

Audubon 92(2): 82-85  
March 1990

# Who's Afraid of the BIG BAD WOLF?

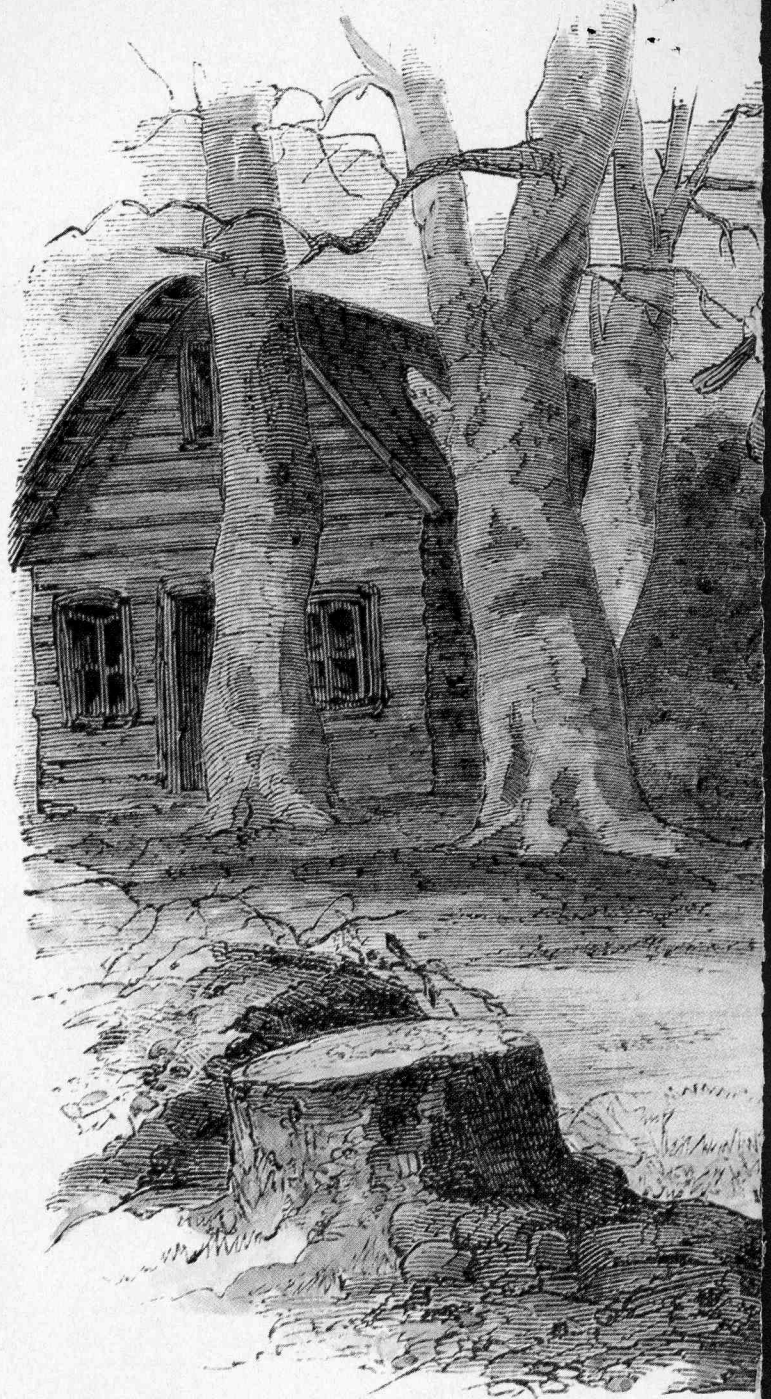
by L. DAVID MECH

A TWIG SNAPPED, AND I KNEW the wolves were returning. Straddling the carcass of the moose that fifteen of them had just pulled down, I peered through the snowy birch and fir trees to see two of the creatures rushing straight toward me. I was twenty-two years old back then and had a quick decision to make: Should I reach for my movie camera or my revolver? (A film of those two big beautiful animals bearing down on me would be incredible, but why had the Park Service insisted I carry a gun?) I pulled the revolver.

Instantly I realized my mistake. Just the movement of my hand was enough to show the wolves that it was a human being who had usurped their kill, and they vanished.

