



Alaska Wildlife ECHOES

Winter 2010

A Voice for Alaska's Wildlife

Volume 6 No. 1

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Romeo's Story

by Nick Jans

Editor's Note: With his permission, the author's original version of this article was updated to incorporate recent court proceedings and events.

The tragic story of Romeo, Juneau's iconic black wolf, is nearing its conclusion.

One of the men charged with killing the human-tolerant wolf in a restricted area, Park Myers of Juneau, pleaded guilty in November to several misdemeanor wildlife violations. Myers and Jeffery Peacock of Lancaster, PA, could have faced a maximum of three years in prison and more than \$15,000 in total fines for illegally killing not only the oddly gentle and sociable wolf who frequented the Mendenhall Recreation Area for nearly seven years, but two illegally baited black bears as well.

In a plea bargain agreement with the state, Myers pleaded guilty to unlawfully taking big game by using a rim fire cartridge to take a wolf and unlawful possession of that wolf. He also pleaded guilty to establishing a black bear station to hunt bear using bait or scent lures without an Alaska Department of Fish & Game permit, and two more counts of unlawful possession dating to May 2009 and May 2010. His sentence was 330 days in jail, all suspended, and \$12,500 in fines, all but \$5,000 suspended. He must also pay \$1,100 restitution and forfeit three rifles, surrender any interest in the hides in this case, and his hunting license will be suspended for the duration of his probation.

As of mid-December the state's case against Peacock is still pending. His next appearance in Juneau District Court is scheduled for late January. Both men could also face federal charges; however federal prosecutors are unlikely to pursue the case.



Photo by Nick Jans



Photo by John Hyde

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Notes from the Director

HAPPY 50th BIRTHDAY ARCTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE!

Please use this blessed event to renew your commitment to stopping the industrialization of an American treasure that is the heart of our last great wilderness. The Refuge – more than 19 million acres (about the size of South Carolina) in the northeast corner of Alaska – is home to 37 species of land mammals, including wolves, polar, brown and black bears, caribou and muskoxen, not to mention hundreds of varieties of birds, fish and marine mammals.

Currently the Obama administration has an opportunity to help protect this vast area from oil exploration by designating it a National Monument. Please show your support by signing an online petition: www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/588/633/233/.

FUN RUN IN THE SUN

AWA's fourth annual 5K Run for Wildlife Fun Run enjoyed a (rare) beautiful August day and much good cheer. Congratulations to Andy Josephson and his volunteer staff for another great showing of support for Alaska's wildlife.

ON BEHALF OF THE BEARS

A sincere THANK YOU to everyone who submitted comments in response to our bear snaring email Alert! The Board of Game postponed action on the proposal to initiate a massive bear snaring program until 2012. Together we saved hundreds of bears from a brutal death. Now we must work to be sure that the science of responsible ecosystems management extends past 2012 and recognizes the vital role bears play in healthy living ecosystems. Please check out my testimony to the Board of Game regarding bear snaring and special interest influence on page 7.

THE STORY OF A VERY UNUSUAL WOLF

Romeo was a wolf that bridged the gap between two worlds that are growing ever further apart. The AWA is not an "animal rights" organization, but we do recognize the human interest that surrounds this story. I hope you will read Nick Jans' front page article that details the life of a wolf that knew two worlds. 



**ALASKA WILDLIFE
ALLIANCE**

Echoes is published by the Alaska Wildlife Alliance. AWA is dedicated to the promotion of ecologically and ethically sound wildlife management in Alaska. To become a member or learn more please contact us at:

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Our EIN is 92-0073877. All donations are tax
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Photo by John Hyde



Three to Twenty in Eight: A Chapter is Born

by Tina M. Brown, AWA President

One Friday morning in April, three Juneauites sat down at the Southeast Waffle Company in Auke Bay to evaluate AWA's successful March event and rally, "Managing Wildlife in Alaska: Predators, Prey & Politics." However, more important than our past accomplishment, we were working on an innovative idea: a Southeast chapter of the Alaska Wildlife Alliance, its first regional chapter. Those three people were Jos Bakker, Pat O'Brien, and myself.

AWA-SE met every week of the summer and fall, rain or shine, and there was more sunshine last summer than most would expect in a rain forest. We crafted our organizational plan. We crafted our goals. We crafted our timeline. We recruited more board members.

