



Illustration: Virginia Johnson



# WOLF

The wolf's return to the Northern Rockies pits rancher against government against environmentalist. Is there room enough for all of them?

— BY ELIZABETH DARBY JUNKIN —

THE SKY WAS PEACEFUL THAT cool, early summer day. Aloft in the Cessna, it was a mid-week workday like any other for the two men at the controls, listening intently to their headphones for the soft electronic beep that is best reminiscent of a heart monitor on an intensive care unit patient. For one who sought the quarry, a creature festooned with man's radio collar jewelry, she was one of the many he was under government contract to find. She was a meal ticket. For the other man, there was a familiarity with this particular sample of *Canis lupus*, thus his listening was more intent, more intimate. He and the beast had a history—not a good thing to have in the west with an animal such as a wolf. He was anxious to find her, and yet anxious not to be called upon to find her; it was a kind of emotional crossroads he knew well, the kind that would drive you crazy in the long hours of driving if you thought about the wolf thing too much. It was a kind of vortex that grips man and wolf, spinning the two species closer and defying the gravity of logic. It intensifies feelings and raises the stakes; it makes those involved seem more than they are in reality: two species, surviving from birth to death in whatever way possible.

The men pointed and discussed the

valleys stretching below, gesturing in knowing ways to washes and drainages, stands of tall timber and open pasture land. With fingers and gesticulation, nodding heads, calm words in low voices, they applied logic to the land below, a wild already carved into squares of forest clearcut on one mountain range and fenced in by houses and ranch houses in every open meadow where there wasn't forest. They applied expertise to finding this particular female wolf, black with a ruff of silver, and drew tight circles with the noisy small airplane over the ridge where she had been seen most recently. But that was three weeks ago—and no good signal had emanated from her collar since, once bear season had begun. They nodded knowingly.

With the plane descending and banking in the blue sky, they traced in the air her likely path that brought her 300 miles, down the Flathead Valley to the area north of Missoula, across and skirting numerous pastures full of cattle and sheep and pet dogs, and then across a four-lane highway to another ridge where, somehow in the myriad of acreage covered, she connected with a lone wolf no one had seen before in the area and who, by reports, did not exist in the area previously. He was a disperser from more wild parts than this. It was all

the special interest groups representing ranchers and environmentalists, just no species to hang it on and thus no point man, with the weight of law on his side, to walk the middle ground with the wolf.

The truck slows and a house is pointed out with a nod of his head—a visit to be made later—to a family who had their dog mauled by this female wolf. "They're nice people and are taking this well," Bangs narrates. The truck slows again while a padlocked gate on the forest access road is opened, the sign "ROAD CLOSED UNTIL..." dropped aside for the moment. The reason for the closure is carefully omitted—denial of access to areas closed due to endangered species protection is not something to be publicly broadcast. The outcry over closed roads is one of the sirens of the vortex and encourages one of Bangs's biggest fears: Shoot, shovel, shutup of the thing that is inconvenient to a lifestyle.

At a Y in the road, the truck comes to a halt. The dirt road is still damp from the previous evening's shower. The radio equipment is assembled and the antenna lofted into the air just above head-level, the visual image of a reindeer. There are fresh adult wolf tracks everywhere along the road—this one seems to prefer the easy route, leveled and cleared, rather than bushwhacking through the dense undergrowth as is the stereotype of its kind.

The female wolf has taken up residence in national forest land and so it is Forest Service territory. Understanding the territorial dynamics, Bangs invites the local ranger to show him the ridge with the den site. "You have to give people the responsibility, and thus the pride, of having the wolf in their neighborhood," Bangs had said in the truck. "You have to set up a cadre of people to keep it in the public eye. That way the wolf will survive after its protection is gone."

The radio reveals the same sickly beep heard in the airplane, off mark and faint. But biologists know only what can be seen or deduced, what is logic. And there is an equally compelling desire in biologists—a desire that almost overwhelms the knowing—that your radio-collared specimen is not dead until you see it dead. Or until you receive the radio collar in the brown-paper wrapped package in the mail, return address unknown. Until then, any number of reasons explain that which is known but preferred not to be believed. Technology can fail you. Must be the den siting and the rock ledge.