Meanwhile, above me Don Murray spiraled around in the little ski plane from which we had watched the whole pack swarm over this four-hundred-pound moose calf and, despite valiant charges by the cow, bring its struggling body down. When I invited the bush pilot to join me in inspecting the remains, he politely declined. "A pilot belongs in the air," he proclaimed solemnly. "I'll watch from above."

Later, Murray told me that he had seen most of the wolves run off when I was still 150 yards from the kill. And we had both watched the last couple of wolves reluctantly leave when I was within about a hundred feet.



Murray then saw all of the animals assemble 250 yards away while I was examining their kill. Eventually the two rambunctious wolves decided to race back toward the carcass, no doubt forgetting I was still there.

I don't know how many times in the thirty years since that scene on Michigan's Isle Royale I have regretted pulling the gun instead of pointing the movie camera. Over and over again during my career as a wolf biologist I have found that rather than worrying about whether wolves would attack me, I worried about how I could get closer to them.

Nevertheless, a large segment of the public still believes that wolves are dangerous to humans. The issue of possible wolf predation on humans has arisen several



times during the current public debate over whether to reestablish wolves in Yellowstone National Park. For example, in a 1989 booklet called "Wolf Reintroduction in the Yellowstone National Park: A Historical Perspective," author T. R. Mader lists several alleged threats and attacks by wolves under the heading "Misconception 10—wolves pose no threat to man himself."

Though it's certainly true that a number of aggressive encounters between wolves and humans have been documented, few if any have led to serious injury, and they often involve extenuating circumstances. So what is the actual situation? Can wild wolves be trusted around humans or not? To answer that question, we must explore well-documented reports of wolf-human encounters.

*Can wild wolves be trusted around humans  
in a heavily visited park like Yellowstone?  
The evidence shows we have little to fear.*



ONE OF THE EARLIEST and best accounts of a wolf attack was reported in a 1985 issue of *Arctic*, published by the University of Calgary Press. In the winter of 1915 a team of scientists with sled dogs was camped near the northwestern coast of Canada's Northwest Territories. When an adult female wolf, thought to be in heat, attacked the lead sled dog, the men rushed out of their tents half-dressed. The wolf then attacked two of them. One man shooed it off "with the flapping front" of his wool shirt. The other, ethnologist Diamond Jenness, threw a boulder at it. When the wolf tried to bite Jenness' leg, he grabbed the animal by the back of the neck, and "it screwed its head round and fastened its teeth in my arm," Jenness said. "I tried to choke it with the left hand—unsuccessfully—but after a moment it let go and moved away a little, when the Dr. immediately shot it."

Of interest here are the presence of the dogs, the turmoil, the fact that one man so easily shooed off the wolf and another actually grabbed it. It's not surprising that the wolf "screwed its head round" and bit Jenness, for most wild carnivores will try to bite when grasped by the back of the neck in order to escape. That the wolf came so close to Jenness that he had to grab it in self-defense is most significant. It is likely that the wolf was highly frightened and confused. And when feeling trapped, wolves may respond automatically with a quick, short bite. Twice I have been so bitten by tame wolves and once by a wild one.

Another interesting wolf-human interaction also involved a dog. One December day in 1970 Sanford Sandberg, a logger from Skibo, Minnesota, brought his dog to his cutting in Superior National Forest. Sandberg and a partner were cutting logs when a deer bounded within a few yards with two wolves almost on top of it. The deer stopped, the loggers waved their arms, and the wolves ran off.

While the loggers discussed the incident, a wolf rushed back and began fighting with the dog at Sandberg's feet, its tail banging against the man's leg. The wolf soon gave up and ran off, and Sandberg picked up his frightened dog.

Suddenly, the second wolf came dashing back, leaping up at the dog, catching its lower canine on Sandberg's red-and-black-checked wool jacket, and tearing a six-inch rip in it. For an instant Sandberg looked right into the mouth of the wolf before the animal dropped down and ran off. Sandberg never claimed he had been attacked. He said, "I'm sure the wolf was after my dog."

