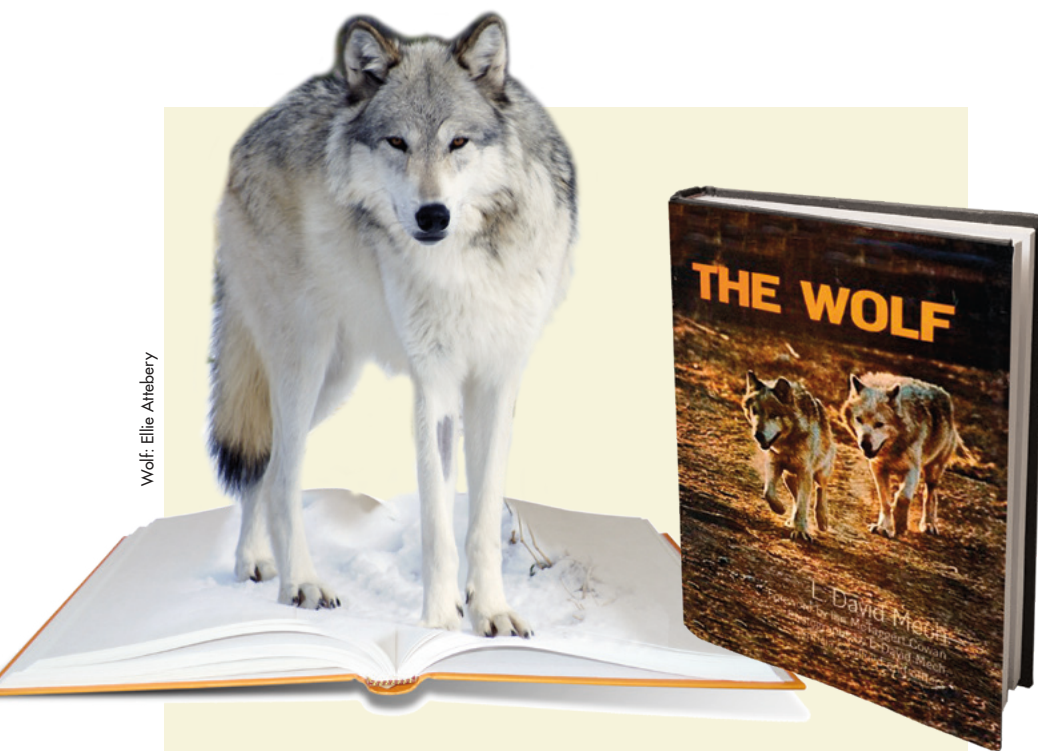


INTERNATIONAL WOLF

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50 Years in Print, L. David Mech's *The Wolf* Remains Relevant

By INTERNATIONAL
WOLF CENTER STAFF

Fifty years ago, a new wolf book hit the shelves, replacing the previous wolf “bible,” Young and Goldman’s 1944 *The Wolves of North America*. The new work was *The Wolf: Ecology and Behavior of an Endangered Species* by Dr. L. David Mech, published in spring 1970 by Natural History Press, a subsidiary of Doubleday Publishing.

As the wolf had been the first species deemed endangered in the 48 contiguous United States under the Endangered Species Preservation Act of 1966, the book was an immediate hit. It remains in print today.

On this occasion of the book’s 50th anniversary in print, *International Wolf* speaks with the author, who is also the founder and vice chair of the International Wolf Center.



IW: What motivated you to write *The Wolf*?

Mech: I had recently published *The Wolves of Isle Royale*, so not only had I completed the first three years of the Isle Royale research on wolves and moose, but I was also beginning studies of wolves and deer in

northeastern Minnesota. Thus I knew the wolf literature well and realized that a new synthesis of existing wolf information was sorely needed. It just seemed like a no-brainer.

IW: How long did it take you to write the book?

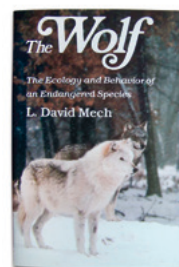
Mech: As I recall, about two years while I was also doing part-time field work.

IW: How well-received was the book?

Mech: Better than I ever expected. It won The Wildlife Society’s Terrestrial Wildlife Publication Award, and famed Supreme-Court Justice William O. Douglas reviewed it in May 1970 for the *Washington Post*, saying “This book will be our classic on the wolf—one of our finest animals, but much maligned and evidently destined to disappear.” A *New York Times* book review stated, “Sets down just about everything that we know about this beautiful and shy animal...a fine, comprehensive survey.”

IW: Wasn’t it reprinted as a paperback?

Mech: Yes; it remained as a hardback until 1981, when the University of Minnesota Press picked it up as a paperback. In 2011 it was released as an e-book.



IW: Were these versions updated?

Mech: No; that would have taken more time than I had then as a full-time wolf researcher. I could only do a three-page 1980 preface to update wolf distribution, mention two more Isle Royale books, and provide a short summary of my latest field research.

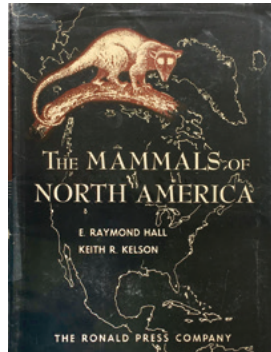
IW: The book has been out for 50 years. Isn’t it outdated?

