

A Killing at Dawn

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IN THE VERY FIRST LIGHT, no more than a pale wash of sky, the four wolves move over the sage-covered hillside above Soda Butte Creek in the far northeastern corner of Yellowstone National Park. Here, the Absaroka Mountains of Wyoming and the Beartooth range of Montana meet, the Stillwater and the Clark Fork head, and if you walk away from this single road, you walk for several days before crossing another. With spotting scopes, binoculars, and radio-telemetry gear, we are watching the Druid pack, the wolves that have made this corner of Yellowstone their home.

“Freed of gravity” more accurately describes how the wolves move than the “trotting” or “loping” gaits they intermingle effortlessly as they hunt up valley. They seem like vapors, like shadows, tracing and mottling the contours of the ground - the occasional draw and swale and stand of aspen not impeding their travel in the least as they search for elk calves.

It is spring in Yellowstone, and the newborn calves - spotted, scentless, and weighing about thirty pounds - dot the moist green meadows, though we see none of them this morning as they lie in the sage, immobile as mushrooms, quiet as a heartbeat, banking on their immobility and the flood of newborn elk to keep them safe. As survival strategies go, it's a sound one. With thousands of calves dropped during the same few weeks in May and June, the chance of any individual calf's being caught by the

wolves is small. Nevertheless, a few of them will be caught. In the conifers, a mile above this hillside, the Druid pack has six new pups to feed, and is motivated. The four wolves hunt in a zigzag pattern: a black alpha male; two subdominant animals, one gray, one dark like her father; and, bringing up the rear, a more grizzled yearling male, as large as his older siblings but inexperienced. The increasing light now gives them definition: tails drooped, noses to the ground, backs arched, like a foursome of animated croquet hoops, raising their heads to pant and grin, their tongues flashes of wild rose in the dawn. They seem happy at their work, which isn't surprising. Evolution wouldn't have selected those who found hunting drear business.

Grizzly bears - there must be two dozen in this valley - are also hunting elk calves this morning. We can see them through our spotting scopes, in the treeline meadows, bird-dogging through the sage and trying to flush a potential meal. The females with cubs, however, lack the unhurried, sans sauci attitude of the Druid pack. They charge here and there with frantic desperation, anxious to make a kill and return to their cubs, whom they've stashed a ways off, for a male bear could come along and wipe out their litters.

It isn't that the wolves are less concerned parents than grizzlies; rather it is that they live in a rich social network, and other pack members remain at the den to guard the pups. This morning the alpha female has

stayed behind.

Watching the two species raise their offspring, I find it hard not to think of the differences in the human world between the difficulties single parents often face rearing children alone and the easier time some couples have, especially those who can call upon an extended family for baby-sitting. Such an analogy may sound anthropomorphic to the “zooseparatists” among us, but those not so narrowly inclined have long noticed that mammals share many traits and behaviors. Charles Darwin considered that nonhuman animals had “moral qualities,” the more important of which were “love, and the distinct emotion of sympathy.”

Before the recovery plans spawned by the Endangered Species Act reintroduced wolves to Yellowstone and also increased the region's grizzly bear population, and before the two species, in turn, forced elk to respond to the historic levels of predation that had shaped them and that had been missing from the ecosystem for sixty years, it was difficult to see the crossover between these three species and ourselves. It was also hard to see how slim the line can be that separates us from other members of the animal kingdom. Now, without leaving the park's roads, one can step across that line on many a spring morning.

With a bleating screech, so childlike in its terror that it raises a shiver on my spine, an elk calf bolts skyward from the sage, a chestnut-colored shape - ‘legs, neck, head - tangled in the jaws of the lead wolf. In an instant, the struggling calf is swamped by paws and lashing tails. As the dust rises, the yearling wolf lags behind. The calf, without any personality beyond its single haunting scream, comes apart like a rag doll - its haunch stolen away by the gray wolf, its foreleg scuttled off by her darker sibling, its abdominal and thoracic cavities emptied of viscera so quickly by the alpha male

that it seems as if the carcass has been vacuumed clean.