Although it has taken time to develop the chapter, we did not remain behind our desks during the process. We had extraordinary tables at the Earth Day celebration at the Mendenhall Visitors' Center, at the Community Day on Campus at University of Alaska-Southeast, and at an oil spill forum at UAS.

We also set up a plan to learn more about how wildlife is managed in our area. The chair of the local Alaska Board of Game's Advisory Committee spoke at one of our meetings to explain the function of those committees. We went directly to the Alaska Department of Fish & Game to learn more about what that agency does. We met with the state biologist assigned to our area to discover the role he plays in the management of wildlife in Southeast.

Recently, we met with NOAA law enforcement officials to learn more about their functions, and we plan to visit the state wildlife troopers and the U.S. Forest Service in the near future.

Most recently, we had a splendid and very successful booth at the Juneau Public Market over the Thanksgiving weekend. We raffled off a gorgeous, handmade wildlife quilt, and sold beautifully crafted and carefully selected wildlife merchandise from local artists. Our booth was the exclusive retailer for Kim Elton's new book on Romeo, Juneau's black wolf, called *Five Winters, One Wolf*.

AWA-SE proudly hosted AWA's annual board retreat in Juneau last September, actively participating in critical discussions about AWA's goals and wildlife management in our state.

One of our main goals and responsibilities, however, is to actively advocate for wildlife. We have worked on several Southeast cases, including a shot brown bear, whale ramming incidents, a shot Steller sea lion issue, the illegal take of two bears and a black wolf, and other wildlife offenses. And we are in the process of forming a powerful legislative committee right here in the capital city to work on wildlife issues on that front.

Meanwhile, our board of directors and our advisory board have both been growing, and our committees are starting to grow. Our board of directors currently consists of Jos Bakker, Tamara Buffalo, Jim Green, Tim Miles, Pat O'Brien, Katrina Pearson and myself. Our advisory board currently consists of these Juneau gems: Bob Armstrong, Andrea Doll, Bob Doll, Doug Mertz, Linda Shaw, Margo Waring, and Mary Willson. In fact, we now have 20 board, advisory board, and committee members...all in just eight months. We are actively seeking a few new board members and several committee members, but for all intents and purposes, AWA-SE is up and running - and working hard for wildlife in Southeast Alaska and across the state.

From three to 20 in eight. Not bad. It makes me wonder how quickly additional regional chapters could be formed statewide to advocate for Alaska's wildlife. I hope you're interested. If you'd like to know more about how we did it in Southeast, please contact me. We at AWA-SE are currently the first and only chapter, but we hope to be the first of many chapters of the Alaska Wildlife Alliance very soon.

Kim Elton's book *Five Winters, One Wolf*, the unique story of Romeo told in compelling text and outstanding photos, is available for a limited time from AWA. Copies are \$60 each, including mailing to US addresses. Proceeds benefit AWA-SE. For more information please email info@akwildlife.org or leave a message at 907.277.0897. 

Romeo's Story

(continued from page 1)

Thanks to a months-long investigation by private citizens, who then presented evidence to both state and federal agents for further investigation, authorities had both men dead to rights. The mass of incriminating evidence included animal hides, photographs, emails and even eyewitness accounts.

Although DNA testing on the black wolf pelt confiscated from a Juneau taxidermist and presented as evidence in court has never been done, those who were most familiar with the wolf knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was indeed Romeo.

After charges were filed against the pair, Juneau wildlife supporters – many of them familiar with Romeo – packed the Juneau courtroom each and every time the case came before the judge for a hearing. The Alaska Wildlife Alliance sponsored an online petition that gathered more than 1,200 signatures asking that the two killers be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

Romeo's history is an enigmatic as his behavior. He appeared alone in the spring of 2002 as a gangly adolescent wolf. He might have been a wanderer or a cast-out from a pack, or one of two survivors after his pack was trapped (a pregnant female black wolf was struck and killed by a taxicab that spring near the Mendenhall Recreation Area). Though speculations are many, no one knows his history. All that's known for sure is that he began frequenting the area near the popular Mendenhall Glacier, and began approaching dogs - not aggressively, as you might expect, but with friendly social intentions that he clearly displayed by his postures and whining.

Though owners were understandably alarmed, it soon became clear the wolf was seeking playmates, not prey. Some dogs responded in kind; others shied away or became aggressive.

