

Kirsty Peake in conversation with Rick McIntyre, YNP Wolf Project's Interpretive Ranger.

Questions by Cammie Jones and Kirsty Peake

Q. How did you start your career?

RM. I started as a seasonal naturalist in Denali National Park in the 1970's. During my first few years there wolves were hard to spot. I only saw three during my initial summer there. Grizzlies, however, were way more common and I spent a lot of time watching them. But gradually I realised that, other than mother/cub interactions, bear behaviour is pretty repetitive. It is mostly eating, walking around and sleeping. As the years went by I saw wolves more regularly and became fascinated by their endless social interactions with pack members. BY the 1980's Denali had become the best place in the world to see and study wolves. During that period I found a viewpoint from where miles away I could watch the den of the famous East Fork Pack, the pack that Adolph Murie had studied and written about in the 1930's and 1940's.

Q. What brought you to Yellowstone?

RM. In the early 1990's I was asked to write my first wolf book (*A Society of Wolves*) and at the time the biggest wolf issue was the possible reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park. I interviewed Park Service staff involved in the issue, along with Ed Bangs of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the over wolf recovery leader. I got to know all the players involved in the possible reintroduction proposal and became familiar with all aspects of the issue. I transferred to Yellowstone in the spring of 1994 and was given the title of Wolf Interpreter. All my programmes to park visitors were on the reintroduction proposal

Q. What was the best way you found to talk to people about the reintroduction?

RM. Only a small percentage of park visitors go to the formal Park Service naturalist programmes and those people tend to be very well informed about park issues. I tried to figure out how to reach the vast majority of visitors that never went to our programmes and who likely knew nothing about the history of wolves in the park. I recall how I would walk around in my ranger uniform in the busiest sections of the park, such as Old Faithful, with a wolf pelt in my arms. That guaranteed that people would come to me. As they gathered around to touch the pelt, I would tell the story of how the gray wolf was native animal when Yellowstone was set aside as the first National Park in 1872, but that the early rangers killed all of them off by 1926. I then would add that we hoped to get approval to reintroduce them back into the park. In those days I felt like I was more of a street preacher than one giving sermons to the converted.

Q. Were you here for the release in January 1995?

RM. No, in my first few years in Yellowstone my job was only for the summer months. I worked in Big Bend National Park in the winters so that meant that I was there when the wolves arrived in February of 1995. I got back to the park in May and during my first full day back I saw the entire six member Crystal Creek wolf pack in Lamar Valley. None of us had expected that the wolves would be very visible, but it turned out we saw them frequently that first year.

Q. What is the longest time you have had seeing wolves on consecutive days?

RM. I saw wolves every day during one period of 892 days.

Q. Much has been said about the amount of data you have collected. What are you doing with this?

RM. At the end of the day, on my own time, I write up my field notes and now have close to 11,000 pages and any time Doug Smith or other wolf biologists would like to take a look at that I am happy to share. Eventually I will be writing books based on those notes when I am finished with the Park Service. *KP – well I don't think that will happen for a long time, RM – the date does keep being pushed back!*

Q. Do you think captive wolves play an important part in educating people about wolves?

RM. Yes I definitely do feel that way. Not everyone has the time or money to visit parks like Denali and Yellowstone and see wolves in the wild. We need captive facilities like the one so well managed by the Trust so that people in the UK and nearby countries have the opportunity to see a wolf pack and hear talks given by knowledgeable guides about the real story of wolves and their place in the natural world. I am very grateful for all the people that have worked so hard in the Trust and in other wolf organisations throughout the world and have dedicated their lives to help educate people about wolves.

Q. In a previous interview you stated that packs generally shared their carcass peacefully. That images of wolves baring teeth at their own pack members was usually captive wolves. Is this still your observation with the apparent reduced elk numbers?

RM. Yes, I think wild wolves are very tolerant of each other at carcasses. We have had many cases of the adult wolves making a kill but not feeding right away. They will walk off to rest or catch their breath. While they are doing that the subordinate members of the pack come in and often they are in fact the first ones to eat.

The most aggression you might see is when wolves are feeding shoulder to shoulder and one might snap at another and then it is over and they continue to feed. It's like the equivalent of a human family at a big dinner where two teenagers go for the same piece of food. The wolves seem to get along very well in terms of sharing a carcass. Of course a bull elk carcass could be 700lbs so if I was a wolf I would have a pretty good understanding that there was plenty to go around. If there was a tasty tit bit there might be a very minor, very brief argument.

We may have done some harm in the perception of wolf behaviour. Most of the earlier wolf documentaries were filmed with wolves in captivity and they didn't always tell the audience straight off that that was the case. It makes for good TV to see animals fighting over a carcass, growling and seeing one bite and pin another one. I understand why filmmakers would put a lot of emphasis on that.

Wolves born in captivity have no option of hunting, no ability to earn their own living. All they know is that once in a while food shows up in their pen. If there is a big dominant male he may well take the food aggressively because he doesn't know if he is going to eat again.

Compare this to a wild wolf which has, in my opinion, a lot of self-confidence, a lot of self-assurance that its pack will make a kill sooner or later and there will be plenty of food for all.

