

Wolf Encounter: The Story Behind The Photograph

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Head down, the wolf trotted toward me, right down the middle of the Fernberg. You know the way wolves trot, that bicycling gait. No effort. I'd just pulled over and gotten out of my vehicle to photograph an interesting tree trunk formation when I saw the wolf about 100 yards away. As long and hard as I've been trying to put myself close to wolves, I blinked back surprise that it seemed to finally be happening.

It had been a summer of wolves. I'd heard them howl several times over the season and had fleetingly seen a pair of them near Burntside Lake when out with photo excursion clients shooting sunrise images. Late in September, I'd backpacked the wilderness Pow Wow Trail alone, something I'd wanted to do for a long time, and had company all night long at my first campsite on the shore of Superstition Lake. Even as I'd dropped my pack about 4 p.m. at the campsite, a wolf howled about a quarter mile farther down the lake. It was a single howl - low and guttural at the start, then rising in pitch before trailing off. I sat on a log and listened, and there was more howling.

All that evening, as I pitched my tent and fixed supper in a light drizzle, the lone wolf howled. Later, warm and dry in my sleeping bag with my head lantern on, I made my notes about the day. I awoke later that evening and saw the full moon through the tent with the pack gathered and howling about 200 yards away. There were deeper howls of adults leavened by the yipping cries of growing pups. I named them, naturally, the Superstition Lake Pack.



Several times throughout the night, I awoke to wolf music - often within 100 or 200 yards. I fancied that they checked me out at some point while I was sleeping, filtering their way silently through my camp like gray ghosts. They would raise their snouts and sniff my food bag suspended 15 feet in the air, and make their way to the cooling campfire ring to vacuum up any scraps I may have left. Not much for them, though. I was pretty hungry after a 10-mile plus hike. Mac and cheese with tuna. It all went into my mouth.

Shortly after sunup, the wolves howled again across the narrow lake as I was breaking camp. This, I thought at the time, is why we come here, why we work so hard to piece together a living where the inflated expenses at the end of the road mean the end of your wallet. It was moments like this that made it all worthwhile.

I quickly brought my mind back to the wolf trotting down the Fernberg and quartering into the woods close to me. I quickly noted some things both obvious and subtle about this wolf. This wolf was black. Not partly black or mostly black, but all black. A relatively narrow muzzle and face made me think it was a female. This was the third black wolf I had seen in the area and someone who used to live nearby later told me that they'd nicknamed these wolves "the black pack" because of the number of black members.

She veered off the road about 40 yards from me and continued to trot through the woods, pausing briefly now and then. At 20 yards, she entered a small clearing and I cat-footed several steps to my left and toward her to make sure she was clear of some brush for a better photograph. I was sure my movement would push her back into the woods and out of sight. I'd been fairly close to wolves before but this was the first time a wolf ever saw me, smelled me, and came toward me. I dimly sensed that a motorist had pulled over and gotten out of his vehicle, but for now, the wolf was my focus.

She stopped and we stared at each other from about 40 feet - my hazel eyes to her orange ones. Without much thought and purely on instinct, I smoothly brought up my camera, framed the image just so, and fired a burst of frames, quickly filling the buffer of my digital camera. As the camera cleared its buffer by writing to the memory card, I noticed the growing lushness of her coat in the

cooling fall weather. Through the telephoto lens, I saw the lack of scars, her general look of overall fine health, her large ears, and a few tiny whitish seedpods clinging to her face.

In the few seconds while I was waiting for the camera, she took several steps straight toward me, lowered her head, and locked her eyes on mine. This is assessment behavior - figuring out what to make of me.

I wondered briefly if she'd been habituated to finding food near people along the Fernberg and if that's why she approached me. I also wondered if it was simple curiosity. At this moment, however, it didn't really matter why she was here. I quit wondering to myself and immersed myself in the moment.

I stooped lower to get a more intimate angle before firing off another burst of her head-down stare. She raised her head, looked at me for yet another second, and then disappeared into the woods with one last backward glance. I continued to search for flashes of black among the tree trunks and remaining leaves for a while after she had vanished.

I walked over to the motorist and said something about working for four long years for this moment. He knew me then, and introduced himself. We exchanged a few friendly words before walking back to my vehicle. I sat there for a bit, cementing into memory brief seconds that must now last a lifetime. I started to rejoice that I was heading home to my office with beautiful images of a gorgeous black wolf surrounded by fall color, but I stopped myself. There would be plenty of time for that later.



While glancing to where the wolf had disappeared, I mouthed words of meaning that I'd learned 20 years ago in North Dakota when pursuing a new way of seeing myself in the world.

"Hau. Mitakuye oyasin," I said, and smiled, remembering my Lakota friends and the lessons they had taught me.

I reached to turn the key and continue my drive home. My hands began to shake uncontrollably.

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