Through countless thousands of close canine encounters, the wolf seldom showed the least hint of aggression in return, even when dogs or their owners behaved badly. In fact, Romeo often was downright submissive. Some humans openly encouraged close interaction with their pets, and by extension, themselves. Some were thoughtful and careful in these encounters; others naïve, reckless, ignorant, or self-serving. Other people kept their dogs on leash, hazed the wolf away, or deliberately avoided the area altogether.

Over the years, Romeo was viewed, photographed, and enjoyed by hundreds, if not thousands of people. Though some spoke darkly about the danger posed by such an animal and threatened to take matters into their own hands, there was no report of a human being menaced (though some continued to be nervous and reactive). Despite rumors of people leaving food to attract him, in the countless hours I watched the wolf, people and dogs interact, I never once saw him approach humans as if expecting food. His scat contained bones and hair of a variety of wild prey, and he always seemed well-fed. Two or three canine disappearances and a few injuries were attributed to Romeo, but evidence was scant and pointed to careless human behavior. He was also witnessed to snatch a husky puppy and at least two small dogs (I saw one of these), run off, and then drop the animals without harming them.

The ADF&G and the U.S. Forest Service debated several courses of action, and finally elected to do little beyond firing an occasional noise-making barrage of "cracker" shells to haze the wolf away. Now and then,

Photo by Nick Jans



rangers handed out tickets to people for not restraining their dogs or openly encouraging social interaction. But Romeo always returned - seeking out his favorite canines for play and companionship; hunting for small game along the shore and scrounging salmon. His howls echoed in the natural amphitheater of Mendenhall Lake.

There was little doubt he recognized both individual people and animals at a distance. He would lope across the lake to meet favored playmates, and he obviously “knew” and tolerated certain humans at much closer distances than others. But though a number of people claimed some sort of special, direct relationship, they were in most cases (I would argue, and I include myself here) generalizing from the fact that Romeo had a special fondness for their dogs.

In fall of 2009, Myers and Peacock, who'd been stalking Romeo the previous autumn, finally succeeded in killing him - probably with a .22 caliber rifle from a roadway. They circulated gloating photos and emails about their conquest, which in truth was about as challenging a hunt as shooting a neighbor's dog. It was their bragging that led to their apprehension. And in the end, it seems the two killers will walk off with only a fraction of the punishment they deserve. Yes, they'll have legal costs to pay, and Myers and his wife - both of whom lost their jobs in Juneau and reportedly fear local reprisals - may leave town. But Romeo, perhaps the most unusual and unique wolf in recorded history and beloved by so many, is gone forever. Even if Myers and Peacock received the maximum sentence possible, it wouldn't change that fact.

Could things have been different? Was a happy-ever-after ending ever possible? Or was this just another case of wildlife habituation gone wrong, misguided humans loving a wild animal inevitably to death, or at least rendering it so that it lost natural caution? It's easy to reduce the case to the pat explanation that I've heard many times. But this case is far more complicated. The fact is, humans and large wildlife can and do exist with minimal conflict, both globally and locally. For an immediate example, black bears stroll past people at the very same recreation area, and neither human nor bear has been injured (with the possible exception of a tourist bus that struck a bear crossing the road - but even that bear survived). In Anchorage, bull moose

wander through suburban backyards with little conflict. Huge coastal brown bears on the Katmai coast brush past viewers on trails with scarcely a glance. And so on. What's unique about this case is that it involved a wolf - a large male. While far more people are injured or even killed by white tail deer, the ravaging killer wolf of legend and myth is alive and well, if only in our minds.

The facts of the case are plain. Romeo was a unique animal with a strong drive to socialize with dogs. Even though he was hazed repeatedly, he returned. He not only survived in the shadow of Alaska suburbia, he prospered. He didn't become food conditioned and aggressive; his interactions with humans were neutral. To the credit of all, the unique situation worked for wolf, dogs, and humans alike. That Romeo had chosen to frequent an area closed to hunting, and was so often around watching and watchful humans no doubt protected him from poachers.

Romeo was in the process of living to a ripe, peaceful old age (few male wild wolves live past eight, and he was in excellent health when he was killed) and there's no reason to believe he wouldn't have lived several years more. He was in superb condition, with little sign of age other than some gray hairs. If he'd been chased off or drugged and relocated, he'd have been statistically unlikely to live longer. In the end, what killed this singular wolf wasn't love; it was two ignorant “sportsmen” with sociopathic tendencies, who took open pleasure in killing an animal beloved by many. If there's any lesson here, it involves the utter banality of evil, and the empty finality of loss.