On a snowy January day in 1982, nineteen-year-old Ron Poyirier was out snowshoe-hare hunting in a thick cedar swamp north of Duluth. He caught a glimpse of movement just ahead, when a wolf came from nowhere and knocked him down. He rolled on the ground with the wolf and grabbed it by the throat to hold it away. It kicked and clawed him but did not bite. Poyirier's .22 rifle was still in his hand but not pointed toward the wolf. Nevertheless, the youth fired a shot, and the wolf disappeared. Poyirier suffered a one-and-a-half-inch scratch on his right thigh from one of the wolf's claws.

The most reasonable explanation for this incident is that the youth was wearing hunting clothes laced with buck scent. The wolf may have been chasing a deer—which could have been the movement Poyirier glimpsed—and confused the youth's scent with that of the deer.

No such circumstances surrounded the wolf-human interaction on Ellesmere Island in the High Arctic when a pack of six wolves closely checked out a team of scientists. As reported in a 1978 issue of the *Journal of Mammalogy*, the scientists saw the wolves approach and threw clods of tundra at them to ward them off. But the wolves kept coming. One jumped up and grazed the cheek of botanist Mary Dawson, leaving saliva on but not injuring her. In that region wolves have not been hunted or persecuted and are generally neutral toward humans, showing neither fear nor aggression. What the wolf pack was up to when they approached Dawson's team defies explanation.

Somewhat more explainable, but still highly unusual, was a report in a 1985 *Journal of Mammalogy* in which three zoologists were harassed by at least three wolves about fifteen kilometers southeast of Churchill, Manitoba. On June 29, 1984, the three men had just stopped to rest when they spied a wolf charging them from ten yards away. One man yelled and stamped his feet. The wolf stopped about twenty feet away and retreated just as a second wolf charged and came to within ten feet of Peter A. Scott. Scott sounded a "bear horn" used for scaring away polar bears. "Wolf B responded by blinking once, twitching its ears, and completing its third lunge in a slight divergence off course." It landed about a yard from Scott, trotted off at a right angle, and paused ten feet away.

The zoologists climbed trees and watched the wolves trot back and forth in an arc fifteen to thirty-five yards long for four hours. The men finally retreated two miles to their vehicle after not seeing a wolf for fifteen minutes. Later they found a den and evidence of pups in the general area.

Other, less detailed reports of wolf attacks on humans include the following: In August 1987 a young girl camping in Algonquin Park, Ontario, was bitten by a wolf when she shined a light at the creature; in British Columbia, a forester was treed by wolves, and a woman was reportedly injured when she was trying to beat off a wolf.

What is notable in all these reports, besides the highly unusual wolf behavior, is the fact that no one was seriously injured. If a wolf or pack were really to attack a person like they attack prey, the result would be instant and deadly. I have seen wolves attack several prey animals, and there is nothing hesitant about the attack. No one could ever grab a wolf by the neck or throat if it lunged the way it does at prey. Wolves can crack open the heavy upper leg bones of musk oxen and sever a cow's tail at the base with a single bite. To kill moose and other large prey, they must tear through several inches of hair and very thick hides. Indeed, captive wolves, wolf-dog hybrids, and, for that matter, even dogs who have been mismanaged have killed or seriously injured people in very short attacks.

THE WOLF ATTACKS related above seem to represent either threats, defensive reactions, or some other kind of nonpredatory interaction. In addition, when appraising alleged wolf attacks, one must always consider the possibility that the attack was made by a tame wolf. Such an explanation immediately comes to mind for the Algonquin Park incident. Many people who own pet wolves that they acquire as pups need to get rid of them as the wolf matures. Because Algonquin Park is so well known for wolves, it would be a likely area for such a release.

Of course if a wolf is stricken with rabies, as sometimes happens in North America in latitudes above 60 degrees north, it is a different story. Rick Chapman, a graduate student of mine, was attacked by a rabid wolf at the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. He had spent months studying a wolf den there and was working on his doctorate. Chapman was watching the den when he noticed a strange wolf approach the pack and fight them. The next day the same wolf came near Chapman at his tent. After rattling pots and pans to scare it off, he finally had to resort to bopping the wolf over the head with a hiking boot. The wolf left and returned again only to meet the same fate. On the wolf's third attempt, Chapman knew something was wrong with the animal, and he shot it. The wolf turned out to be rabid, as did several of the wolves it had fought with at the den.