The two men again exchange a low discussion of the meaning of the tracks and the beep. The wolf tracks lead down a well-used elk path through a forest clearcut, but it is the other direction from

the observed den site. Ignoring the animal paths and striding in the direction opposite those of the tracks, the ranger and Bangs take off, bushwhacking through deep, wet forest cross-country. Despite the sense that we are walking the wrong direction, that we do not go the way the wolf goes, I follow. These men know. They are using logic.

Through the verdant, remnant old growth forest, light sparks from the drops of every needle and shadows jump over ridges through tall grass. Walking through country with a wolf running wild makes shadows dance. The vision is not a product of fear but a moment of completion; an ecosystem with all the pieces intact, a rare thing in the world today. The wolf is not caught by a leg in a trap, a shrieking animal desperate to escape the teeth of man, but loping over the ridge away from the den, leading down a false path to protect its young. It is a presence preferring to carve a life in the shadows of human civilization, near the cleared pastures, using forest access roads, doing what it does to survive rather than plot or scheme the parameters of its existence as so many others would. Turn quickly and the wolf has just disappeared from sight, on the edge of peripheral vision.

This is how many of those involved in living and working in the Northern Rockies would prefer the wolf—on the edge, living peripherally. No one objects to an animal that does not disturb pursuit of life, a living and a line of work. Yet for others, the wolf is the line of work, a piece of a cause that is a mission: to return the wolf to the Rockies. And it is where these two peoples clash that the wolf is supposed to survive.

This female is not the only wolf in the Northern Rockies. In the Glacier National Park area two litters of pups were observed this summer with an adult pack—a total of about 17 wolves that will likely split into two packs. All told, Bangs estimates there are 40 to 50 wolves and four packs in the Northern Rockies of Montana. They moved down from Canada by themselves, reintroduced themselves and have survived the odds—thus far.

Ranchers throughout the Rocky Mountains from Wyoming north to the Canadian border don't care if the wolf exists in the high mountains and rugged backcountry as long as they never see it. They have no quarrel with the wolf if it returns to the deep forests on its own, without the help of reintroduction. But they don't want to face dead calves or sheep lying in the dew of the early morning grass. And they don't want the



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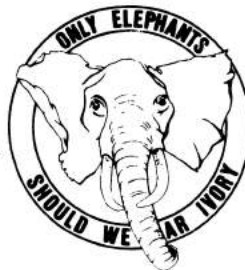
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government to help the wolf find new housing in their rented federal pastures surrounding Yellowstone National Park. That's double teaming, wolf and government against the rancher, in the long-standing battle between government restrictions on federal land and free use of the frontier. The wolf thing is about words. And about control.

The National Park Service and the US Fish and Wildlife Service are looking at reintroducing the wolf into another area—Yellowstone National Park. The recovery report indicates that it is doubtful the wolf could leap from the Rocky Mountains near Missoula across man's roads and population centers, to make the jump to Yellowstone.

That it isn't there yet but is a likely prospect makes each of Bangs's actions in Montana all the more cautious. He, representing the federal government's response to the wolf program, is as much a symbol as the wolf; each act is scrutinized, every word analyzed. Both extremes of the wolf-lovers and the ranchers hate Bangs; it's becoming a personal thing. For the pro-wolf groups like Wolf Action Group, he doesn't do enough for the wolf. To ranchers, too, he doesn't do enough, but threatens to do too much—closures, fines and humiliation. As long as both sides are vocal, Bangs knows where he stands. "I must be doing something right if they both call for my resignation.

"The wolf is a fact here now," says Bangs. "The question is, how much are we willing to share—3 percent? 1 percent? Who staked the wolf to the pole? Not the guy who put it there but the bureaucrat who made him hate it."

That it is there at all is a long step from the most prevalent bumper-sticker in the region five years ago: "JUST SAY NO TO WOLVES." Like the drug war from which the slogan was stolen, the wolf represents government involvement in personal lives. Words and control, use of roads and symbolic freedom.

"We already have one endangered species—the grizzly bear—and the government hasn't done a good job. Until we get a handle on the bear we don't need the wolf," Don Turner said reasonably. He is an outfitter, rancher and owner of a guest ranch near Jackson Hole, Wyoming. "They've closed 30 percent of the park to humans 'for the sake of the bear.' With the wolf, we could see more closures. Both people and the wolf have to be protected."