But the magic of those years that Romeo lived among us remains. Those who saw and lived it knew. And we remember.

Juneau writer Nick Jans is a longtime naturalist and wildlife advocate. His website is www.nickjans.com.

IN MEMORY OF ROMEO

A memorial service for Romeo was held at Mendenhall Recreation Area in November and a bronze plaque is ready to be placed there in his memory. The next edition of *Echoes* will feature more information about Romeo and the memorial service. 

AWA Board Members “Retreat” to Juneau

by Jenny Pursell, AWA Board Member

Alaska’s capitol city, Juneau, couldn’t have been a better locale for AWA’s 2010 Board retreat in September. This is the first time that we met in Juneau and it certainly will not be the last time! Tina Brown, our president, hosted the retreat in her and husband Greg’s beautiful coastal home. AWA Board members traveled from Anchorage, the Kenai Peninsula, and Wasilla to attend. All three Juneau Board members also attended, and Art Greenwalt joined us by teleconference from Fairbanks.

This year’s two-day retreat was particularly significant as AWA now has a Southeast Chapter, and its Board and some members also attended. In fact the SE Chapter hosted a Friday evening dinner reception in honor of AWA’s state Board members which was well attended by many local folks including Juneau Mayor Bruce Botelho and his wife Lupita. Once we started our business meeting on Saturday morning with both state Board members and SE Chapter Board members, we had a total of 13 dedicated Alaskans working together on policy and strategy to best address seemingly endless wildlife-related issues.

But we did manage to squeeze in a little fun. Juneau’s weather gave us unusual sunny, warm days which lent the best conditions for a whale watching boat tour given by Captain Greg Brown on his skookum boat *Weather Permitting*.

This retreat was an unprecedented treat for all of us. We owe a world of thanks to the Browns for hosting us and providing us with the opportunity to gather together and work hard for our real bosses....Alaska’s wildlife!

I now want to recognize and thank each AWA state Board and SE Chapter member who attended and participated during our retreat. From AWA-state: Tina M. Brown, president; Art Greenwalt, vice president; Connie Brandel, secretary and office manager; Alex Simon, treasurer; John Toppenberg, board member and executive director; and Linda Donegan, L. Mackenzie Donegan, Kneely Taylor and Jenny Pursell, board members; and Andy Josephson, Advisory Board member. From the SE Chapter: Tina M. Brown, president; Pat O’Brien, Jos Bakker, and Jim Green.

Also, a special thanks to Katrina Pearson, SE Board secretary and Tim Miles, SE Board member, who gave invaluable assistance with the reception and retreat but were unable to attend. The following SE Advisory Board members attended the reception: Bob Armstrong, Andrea and Bob Doll, Doug Mertz, Margo Waring and Linda Shaw. Advisory Board member Marsha Bennett was unable to attend because of a previous commitment.

Finally, a very special thank you to the SE members whose generous donations made this retreat such a success: Tina and Greg Brown for the use of their home as meeting space and overnight accommodations, and for hosting the whale-watching tour; Pat O’Brien for overnight accommodations; and the tireless crew of SE members who set up, cleaned up, and provided a steady supply of outstanding meals and refreshments. I also had the pleasure of providing overnight accommodations for John Toppenberg and Andy Josephson.

The only downside of our Juneau retreat was having to say goodbye to folks as they headed back to Southcentral Alaska! 🐾

Photo by John Hyde



Telling the Truth to the Board of Game

by John Toppenberg, AWA Director

Reprinted below is the text of John Toppenberg's testimony to the Alaska Board of Game, given during the public comment period at the BOG's October meeting in Anchorage.

Upon conclusion, his comments received a standing ovation.

TESTIMONY

Good afternoon, I'm John Toppenberg, Director of the Alaska Wildlife Alliance. Today my comments will simply be those of a concerned Alaskan.

For clarification: I support true subsistence hunting and actual meat hunting. I believe commercial trophy hunting that takes out all the prime breeding bulls is the very real enemy of these traditional Alaskan hunters.

You may remember that during all of the eight or nine times I've testified before this Board I've consistently been respectful and thanked you for your service to Alaska. While we have disagreed on many points I've believed that you were, in most cases, attempting to fulfill the constitutional mandates of your responsibilities.

