Wolves pack in entertainment

BY HOLMES ROLSTON III
For the Coloradoan

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK — Arriving at Lamar Ranch in wintry Yellowstone, I get out of the car to see several scopes set up in the snow at the west end of the parking lot. I walked over, peeked through one of the scopes and in 30 seconds I saw seven wolves.

What luck.

This is the Agate Creek Pack. People told me they hadn't seen them up near Lamar Ranch for three weeks. “That's the alpha female 715F on the far left,” said a fellow viewer, you can tell her by the short tail. The alpha male 641 M is next to her. He's big.

The wolves, which were identification collars, were laying down on a ridge top across the valley. After a few minutes, four got up and started playing around, chasing each other.

A wolf walks along a ridge in the Lamar Valley of Yellowstone National Park in March.

The viewer turned out to be Rick McIntyre, a ranger and celebrated wolf watcher. The pups were nicely profiled against the snow. We could plainly see their playing. That's why I came to Yellowstone in March to see these wolves trapped in Canada and released 16 years ago March 15, 1995. They formed the Crystal Pack and wolves were again in Yellowstone after an absence of 70 years.

These were last year's pups, now nearly grown at 11 months old. They already were hunting with the adults, but still had the youthful energy to want to play in deep snow.

I checked in and found my cabin at the Ranch where I was staying for Wolf Week, hosted by the Yellowstone Institute.

Then I hurried back and set up my own scope. Snow flurries obscured the view for awhile before it cleared. All seven were up and moving around. They came downhill, spectacularly descending a steep hillside to reach the valley. Sometimes, they were breaking through the snow and seemed almost to be falling down the steepest parts of the slope. Reaching the valley, they disappeared into the forest.

On the prowl

The next morning, our group drove west in two vans and stopped at Slough Creek. Nothing. Wolf researchers picked up radio signals a few miles farther east. There, we spotted the Agate Creek Pack again, but this time they appeared only as seven specks moving against the snow a mile off. They had moved about 6 miles during the night.

Back to Slough Creek, where we wished we had stayed. We had been too early and now we were too late for the big event. The Lamar Pack had killed two elk, which was unusual because they typically kill only one. One of the viewers had seen it. The elk were much weakened by the winter and poorly able to defend themselves.

The pups in the pack had pulled the second one down. By the time we got our scopes up, the alpha female, 06, was tearing into the first

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Wolves

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carcass. She is famous for
killing elk by herself. They ate
their fill. Then the pups deci-
ded to erag the second elk clos-
er to the first one.

A few dozen ravens gath-
ered, waiting their chance.
When only one pup was left
at the kill site, the ravens
harassed the pup and man-
gaged to grab some chunks,
carrying meat into the nearby
trees out of reach of the
wolves. The pup left. A gold-
en eagle and an adult bald
eagle came to the carcasses.

Further up the valley, the
wolves had killed a bighorn
sheep a week ago. That also is
early yesterday. It was a huge
of the carcass, which was
carrying meat into the nearby
carcass.

We had to take care not to
break through. Three bighorn
rams watched us from
horns of the bison were visi-
ble.

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horns of the bison were visi-
table. This bison seemed to have
died of starvation, not kiUed
by the grizzly. Eventually, the
bear lay down on the carcass
while a coyote 25 yards away
waited for a chance to come
in. Bears hibernate but this
grizzly was out two weeks
earlier than usual.

Far above on a ridge near
the top of the mountain tow-
ering above, there were two
mountain goats no more than
moving dots on the skyline.

In a spitting snowstorm,
we snowshoed to see a big
bison carcass, still adorned
with impressive antlers. Like
the bison, this elk seemed to
have died of starvation.

Amidst the bones was a full
runen, mostly willow twigs
and park, which are of little
food value. I was reminded
again and again of the harsh
winter. The animals we were
seeing were on the edge of life
and death with only the
fittest surviving.

Others spotted a red fox at
some distance. Before I could
get my scope on it, it had
gone over the hilltop. Added
to the wolves and coyotes,
they had what in Yellowstone
is celebrated as a “three canid
day.”

Final memory

On our last day, we got the
closest wolf sighting. In the
narrowS of a canyon, we spot-
ted the alpha 06 female about
100 yards uphill. She half-filled
the full power, 90x, scope. There
was time to set up the long lens

cameras which revealed a dark
wolf lying near her, almost out
of sight behind a rock.

She was often sleeping but
frequently stood up to look
around. She would sit and with
a back foot scratch the under
side of a front shoulder where
she had a stripe of mange. She
nevertheless seemed to be
doing well, still killing elk on
her own.

When she stood, she was visi-
ibly pregnant with a low hang-
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