The resentment is as much of the "outsiders" who are dictating how ranchers should live—with or without

the wolf. National environmental groups like Defenders of Wildlife and the National Wildlife Federation can influence a nation to define the ranchers' backyard. From the ranchers' perspective, the environmental groups' strength comes from those who know nothing of surviving on the frontier.

"Housewives in Chicago have to realize that the wolf is doing well in other parts of the continent. We don't want to live with what they force on us," says Turner. "But we also have to teach ranchers that wolves aren't killing 200 calves per day. Ranchers have a lot of bad feelings about how the government handled the whole situation in the past. We have to make sure people who live with them have input—then there will be less resentment."

The ranchers see that environmental groups have been able to invoke the image of wolf, thrive on its image and gain support. Then for the wolf to arrive in reality, protected and even welcome, means a battle won on an invisible playing ground, and they are cornered into government restrictions. That the more moderate environmental groups like Defenders have been talking about the return of the wolf for years, trying to make words make reality OK, doesn't absorb the shock of the wolf wandering your corner of the Rockies. Then, when more vivid groups like Wolf Action Group show up on your land, trying to talk to you in person, or march down your private road in search of the wolf on your property, that's trespassing—and a step too far.

In public, the resentments run high. It's part of the image over the wolf thing. "If you want to see herbivores attacked by wolves and watch them be disembowled, we might as well bring back the arena like the Romans. It's not very pleasing. Is that why they want the wolf back?" asks Bill Tolliferro, head of the Wyoming sheepgrowers. Entering the restaurant where the lamb and the beef specials for the night were sold out, Tolliferro was acknowledged by every table, a community leader and head of a family that has ranched sheep in the area for at least four generations. "Make it a consistent argument. If we want biodiversity, then let's bring it all back—that includes malaria and smallpox. Let's bring it back to Virginia Beach and Miami. Don't go and pick and choose where and what you want to bring back. I don't know that there is a 'thrill' to hearing the wolf howl. Maybe the 'thrill' is fear."

But after the standard arguments are given for the benefit of the media, after the rhetoric dies down a little, after the lamb has been consumed, the real fear

emerges. The word: conspiracy. The wolf, like the grizzly, is "one of a long line of ways to take the West from the livestock industry." Control. Livelihood. The right to survive. He speaks not with emotion, but with logic.

"There's no winter range for the wolf in Yellowstone. That's why he'll come out of the park," said Tolliferro. "And I have no desire to kill a wolf. I don't want to. I'm sick of killing coyotes, too." Defenders of Wildlife, in order to make the wolf less of an economic threat to businessmen like Tolliferro, have raised a \$100,000 fund to reimburse ranchers if wolves kill their cattle or sheep. But economic survival, like the wolf, is not the point. "I'm not in business to feed wolves. I don't want to take the money from the environmentalists."

There's a quiet side to rancher opposition, as well. The wolf, they say, is just the National Park Service trying to make up for its bad ungulate management that has more elk on the National Elk Range than carrying capacity. It all smells of government involvement, and each effort of the Endangered Species Act is another step on the road toward government involvement in the ranchers' lives.

"We're taking the wolf out of context," says Joe Magagma. He, too, is a fourth-generation rancher in Wyoming. The two ranchers sat, calmly exchanging knowing glances. I noticed that the backs of our chairs pushed into our backs a little uncomfortably. "The wolf should be removed from the issue. We should talk about how biodiversity and real management will work."

But what does the wolf mean to you? What does it symbolize?

A blank was drawn across the table. It was an unexpected innocence. Disarmed, a moment elapsed, they sought for words. "The wolf? I can't think of a thing it means. The *wolf issue* means something to me. But not the wolf."

**B**angs knows this. It is why he carefully responds to every rancher's call in Montana. While trying to catch and move a wolf that was suspected of killing cattle, he received a message by radio from another rancher who said he would be available to talk for only the next two hours. Bangs left the field and his wolf traps and drove an hour and a half to a phone and called him. The rancher wanted to meet—oh, in an hour. Bangs drove the 50 miles to talk with him. "When I got there, he said he'd planned to call once and that was it. Driving all that way means I would respond to his needs."

The rancher turned himself in—he said he killed a male wolf. "He said it

was an accident," Bangs continues. "He mistook the wolf for a big dog in his corral. I made the recommendation that it was an honest mistake and no action has yet been taken. The rancher feels he got a fair deal—he was responded to. He tells others to give it a chance—that it's better than shoot, shovel, shutup."