I no longer believe that to be the case, with Mr. Grusendorf being a partial exception. The totally unscientific extremism of the Department of Fish and Game's proposals to bait and snare bears during the summer tourism season, the unlimited killing of bears by individual trappers, the snaring of cubs, and leaving bear meat to rot are among the reasons it's become clear that the department and this Board have become an extension of special interest trophy hunting organizations; specifically the Alaska Outdoor Council and Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife.



Photo by John Hyde

The political reach of these special interest organizations cannot be overstated. On their issues they are far too often puppeteers for the Governor, the legislature, and the Department of Fish and Game. And most especially with this Board!

Who are the Alaskans you represent?

We know that 14 percent of Alaskans hold a hunting license, which is about 18 percent of those eligible; however only a small percentage of this subgroup belongs to these influential special interest organizations. This amounts to between 2 and 3 percent of all Alaskans.

I know I'm not the only Alaskan that believes it's time for this Board to add the other 97 percent of Alaskans to those you represent, and manage our common wildlife heritage for all Alaskans as the state constitution mandates.

Thank you. 🐾

“For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with the extension of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings, they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time.” --Henry Beston, Naturalist, 1928

A Walk in the Autumn Forest

by Art Greenwalt, AWA Board Member

Autumn has come to the Interior of Alaska and once again Midas seems to have touched every hillside and dome in view. Mixed here and there are the dark greens of spruce but it is the dazzlingly bright gold and yellow of the birch and poplars that shines so in the waning sunlight. Go out onto the tundra and beside its own golden hues blaze the velvety deep reds as the vegetational mat moves towards winter, the berries succulent and full of sugar.

Now is a special time to go into the forest of the Interior to a place where prehistory intersects a newer history and in doing so reveals the intricacies of life in Alaska.

Many years ago on one of the numerous rivers in the Fairbanks area I found a deposit of late-Pleistocene bones: mammoth, bison, horse, a few other critters. Judging from the faunal assemblage it was not terribly old, perhaps 12 to 14 thousand years or so. It harkened back to a time when the thick forests of today were but scattered small clumps of trees and the main growth was a steppe, a grassland of incredible productivity.

To get to this deposit means a half-hour's hike through the woods, beginning with a careful balancing act along a beaver dam. I never saw the owners of that structure but they were around for it always showed new signs of their efforts with each of my visits. Indeed, I once pulled a long, de-barked poplar staff from it to use as a hiking stick and over the decades it has served me well on glaciers, mountain sides, and along many a trail. Once over the dam an old logging road leads a little ways into the woods. At this time of the year, especially in the morning when it tends to be very damp, the air is spicy, tangy with the heady fragrance of ripening berries. Rose-hips, highbush cranberries, blueberries, even the poplars lend their own sweet aroma to the swirl.

The trail itself is swathed in their yellow and golden leaves, while here and there an errant red leaf stands out like a ruby on the ground. It's quiet walking. Now and then there is a bird call or a squirrel chattering away, but for the most part a wonderful silence fills the spaces

between the trees and lets the mind wander where it will. Mushrooms of tawny coloration or faded reds and greens appear, often with bites missing where something has sampled them. Boletes, thick and luscious-looking, tempt me to take them home for dinner. But I could never fix in my mind the simple test as to whether this one was edible and its look-alike not. So they stay there to feed some creature a bit more knowledgeable than I.

Cool and damp, the thick woods are lit with a light subdued no matter how sunny the surroundings for these are old spruce, with trunks I can barely encircle with my arms, birch gnarled and bumpy with boles. It is a green solitude where the spruce hold sway and it is easy to let go of all the thoughts that tend to crowd one's mind. Should a breeze spring up the sound of the poplars and birch leaves is one of soft applause at this natural pageant.

Eventually, the trail becomes more of a suggestion where the brush isn't quite so thick until it suddenly comes to the river. There is a cutbank here. Not too high but obviously preventing any further progress and so I go off to the left where soon enough I am pushing my way through willow saplings onto a broad apron of gravel, cobbles and sand. Across the channel is another cutbank and from its sandy face I can already see here and there an old bone protruding.

But my attention is more immediately taken by the narrative set in sand at my feet. Moose tracks, ubiquitous along the Interior's waterways, dot the damp surface and interspersed with them are grizzly bear tracks. Both are at least a day old for they have dried to a fair degree, but the latter reminds me of an implicit agreement I have with the bears: I don't steal their stinky, dead salmon and they don't steal my old bones, fossil and otherwise! The salmon run in this river is long over but the bears still check its bars just in case, for they must fatten up.