Then, from the aspens fifty yards off, an elk charges, sleek as a sorrel mare, neck hair bristling, eyes bugging, snorting - and too late. At least to save what was her hidden calf. But not to drive off the wolves. No fools, they retreat. The largest of them weighs about 130 pounds. The elk weighs 500 and has hooves as sharp and effective as splitting mauls. She stands over the bloody pile of flesh and bone, sweeping her head threateningly in the direction of the wolves, who, like commandos confronted by a more heavily armed foe, have retired a hundred yards off and lie in the sage, waiting and watching.

Suddenly, the mother elk stiffens, sniffs at the carcass, and trots down valley, head back and mouth agape. She goes no more than a dozen yards before wheeling and returning, only to bypass her calf and dash up valley, crazed and disoriented. The wolves rush back and reclaim their meat, dragging the carcass behind a fallen aspen tree, where they gnaw at it. The elk stands at a distance and stares at them malevolently. Then she races at the wolves, scattering them in three directions.

We watch as the sun rises and the yearling wolf, a teenager that hasn't participated in the kill or dismemberment, saunters down through the sage, approaching to within forty yards of us. He lies in the long grass up to his ruff, his radio collar hidden and his back turned to the drama taking place above him. He gazes directly at us as I focus my spotting scope. His head appears in astonishing clarity: greenish-yellow eyes illuminated warmly by the flood of sunlight; the commas of his nostrils incised deeply into his moist black snout; his whiskers long and pearly; a fly settling on one of his furry ears. Glancing up at his pack and then back to us, the wolf minces his eyes in an

expression I have seen on the face of my own dog countless times: Feel my pain. He knows he will get none of this meat. The wolf turns his head away and once again stares up the hill to where the mother elk stands protectively over her dead calf, and the other members of his pack wait beneath her.

The morning fattens. Cackling garrulously, a V of Canada geese flies downriver, the silence that settles behind them deeper for how they broke it. Two sandhill cranes trill from a gravel bar, and a coyote appears in the grass behind us. It jigs along the bank, stops momentarily, and studies the waiting wolves and the disputed carcass. Long reddish ears pricked forward, eyes piercingly alert, pointy muzzle tickling information out of the breeze, it calculates the odds of stealing some scraps. It continues on its way. After all, perhaps only fifteen pounds of meat, hide, and bone remain of the elk calf, and the wolves won't hesitate to kill a coyote.

The yearling wolf rises from the grass, extends his forelegs in a lavish bow, and trots off in the direction of his den. Two of the waiting wolves follow, leaving the black alpha male lying in the sage and watching the mother elk with the patience of stone. After a few minutes she makes her way up the hillside, searching back and forth, everyone of her dazed movements seeming to signify that a mistake has occurred and that she might yet find her calf alive and well.

When she strays twenty-five yards from the carcass, the alpha wolf flashes into motion - black stone to sprinting blur in less than a second. He snatches up the calf in his jaws and tears away, the elk wheeling and barreling down on him, but he has judged the distance, the angles, and his ability to escape perfectly. He stays four yards ahead of her, expending no more energy than necessary. Then, as if

realizing the futility of her pursuit, she skids to a halt and he lopez away with her mangled offspring in his jaws.

He runs several hundred yards before coming to rest in the grass. Glancing over his shoulder, he begins to nip at the calf with tender little bites. The mother elk stares at him, then retraces her route up the hillside, sniffing here and there before coming to the spot where blood stains the bunchgrass. She stops directly over the site of the kill, looks back to the wolf, and begins to grunt mournfully, her sides contracting and her muzzle elongating into the shape of a trumpet. A few moments later her bellow of loss and frustration floats down the hillside to us. Again and again she calls.

The black wolf glances one more time at the grieving elk before standing and getting the calf comfortably set in his jaws. He trots in a straight line toward the forest and his den. He has made his meat, and six new pups are waiting to be fed.

We watch the elk watching the wolf disappear into the trees, and she continues to cry out, turning this way and that, sending her dirge in every direction as the morning heat rises. I would like to see how long she remains there, but we have to head down valley to find other wolves.

On our return at sunset, fifteen and a half hours after her calf was taken by the Druid pack, we see the mother elk standing on the very spot it was killed, a monument to fidelity in a natural world that barely blinks at such recyclings of protein. She looks weary and beaten, her head at half-staff. She also appears immovable in her resolve to guard the site, or to stand witness to what has occurred, or to continue to hope for her calf's reappearance. Who can know what is in her mind, except perhaps another mother elk? Perhaps a wolf, determined to bring meat back to his pups, might know.