Q. There are huge numbers of visitors to the Park now. Approaching 4 million in 2015. Their enthusiasm to get close to the wolves must be challenging at times. You are always so patient and polite with them. Does it ever get frustrating that their behaviour may be bothersome to the wolves?

RM. Yes it does, but it is important to understand that if I allow myself to get angry it is going to do way more harm than good. I understand how important it is for people to see and get a photo of a wolf. But if park visitors are too obsessed with those goals, they may not realise that they might be interfering with a wolf's everyday life. For example we have some wolf dens near the park road and the pack members have to frequently cross the road to hunt and bring back food to the pups. Our most common problem takes place when a visitor is driving along and sees a wolf approaching the road. Without thinking, they probably will speed up to the potential crossing spot, stop the car, get out and take pictures of the wolf, not knowing that it is a mother trying to get back to her pups. In cases like that I would go to the person and ask if they have had the chance to get some photos of the wolf, then explain that it is a mother who is trying to bring food to her pups. I would then add that it looks like we, and I would emphasise the word we rather than you, might be in her way. I would lastly suggest that they take another picture or two then move on so we can help her get home to her family. By wording things that way, rather than accusing someone of harassing an animal, I am hoping to get people to understand their potential impact on wild animals and how they can avoid bothering them, both now and in the future.

Q. When we travelled up to Billings together you talked about the 126 matings you had seen. 50% were the Breeding males and 42% were the Breeding females.

RM. I have now seen 126 matings over 17 breeding seasons and in total, adding in other people's observations, we have observed 204 ties. 50 of the males in ties have been breeding males and 43% of the females have been the breeding females. That means that subordinate males and females can often find ways to mate despite their lower positions in the pack. For example a subordinate male may wait for the breeding male to tie with the breeding female, then run over to a lower ranking unrelated female and mate with her. It may be sneaky, but it works.

Q. I couldn't remember what you said about the subordinate females and why they are a larger percentage than the breeding females.

RM. I am working on analysing that in order to come up with a better understanding. The common practice seems to be that it is more likely for young male adults to disperse from their home pack seeking out unrelated females. This is a risky business as they leave their territory and cross into territories of other packs. It seems more likely that subordinate females stay within their territories and the males come to them, gentleman callers in fact! The females are in a very secure situation. They have the protection of their own territory, their own family, etc. It is the males that are taking the risk.

If a subordinate female meets up with a dispersing male then she has a lot of options. For example she could go off with that male and try to find a vacant territory to start their own

pack. In Yellowstone the norm is that at any given time all good wolf pack territories are occupied. It is a hard thing to find a vacant territory which could support them year round. Another option would be to stay with her natal pack and have her pups. The dispersing male may not stay with her pack. We do know that at times certain adult females have shown aggression towards other pregnant females with the pack. However there are many Breeding Females that are non-aggressive to subordinate pregnant females, sometimes their own daughters. If the daughter 'stays home' and has pups they would be the 'grandpups' of the Breeding Pair. Genetically that is a pretty good pay off for allowing them to stay. There is just a lot of possibilities and options and I think one indication of the intelligence of wolves is how they have to make so many decisions in their life – what to do here, there.

Thank you Rick for giving me so much of your time. It has been fascinating listening to your insights on wolves and their behaviour.

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NB: This question and its answer are going in a separate Wolf Print edition covering 'Young Ones'.

Q. You told me that you have had over 88,000 wolf sightings. Are there any that stand out?

RM. A recent one was when we had the Lamar Canyon adults howling from the north side of the road. One of their gray pups was missing and their howling was probably an attempt to contact it. We heard answering howls from the south, then saw a gray pup in that area. It was going north, toward the sound of the adults' howls. 926F the breeding female and mother of the pups, was doing most of the howling. She and a yearling daughter crossed the road to the south and went toward the pup. On reaching it, 926F sniffed the pup nose to nose, just like you would expect a mother to do with a missing pup. Then 926F walked off to the east and the pup followed. But after another moment or two, 926F turned around, ran at the pup and pounced on it. She seemed to be attacking it and her yearling was joining in. Apparently it had taken 926F a few seconds to analyse the scent of the pup and realise that it was not hers. It must have been a pup from the neighbouring Junction Butte Pack and had mistaken the howling as being from its own pack. The pup ended up in a low spot and we could not tell if it had been killed. The two Lamar Canyon adults then walked off. After a short delay the pup stood up with a tucked tail. Both adults ran back and harassed it, but this time the pup fought back and 926F and the yearling soon left it alone and recrossed the road to the north. The pup went back to the south and seemed alright.

In thinking over that incident, I concluded that 926F was fixated on finding her lost pup and was assuming that this gray pup was hers. After realising that it was from a rival pack an instinct to attack it kicked in and her adult daughter imitated her actions. But then another instinct took over and she spared its life and let it go. We have had other observations over the years of adult wolves coming across pups from other packs and also letting them go after sniffing them. Perhaps an adult wolf when meeting a pup from a rival pack just does not see the pup as a threat and therefore has no reason to kill it. 926Fs actions may also relate to what we have seen happen when a breeding male dies of natural causes and is replaced by a new male who has come in from another pack. In every case we have seen, the new male adopts and raises the pups of the previous male, just like they were his own.