Sprinkled amongst these depressions are the smaller tracks of fox, ravens, gulls, mink, beaver and wolf. The last two visiting species remind me of an important

interplay between the two. Wolves are one of the few predators that take beavers. Without them, there would be dams and ponds in far greater profusion. While beaver ponds and dams are important to the ecology of an area, too many and things go awry. Flooding occurs as the dams back up the waters and loss of certain species of favored trees can take place as they stock up for winter. A nice balance exists between the wolf and the beaver for the one keeps the other's numbers in check. At the same time, even a wolf finds it a bit of a challenge to take a beaver.



Photo by John Hyde

I've spent much time standing at these ponds, enjoying their stillness and the reflections of the world around them in their quiet waters. Sometimes I've been rewarded by happening upon a moose chest-deep and grazing on the underwater plant life. At the same time I can think of instances when a long, long detour has been necessary to circumnavigate their watery domains and times like that I selfishly appreciate the wolf's role a bit more.

Adding my own to this litany of tracks I begin to wade across the river to the fossil site. The water is clear, not too fast, only coming up to my waist, and cold enough that I am glad to be quickly out of it and on the other shore. Once there it's time to start searching for those ancient remains. Some days the effort was rewarded magnificently as in the time I found a tusk and several bison skulls. Other times...well, I had a nice walk in the woods, at least.

Each bone found is still quite organic even if stained by the natural tannins in which it has been buried. Hand one to a dog and it will gladly chew on it (though I don't advise doing so). Sometimes they bear a rich brown patina from iron in the soil or are like polished teak. Sometimes I would find a series of bones that could be put together to form an ankle and hoof or part of the spine and I could move it, wonder at its articulation. Above all, each bone was a touch of the past returned to life: for in thinking about its origins, the animal of which it was part and how life must have been for it at that time is the animal then resurrected.

It is that pondering, that fitting together of a myriad of facts that begins to give one a picture of what has been and gives you the chance to relate it to the present and thereby form a bridge across the millennia. For as there were immense herds of bison and horse in Alaska then, herds of caribou and mammoth (not to be confused with mastodon which were uncommon up here) there were also sabre-toothed cats, Alaskan lions, dire wolves, Pleistocene bears of enormous size and many other predators. Just as there was life there was also death on a daily

basis for both predator and prey. Yet, somehow without the increasing human intervention that some find so needful these days, intervention that at times is brutal beyond comprehension...somehow a general balance existed between what hunted and what was hunted. It is a balance one rarely sees today in our zeal to manage everything around us.

Back across the river, back through the forest, my boots squishing with each step I find myself wondering what it would have been like to step out onto that sandy apron and instead of beaver tracks find mammoth tracks. Instead of the hand-sized prints of a passing grizzly, the dinner-plate-sized prints of the Pleistocene bear. Or, instead of my waffle-tread bootprints, the skin-clad footprints of the first humans in the area.

Such are the musings on a walk in the autumn forest. 

A Wolf on the Ridgeline

by Bill Sherwonit

I scan the ridge. For a minute or two, I see nothing but rock and tundra and clouds. Then, to my delight, a dark, four-legged form appears, silhouetted against the sky.

Driving my mud-splattered Toyota through Sable Pass, a place of tundra foothills known to be frequented by grizzly bears, I instinctively slow down and pull over to the shoulder when I round a curve and see two shuttle buses stopped on the gravel road. The buses' signal lights flash golden in the somber light of a gloomy autumn afternoon, a sure sign that the drivers and their passengers are looking at wildlife.

Maybe they've spotted some bears, I think, while looking for anything that resembles a grizzly.

The fortunate owner of a rare road permit, I'm homeward-bound after three nights in the heart of Denali National Park. Already I've spotted most of the larger, grander wildlife you can hope to see here: caribou with their antlers shedding velvet; Dall sheep, white against the browns and reds of volcanic hills; a giant-antlered bull moose feeding on willow; and, best of all for this bear lover, a blond, berry-fattened grizzly that hungrily stripped blueberry bushes of fruits and leaves beside the park road, then casually ambled onto the gravel surface less than 15 feet from my car's front fender.

I turn off the engine and follow the gaze of the bus drivers and their passengers, off to the right. Unable to

find anything that remotely looks like a bear or other large animal, I walk over to the nearest driver, who holds up three fingers. I take this to mean a family of three bears: mom and twin cubs.