That incident is reminiscent of a record in the *Journal of Mammalogy* in 1947. A wolf attacked a trainman who was riding on a little railroad "speeder" through the bush in Canada. The man hit the wolf with implements several times, and was later assisted by a train crew who happened by. Finally the wolf was killed. Although the wolf was never checked for rabies, it would certainly be a good explanation for the animal's bizarre behavior.

Rabies may also explain numerous newspaper accounts of wolf attacks on humans in mideastern countries, where the disease has been a regular problem throughout history. On the other hand, colleagues of mine in India and the Soviet Union have told me of accounts of attacks on humans by nonrabid wolves that they believe are true. The reports from India usually involve youngsters from rural villages who are attacked while relieving themselves in fields in the morning. They are often carried away and later found dead.

This "child lifting" is popularly attributed to wolves, and twenty to thirty reports a year have reached me, giving the names, ages, and villages involved. The problem is that the incidents have not yet been properly investigated by competent biologists. In an article in the *Times of India*, a local leopard hunter disputed the official view that wolves were attacking children and claimed the attacks were made by leopards. Not an unreasonable explanation considering that leopards are known to kill people. But until foreign reports are thoroughly checked, judgment on them must be suspended.

Even if found to be true, we must not conclude too much from the Eurasian reports. There is too much evidence that North American wolves are not dangerous to humans. Some nineteen million visitor days with no wolf attacks have been recorded in Minnesota's Superior Na-

tional Forest alone. In addition, the national parks of Canada and Alaska could boast many million more safe visitor days, as could Canada's provincial parks.

Furthermore, there have been incidents of humans interacting positively with wild wolves in the High Arctic (above 70 degrees north latitude), where wolves are not persecuted by humans. For example, ornithologist David Parmelee once grabbed a wolf pup and carried it back to his tent. The mother wolf followed at his heels and slept outside his tent until he released the pup.

Frank Miller, a Canadian Wildlife Service caribou biologist, reported in a 1978 issue of *Musk-ox* (published by the University of Saskatchewan) that G.A. Calderwood surprised two wolves near the U.S.-Canadian Arctic weather station, Mould Bay. "The wolves rose to their feet but did not flee. When Calderwood knelt on the ground to put film in his camera, one of the wolves approached, licked [his] face, uttered a gurgling sound, then turned and trotted off with the other wolf."

While this may sound incredible, my own experience leads me to believe it. During the past four summers I have spent my vacations in the High Arctic studying a pack of wolves who were just about as friendly. I have had seven adults surround me as I lay watching their den, a yearling steal my fake fur hat when it blew off me, and pups and their mother howl within a yard or two of me as I took notes. In another case a four-week-old pup toddled up to me while I filmed its mother a few feet away and yanked on my bootlace until it untied the bow!

The most dramatic demonstration of how tolerant of me the pack is occurred when they killed a musk-ox calf in front of me and a companion. As they tore apart the carcass, I crawled toward them on hands and knees to take notes on what they were eating. The subordinates (younger wolves) allowed me to within about thirty-five feet before leaving, but the alphas (elders) continued to feed undisturbed while I sat twenty feet away.

The tolerance shown by this wolf pack has allowed me to gain tremendous insights into wolf social behavior that could not have been obtained in any other way.

During all of my interactions with this pack the wolves accepted and never threatened any of us. In fact, a photographer, unbeknownst to me, actually invaded the den itself when the pups were two- to three-weeks old. I am not certain how the adults behaved, but I know they did not attack him. On the other hand, for the rest of that summer the mother of the pups was much less tolerant of me than she had been the previous two years. The next denning season she abandoned the den and bore her pups many miles away. The point here, however, is that despite what the wolf must have considered an extreme intrusion, she did not attack.

Of course, individual wolves and packs are highly variable. Some might attack under conditions where others might not, and the potential for a wild wolf to injure a human during an attack is great. Thus one can never say never when discussing the possibility of wolf attacks on humans. Nevertheless, the weight of evidence indicates that humans have little to fear from healthy wild wolves. Certainly the remote possibility of wolf attacks should in no way inhibit sound wolf reestablishment. ■