Mech: Certainly some parts of it are, especially the information about wolf range or distribution. When I wrote the work, the only places in the 48 states that held wolves were northeastern Minnesota and Isle Royale in Lake Superior. In western Europe, only Spain and Italy still supported wolves, with about 100 left in Italy. Now, of course, there are at least 6,000 wolves in breeding packs inhabiting at least 11 states other than Alaska, as well as thousands of wolves throughout most of western Europe.

IW: Do any other parts of the book need updating?

Mech: Yes; I had listed in an appendix all the wolf subspecies that science had accepted by the late 1960s—some 24 in

North America and eight more in Europe. However, when biologists first classified wolf subspecies in North America, they were very liberal with subspecies recognition, so when Goldman reviewed those subspecies and added to them in 1944, he recognized 23 subspecies. When Hall and Kelson wrote *The Mammals of North America* in 1959, they recognized all of those and added another—*Canis lupus griseolabrus*, mainly in northern Saskatchewan, Canada, which Goldman had included in *C. l. occidentalis*. I accepted Hall and Kelson's classification with 24.



IW: Is this an example of what is known as “splitting” versus “lumping” animal subspecies?

Mech: Yes; an excellent example. In this case, Goldman had been a lumper, and Hall and Kelson, splitters. However, a more recent and relevant example is what Nowak did in 1995, lumping all of Hall and Kelson's 24 North American subspecies into only five. Thus, officially, science now recognizes only these five subspecies, and a more recent paper suggests those five should be lumped into four.

IW: It seems like classifying wolf subspecies is highly subjective.

Mech: Yes; but behaviorally and ecologically “a wolf is a wolf is a wolf.” They are all basically alike, differing primarily in size, coat coloration and skull measurements.

IW: Any other major updates needed to *The Wolf*?

Mech: Another, more-important, update involves the whole concept of the “alpha” wolf—a concept that my own, more recent field research since 1970 has led me to challenge.

IW: How is that?

Mech: When I wrote *The Wolf*, I had to rely much on the existing scientific literature, unless my own or someone else's research challenged or contradicted earlier findings. In 1947, a German ani-

mal behaviorist, Rudolf Schenkel, had published a major, 48-page, wolf-behavior study, *Ausdrucksstudien an Wolfen*, or *Expression Studies on Wolves*. That study described how in Schenkel's captive pack some wolves dominated over all the others in a sort of pecking order, as observed in chickens. Schenkel referred to those wolves as “alphas.”

IW: What's wrong with that?

Mech: In captive packs of unrelated wolves, like Schenkel studied, probably nothing. In such a pack, as in assemblages of most unrelated mammals thrown together in a restricted group—even in human prisons—individuals compete aggressively with each other for dominance, and the top-ranking individual is referred to as an “alpha.” The problem arises from applying that idea to natural, wild wolf packs.

IW: Please explain.

Mech: Natural wolf packs are basically families—that is, a pair of parent wolves and their offspring. The parents don't compete in a group to become a parent. They merely meet a member of the opposite sex, mate and produce offspring. Then the parents are naturally dominant to their offspring just like human parents are to their children, or doe deer are to their fawns. Calling parent wolves “alphas” implies that they fought to get to the top of a group, when in most natural packs they just reproduced and automatically became dominant.

IW: So what would you call them instead of “alpha male” and “alpha female”?

Mech: Merely “male parent” or “father,” and “female parent” or “mother.” Or “breeding male” and “breeding female.”

IW: What about packs with multiple breeders?

Mech: True, in some packs, like a few in Yellowstone, daughter wolves sometimes mature in their natal packs and produce offspring right along with their mothers. Those daughters could be referred to as

“subordinate females” because they are subordinate to the mother, who could then be referred to as the “matriarch.” The point is that “alpha” implies a creature more socially aggressive, rather than one that merely became a parent or one who merely dominates another.

IW: So it is never appropriate to refer to some individual wolf in the wild as an “alpha”?

Mech: There may be a few complex packs out there that have older members who are not breeders or parents but still dominate the others and might be called alphas. Murie in his 1944 book, *The Wolves of Mount McKinley* described one he thought was not the father of the pack and seemed to be the “lord and master” to whom all other pack members showed “diffidence.” However, he had no way of knowing who the father was. The description of this animal's behavior could very well fit that of a breeding male and his maturing offspring.

IW: Why, then, do we still see articles and even some books that continue to use the alpha term?

Mech: It is rare to find “alpha” used in a peer-reviewed, scientific publication since 1999 when I refuted that label. It still tends to be used among laypeople, reporters and authors writing for, or speaking with, popular audiences. I guess they either haven't heard about recent research or find the term special in some way—but I am to blame for that by publicizing the alpha concept in *The Wolf*, which is still being sold.

IW: What about other information in *The Wolf* that readers should be wary of?

Mech: Fortunately, the basic information in that book is still valid. It's just that we know so many more details now. Luigi Boitani and I, with 21 co-authors, filled a much larger book with all

that material in 2003, in *Wolves: Behavior, Ecology and Conservation*—and even that book could use updating.

IW: Ah. Maybe in 50 years we can do an interview about that book! ■