But when I ask, "What do you see?" the driver shocks me with his answer. "Wolves," he replies. "But they just went over the ridge."

"You're kidding. How many did you see?"

"Six in all."

Of course I can't leave, knowing six wolves are passing through the area. I wait five minutes, maybe 10. Then, looking back to the ridge where the wolves disappeared, I decide to play a hunch. I do a U-turn and retrace my path through Sable Pass, looking for a different angle, one that might better reveal the wolves as they move across the hills.

Then, putting my binoculars up, I scan the ridge. For a minute or two, I see nothing but rock and tundra and clouds. Then, to my delight, a dark, four-legged form appears, silhouetted against the sky. A lone wolf is trotting along the ridge top. Attention focused on the ridge, I nearly drive into the ditch, but swerve at the last moment. Keeping my eyes (mostly) on the road for a few hundred more yards, I pull over.

The wolf is far enough away that I can make out little detail, except that its body is dark gray. For no clear reason, I decide the animal is a male. He descends the hill and begins angling toward a dirty remnant snowfield that fills a north-facing gully.

The wolf stops frequently and repeatedly drops his head as if smelling the tundra, then glances around, as if in no hurry.

Other shuttle buses arrive and I go over to one of the drivers, tell him about the wolf, and describe the animal's position. The patch of snow helps him quickly locate the wolf, so another bus load of people gets to share in the treat.

By now the wolf has returned to the ridgeline. He briefly paces back and forth, then drops out of sight.



Romeo at Mendenhall Recreation Area

Photo by John Hyde

I've watched the wolf for 10 minutes or less, at a distance where the wolf is barely visible with the naked eye. Yet this "encounter" will remain firmly fixed in my memory, like all my past meetings with wolves.

There's something about seeing the wolf on that far ridge that is especially exciting. Maybe, in part, it's that my hunch played out. But it's more than that. Today, at least, I'd rather see the wolf atop that far ridgeline than have him amble down the middle of the road as Denali's wolves sometimes do, trailed by buses and cars. Denali's wild backcountry is where this animal is most at home, closest to his essence.

Seeing the wolf in remote terrain, and knowing that other members of his pack are nearby, stirs my imagination. It's almost as if I've been carried out there, far from the road and its bus loads of tourists.

"Out there" is where I prefer to be when in Denali, walking ridges and exploring the tundra. Immersed in wildness, I sometimes sense a lupine joy. It's what I'm feeling now.

Bill Sherwonit frequently writes about Alaska's wildlife and politics. His latest book is "Changing Paths: Travels and Meditations in Alaska's Arctic Wilderness." He has authored 12 books about Alaska, including three books about Denali, two about the Iditarod, and others about Alaska's state parks, the necessity of wilderness, his evolving relationship with wild nature, and bears. 🐾

AWA Board President Retires

The Alaska Wildlife Alliance wishes to profoundly thank Andy Josephson for more than two years of distinguished service as our Board President. His steady hand at the helm of our governing board saw us through many difficult issues and challenges.

Congratulations, Andy, on a job well done. Alaska's wildlife could not have a better friend. They, and we, look forward to your continued involvement with AWA and our quest for a better future for Alaska's wildlife.

Welcome to Tina M. Brown

The dynamic head of Alaska's new Southeast Chapter has taken Andy's spot as our Board President. We know her tireless efforts on behalf of Alaska's wildlife will see us through the daunting challenges ahead.

Thank You!

To some of our special donors:

- Ferguson Foundation
- Suzan Mackler Fund
- WestWind Foundation
- Cheryl Forrester Babcock
- Ed Bailey
- Nancy Ferguson
- Sandy Lerner
- James and Barbara Matthews
- John Porter
- Lowell Thomas, Jr.
- Bryan and Christine White

For their invaluable in-kind donations:

- John Hyde
- Johnny Johnson
- Andrew Josephson
- Kathy Sarns

The Alaska Wildlife Alliance would like to offer a heartfelt thank you on behalf of Alaska's wildlife to Nancy Ferguson and the Ferguson Foundation. Without their generous support much of the action we are able to take in support of wildlife on the Last Frontier would not be possible.

And a most sincere thank you to all of AWA's loyal and generous members who help us give Alaska's wildlife a voice.

We deeply appreciate everything you do for Alaska's wildlife!





THE ALASKA WILDLIFE ALLIANCE

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Farewell, Romeo

Juneau will be a lesser
place without you...



Photo by John Hyde