them left to take food to the den.



The last few hours of our vigil seemed utterly interminable. So much was riding on what those six wolves would do: (1) our plans for the rest of the summer, (2) plans for Mary's replacement, (3) my plans for the next year, and (4) my extreme curiosity about what was

going on. Fortunately the weather was holding. The sky was cloudless, and miracle of miracles, no wind. At least our padded wind pants, parkas, and down vests were keeping us warm while we hugged the ground.

However, as time passed it began to look like something was wrong. We knew that these wolves could not have been at the den in at least 22 hours. It was now about 7 a.m., and with 24-hour arctic sunlight, we had been watching for 17 hours since they made their kills, yet still no wolf had headed off to the den. Usually the prime function of a pack's hunting contingent is to procure food for the breeding female and the pups. The pups remain at the den this early in the summer, and their mother stays with them most of the time.

All my observations during the past three summers had shown that the breeding male and pack members carry food to the den regularly both in their mouths and by regurgitating their stomach contents, sometimes more than once per day. At the only other two musk-ox kills I had seen, the wolves did the same thing. In 1986 the wolves had nailed three calves one day in July—probably 300 pounds (136 kilograms) of meat—and delivered food to the den within hours. Those kills were only a mile (1.6 kilometers) from the den, but after completely consuming them, the whole pack was at the den a few hours later. In 1987, even though the kill was 20 miles (32 kilometers) straight-line from the den, two pack members left the kill for the den immediately after feeding, and the whole pack was back to the den within eight hours.

This time the wolves had essentially cleaned up both the yearling and calf within 11 hours and now were merely sleeping it off, with no one heading off to a den. The unspeakable thought kept creeping into my mind: "Maybe there is no den this year." That would be the only explanation I could think of for this behavior. First 2, then 3, 4 and 5 a.m., etc. rolled by, and still the wolves just slept. Every now and then one got up, stretched and curled back down again. When would we know our answer? I have watched wolves sleep as long as 19 hours. Would we still have to endure that? 6, 7 and 8 a.m., and no movement.

It just didn't make sense. The pack is a pack because of the breeding pair. The bond between the adults and the ties of offspring to their parents are what hold the pack together. We knew there was a breeding female this year because we had seen her and confirmed that she was nursing only a week ago. We also had good reason to believe that she was still part of the pack because eight wolves had been seen only two weeks before, which would have included the six we were watching, plus the breeding female and a non-breeding female (probably her daughter) that usually accompanied her.

Still, all day went by, and Mary and I took turns dozing off, not wanting to miss the crucial departure that should allow us to follow the wolves to the den.





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Our field notes told what happened next:

"5:50 p.m.—four wolves arise and one goes to the calf kill and works at further reducing it. Now two more join it and pick at the carcass. Two scuffle over some last bit of intestine, and others peel off the shaggy hair on the bottom side of the skin. These wolves were hungry. One goes off to raid caches, some as far as 250 meters (273 yards) away."

"6:47 p.m. —the last wolf is done at the carcass. The whole pack meets, wrestles, troops and plays and then sleeps. How long must we wait?"

Mary and I continued to take turns snoozing on the tundra, until suddenly Mary poked me. "They're leaving!" she announced. It was 8:22 p.m., some 30 hours since we had plopped down to watch and wait, and now finally the wolves were heading out, hopefully to the den.

Within a few minutes, however, the pack ran into more musk-oxen, two herds and a single bull. The wolves charged a group of five adults and a calf, but as usual the adults tightened their

group and protected the calf, and the wolves quickly gave up. A few minutes later the scene repeated itself, this time with a herd of 10 adults and 2 calves. The single bull then grabbed the wolves' attention, and they chased it up and down over rises and depressions for five minutes and then relented. Ditto with a musk-ox duo that they only focused on for a couple of minutes. When would the pack ever head back to the den?

Not now, we soon found out to our great dismay. The six wolves veered off away from the musk-oxen. They then headed right back in the direction from which we had just come and which we had searched thoroughly. We had watched from every hilltop and howled every few hours with no success for five days. We were convinced the den was nowhere near that area.

As we watched the wolves disappear over the tundra, we boiled our last meals over our single-burner stove. We



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had already finished our cashews and eight licorice sticks while we watched the wolves feed and sleep for 30 hours. Now it was our turn. Each of us had only caught a few fitful winks during the past 58 hours, but it was still a three-hour very-rough ATV drive back to base camp. Thus we just crashed where we were. Ellesmere Island is a desert, so rain is usually no problem.