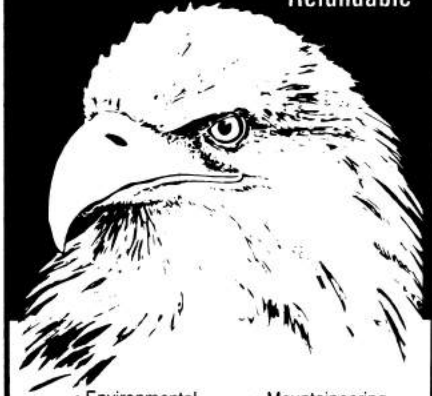
The ranchers and government agree. After all the words are put aside, those who know speak: If they could get the Washington offices of special interest groups out of the issue, if they could just talk, neighbor to neighbor, they would succeed in carving out a place for the wolf in the West. "If we took all the lobbyists away and let locals sit down and talk about it, we could solve it, all together. But they'll always find another conflict. It all has to do with economics. Conflicts make jobs," says Tolliferro sadly.

Bangs sees it only slightly differently: "All the issues are a way of asking if man should control nature. It's not about wolves at all."

**N**ot surprisingly, we did not see the female wolf that dewy morning in the woods. Back to the road, off to another meeting where people see the wolf in every corner of their eyes. Biologists on Bangs's small staff returned to the area a week later, part of the wolf monitoring operation that keeps them all so busy. If howled to, even by humans, wolves will often respond. Howling this time revealed pups in the area. A phone call three weeks later revealed the female's collar, found in a stream near the den site with a bullet in it. The tracks revealed that the male had been taking over the care for the pups, six in all, and moved the entire family to a new den site, down the ridge to the clearcut where the tracks led. "I hope he can do it without killing cattle," Bangs noted ominously. But, too, these words cover his other fear: the alienation of one group by another—a demonstration by ardent wolf lovers in a rancher's front yard, for example. It's the kind of behavior that encourages shoot, shovel and shutup. In their fierce battle over the wolf thing, each encourages the other to decimate the middle ground—the wolf and the program.

Bangs is managing an image—the chief PR officer for a killer, a god, an idea, a symbol, a part of the not-so-fair face of Nature, a scavenger, a method of ungulate control. It keeps him busy. "When people call you up at home at night, screaming at you and your family, you often have to stop them and ask whether they are pro-wolf or anti-wolf. The more extreme they are the more alike they sound."

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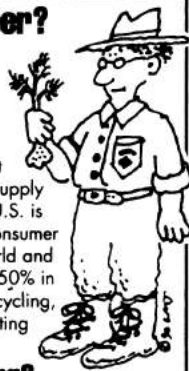
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CIRCLE NO. 13 ON READER SERVICE COUPON PAGE 93

Bangs got a lot of night phone calls in October 1989, when he first met this female wolf. It was a time when publicity is not wanted, when the wolf is better not seen. When a bad experience in the public eye threatens all reason and logic, when you are surrounded not by forest but by special interests. Then it's just you and the wolf trying to survive. It started with a mistake: a male wolf mistaken for a dog or coyote as it tried to enter a sheep corral. Bangs drove through the area to meet with the residents, to talk about the wolf, the behavior, to represent and reassure. By mid-summer it was clear that a den site was in the area, which was largely private land and had heavy stock grazing. The owner of the land where the den was located agreed that he would sit out the summer with the wolves and frequently saw them hunting small mammals among his cattle. In August some calves were killed; regardless of whether wolves were responsible, it was decided that the pack should be moved—preferably to an area of the Great Bear Wilderness. Traps were set—leg-hold traps refit to do less damage than the traps commonly used by pelt trappers. The pups were the ones they hoped to catch first, both to head off any further depredation but also to keep the adults in the area. Another cow was killed. Two pups were captured and taken to a holding facility. An incredibly old male wolf was captured. The female—this female—was finally darted from a helicopter. One pup was still not caught. It was now September and wolf hysteria, both pro and anti, was mounting. The media wanted to show the wolves in captivity to the public. In the tension of capture, a rumor got started among ranchers: The relocation was going to become a reintroduction to areas without wolves. The Wyoming Farm Bureau threatened a court injunction. The US Fish and Wildlife Service rushed to release the wolves; the pups weren't gaining weight in captivity, probably due to stress of confinement. An alternate site for relocation in Glacier National Park was selected after the Montana Governor interceded in the fray. Then the demon of wolf management—the things unknown—took hold. The adults immediately left the pups after they were freed together. The pups soon starved. Bangs eventually had to kill the old male after it showed up at a ranch emaciated and with a swollen and infected foot from the trapping. The female moved south, way south, covering some 300 miles until she joined up with the male in the Missoula area.

