

# High Drama in Yellowstone

By Kirsty Peake

Watching wolves in Yellowstone brings high drama, laughter and sorrow. When my husband and I left our Montana home on February 2, 2013, we had no idea that the next few days would be a rollercoaster ride of emotions we had never before experienced.

Events began on a clear day, which meant that Yellowstone Wolf Project leader Doug Smith and his tech team might radio-collar some wolves from the newly formed Junction Butte pack. The team spotted the pack from Hellroaring Overlook, a vantage point with a panoramic view of a valley with steep hills and rocky outcroppings beyond. Soon the spotter plane found the breeding male (nicknamed Puff) and his mate, and the helicopter came in. Puff evaded Smith and his crew, but they were successful in capturing and collaring Puff's beautiful mate, who then officially became 870F

For the next two days we watched as Puff flirted with 870F. Finally she accepted his advances and the pair remained tied after mating. The other wolves, watching from uphill, ran down and jumped on the tied pair and they disappeared, buried under the pack. The tie was broken during the melee, and 870F moved away and lay down, flat out. Puff settled down next to her, licking her face. Eventually the rest of the pack gathered around and bedded. As light was falling, we called it a day.

The next day, we arrived at Hellroaring, and I soon had my scope up. I immediately realized that Puff and a black female were standing over something. It was 870F, and she had hardly moved from the day before. Puff was pawing at her but getting no reaction. The pack began to move off towards the east, but Puff was reluctant to leave 870F. He repeatedly pawed at her in an effort to get her to move. Then he began to move away, glancing back at her. Two other females approached and sniffed her and then left, too. She remained still as Puff returned one more time, pawing her so hard that she rolled over and slid down the hill where she lay unmoving. By this time tears were streaming down my face. I thought she was dead. All the while, ravens and magpies were on the ground near 870F. As the other wolves left, the birds moved in toward her.

The first raven landed on her side, but her head lifted and the raven flew off. Our tears turned into smiles. Then, with her drive to survive, 870F staggered to her feet and took a few shaky steps before collapsing again. Puff had noticed, and he returned with the black female accompanying him. Then 870F tried to get up, at which time Puff tried to breed with

her again, but she collapsed. Bit by bit she would get up, move a few feet and then fall, head and chest hitting the ground first. She would lie there for a few minutes and then try again, her head lowered as she tried to walk. As she made a great effort to climb a short incline, Puff mounted her again. She averted her tail, and this time they tied for 18 minutes. Within the first two minutes, 870F collapsed on her back and tried to get up, only to fall once more. Eventually both wolves, still tied, lay down. After they broke apart, 870F remained motionless. We thought she would not get up again.

But as the pack picked up the pace and moved off to the east, 870F rose to her feet and started to follow. Collapsing, she would lie still for several minutes before trying again to catch up with her family. Every now and then, a pack member would return to check on her. After traveling perhaps two miles, the pack disappeared among the rocks. We followed 870F with our scopes until we could see her no more. Our feeling was that she had suffered some sort of traumatic spinal or neck injury when the pack had jumped on her. Gerry, a friend of ours, and I looked at each other as the wolves vanished from view, and he said, "Well, I never thought that would be the outcome." We were emotionally drained.

After several anxious days, we saw 870F again. She was lying down, still badly injured. Finding her after that was difficult and sporadic. She appeared to be staying near the pack but not necessarily with the others. Her injury excluded her from taking part in any hunting. When we did see her, she was always lying down. Then we realized that she was no longer with the pack. "She's out there on her own," we thought, with no ability to hunt. When we did spot her, she was on high ground—good for safety—and she was resting. Survival was her focus now.

The days passed, and finally in March we discovered 870F up and moving. She was still stopping and resting regularly, but she was moving at a trot! She was with two other wolves that must have been helping her, perhaps bringing her scavenged food. She was thin but not emaciated. As we watched, 870F gnawed a bone that she was determined to break. Suddenly she was startled. Her head came up, and she jumped to her feet and looked behind her. Nothing was there, but just to see her able to move like that was a joy. From then on until we left, we had occasional sightings of her and heard her howling. She has since mated with 890M and dened in an area called The Trough. I am now anxiously waiting for news of her pups. If they have inherited her character, they will be

noticed during their lives in Yellowstone. She has shown true grit to overcome the horrendous injuries that she suffered and has shown the incredible strength of a wolf's desire to survive in order to be able to reproduce.

In late June 2014 Yellowstone Wolf Watchers saw five healthy pups, three greys and two blacks, playing at the Junction Butte pack's rendezvous site. What a happy outcome to a story that almost ended tragically.