Or so we thought! Some 15 hours later light rain began to fall, and we started back to camp. The wind and rain picked up, the rain turned to sleet and then big flakes of snow covered us. ATVs are wonderful vehicles, ideally suited for tundra travel. But they quickly turn into mud-mobiles in rain and snow. Ours threw mud up all over us every inch of the way back. We even had trouble climbing hills with the machines. Their four-wheel drives merely spun the wheels on the slippery slopes such that we had to pick our way up the gentler ones.

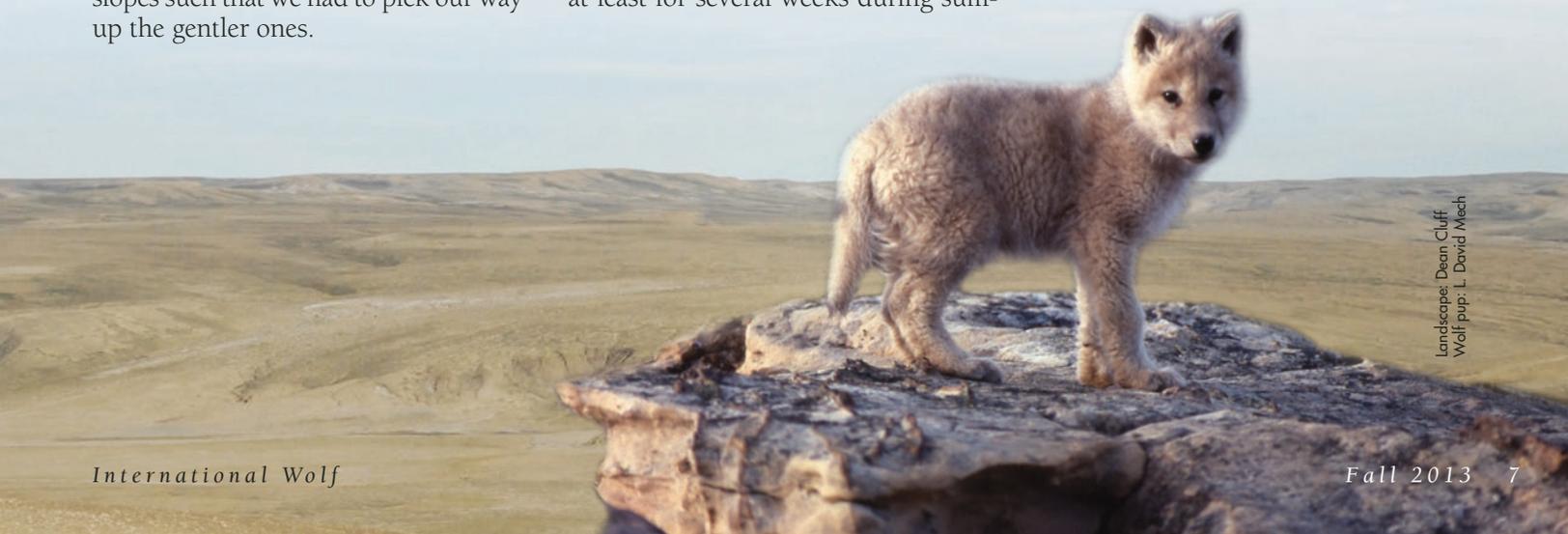
When within a half mile (0.8 kilometer) of our tent, lo and behold, there was the wolf pack again, hunting musk-oxen in the snow. No way could we repeat our past vigil, even though the wolves did kill another calf in front of us out of a herd of 10 adults and 3 calves. After completing my notes and snapping a few pictures, we continued on to the warmth and dryness of our tents and the contentment from our food cache.

And the den? There certainly was one we eventually found, with four pups, the breeding female and her 2-year-old daughter. However, during the two weeks that we got to watch the den, only a single member of the pack of six ever joined these stay-at-home wolves, and then only for a few days. Contrary to all the other observations we or anyone had ever made, the breeding male, the yearlings and the 2-year-old male operated independently of the den wolves, at least for several weeks during sum-

mer. Based on observations by weather station personnel in the area long after we were gone, both groups finally did merge again in the fall.

Thus our five-day odyssey, our 58 hours without decent sleep or meals, and our 30-hour watch of the pack at the kills were all for naught so far as finding the den was concerned. We had made a new discovery: This was not the way to find a wolf den! ■

L. David Mech is a senior research scientist for the U.S. Geological Survey (Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center, 8711 37th St. SE, Jamestown, ND 58401-7317) and founder and vice chair of the International Wolf Center. He has studied wolves for more than 50 years and published several books and many articles about them.



Landscape: Dean Cluff
Wolf pup: L. David Mech