Of the losses, Bangs feels real bad. Of the necessity to kill the wolves he is

chartered to protect, he says, "It's tough. You rationalize with the idea that you are working for the wolf species, and one is a member of the whole, but it's tough." But he is rational and reasoned. "It would be different if the wolf were really endangered—but it isn't. We are trying to make it possible for wolves to live here at all." He seeks refuge in his knowing, in the logic. For it is only through calm logic that his goal will be achieved: three for ten, off the endangered list. Recovery means many different things—protecting wolves with public education, playing survival politics in the high stakes territory of special interests. And it means tracking, moving, sometimes killing the wolves that give recovery a bad name.


In the truck, Bangs resumes his work and words with the ranchers, trying to reach a balance of trust between independent souls and government representatives—anathemas at every turn. The wolf doesn't mean a conspiracy to get the ranchers off the land once and for all. But the wolf means control, even if only self-control. Perhaps that is why we have never gone the way of the wolf—even in his absence, the wolf controls our lives. Bangs is in the middle and he is a good guest. He will kill all the coyotes he finds in his traps—but only if the rancher requests it. A year later, despite the logical explanation that the traps he and his staff use help to catch wolves, to radio collar them, to give a presence where they are unknown, to move them elsewhere where they might live without crossing man's boundaries, to apply knowledge and logic to the wolf's world of innate survival without explanation, his daughter ambushes him by asking what the traps are for. "Doesn't it hurt? You wouldn't like it if someone did that to you..."

He is on the edge, the logic of his daughter's question, the storm visible in his eyes as he battles with the knowing and the words. The wolf thing. His logic is defenseless in the teeth of innocence and his words fall off for a moment while the truck continues its methodical movement over the pavement.

"Recovery," and summer, progressed quietly. The male wolf successfully fed and trained the six pups without the benefit of social organization that would have left one adult to watch the pups while the others hunted and brought food home. Bangs's fear that he would be driving a road to view dead cattle or sheep was not realized. Over the summer, the pups learned to wait for their father at the den until he returned with food. Biologists know that the male trav-

eled nightly in search of food for the pups as they grew to 45 pounds. No one knows what time the male decided to cross the road, but it was a week before autumn began officially and about the time for the wolves to howl up the pack for the long winter of group hunting to survive the heavy snows. It is logic that he was crossing the road toward the wolf rendezvous where he and the female had found each other a year before. But this cold morning, the male was found instead by the side of the highway, road-kill. After two reports of a big dog dead on the road, the report was finally verified. Bangs and two partners went to the den site to check it out. With howling, the pups ran out, expecting dad with a meal. But it was the man with the collars. And a sad look on his face.

Now Bangs cuts the engine off a half-mile away. A biologist is monitoring them full-time. They have dropped 20 deer carcasses from the back of the pickup as the first early snows begin to fall, careful to keep away all human smell. It is the only hope for the pups. Although over 50 pounds, they are too young to have learned how to hunt. The rancher on whose land they live videotapes them from the barn of the old family homestead. He is delighted, for he captures on family videos the pups learning, step-by-step with innate knowledge, to hunt. To survive. They have succeeded with grasshoppers but magpies still elude them. As soon as there is any evidence that they are feeding themselves, Bangs will slow down on the carcasses. "They are on the verge of making their own living," he says assuredly. Ever hopeful, the attainment of his goal.

There are no words that can help the survival of the pups over the winter. Theirs is a future unknown, their choices dictated by survival. For the pups, it is not a control issue. It is just another stop on the road to recovery. Wolves survive. We know this. We talk about it. But it is in the words—when accompanied by trust—that perhaps a bit of room on the edge of our psyches can be carved out that will allow them to go their own way. In that landscape of words, perhaps there Bangs's goal will be attained. We will change enough to let them survive. 

*Elizabeth Darby Junkin is managing editor of BUZZWORM.*

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