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ELUSIVE IN NATURE

It's been more than a dozen years since Mexican gray wolves were reintroduced to their native habitat in Eastern Arizona. The captive-breeding program has been half successful at best, but that doesn't deter nature lovers and wildlife enthusiasts from hitting the trail in the hopes of catching a glimpse of the evasive endangered species.

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Bear Wallow Wilderness is Rim Pack territory, and the presence of that pack, a small pack of Mexican gray wolves, is a kind of miracle.

Native to Arizona and among the most endangered mammals in North America, the Mexican gray wolf was extirpated from the United States by the 1940s. Decades later, between 1977 and 1980, the species was resurrected out of near extinction when the last five wolves anybody could find were captured in Mexico. The journey of this small gray wolf has not been easy. Three of the five survivors were taken to the Endangered Wolf Center in Eureka, Missouri, to begin a captive-breeding program. The other two died. In 1998, the first 11 captive wolves were released into the Apache National Forest.

I wanted to see the Rim Pack — to hear them, at least — to find a sign of them. Few things are as powerful in wild country as the presence of wolves. Yellowstone, where I worked as a guide and where wolf restoration has been successful, became more pristine for me, more whole, once the wolves were back. An ecosystem restored feels different from one with species missing. I've seen Mexican gray wolves in zoos. I wanted to see them in their native habitat.

My husband, David Muench, and I entered Bear Wallow via the Reno Lookout Trail, descending about 3 miles to its junction with the Cienega Trail. Huge blown-down trees lay across the trail, the result of violent wind in an earlier year. Some fallen trees bridged high enough that we could crawl under them. For others, we were able to slither on our bellies or, by removing our packs, wriggle through on our backs. Some we climbed over, jumping down the far side. A grouse sitting on nine eggs — her nest lodged between the trunk and a limb of the tree we had just climbed over — flew up with sudden pounding wing-beats and frightened squawking.

We stopped for lunch on the north fork of Bear Wallow Creek. Running in little riffles and falls, the creek formed a perfect small pool just above us. Along the banks, yellow flowers interrupted the forest shade, the stillness of the pool, the white of dancing water, the gray of boulders. We ate cheese and apples and dates.

Wanting to photograph the gorge, David took off after lunch while I moved a little farther downstream. Leaning against a comfortable rock, I sat on soft earth in a gentle place at the creek's edge. When David was gone awhile, I imagined it quiet enough for wolves to emerge. *I crawled under and over all those trees to be near you,* I thought. *Now come to the creek to drink.*

Bear Wallow Wilderness is part of the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area, 4.4 million acres ranging across Arizona's

Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests and New Mexico's Gila National Forest. It's twice the size of Yellowstone, and about half the area is roadless. It's home to elk, deer, javelinas, pronghorns, bighorn sheep. This is good country for wolves, and left to themselves, they would thrive, easily reaching the numbers projected in 1998 of more than 100 by 2006. Instead, there are 50.

They have not been left to themselves. For all the excitement many of us feel about the restoration of this long-missing component of the ecosystem, there are people in the region, primarily cattle ranchers, who aren't comfortable with the idea of wolves.

Ridding the country of predator animals is nothing new in America's history. For a long time, we looked at animals as "good" or "bad." We did not understand, as we do today, that the health of the ecosystem requires all the elements — prey animals and predators — with which it evolved. Without their predators, animals like deer and elk increase so rampantly they eat themselves out of food, ultimately dying of starvation. And hunting pressure is not enough. Without predators, prey animals lose their natural wariness. There is a reason for every native component of a landscape. Whether we understand it or not, nature does.

Ironically, for family ranchers struggling to make a living from cattle, there are potential economic benefits from having wolves in the area. Hosting guests who are eager to see or hear wolves has proved a boon. One Arizona rancher who does this is Wilma Jenkins at the Double Circle Ranch in Clifton. Jenkins believes that wolves belong in the area as much as well-managed cattle do. Beaver Creek Guest Ranch, in the heart of the recovery area, does weekly presentations on wolves.

I was not thinking about the politics of wolves as I sat by Bear Wallow Creek. I just thought about their presence, believing with all my heart that if I was alone long enough, quiet long enough, one would come to the stream to drink.

I believe this every time I hike within the recovery area. It has not yet happened.

But other people have seen them. Wolf advocate Jean Ossorio frequently camps in the recovery area. Armed with weekly telemetry reports from the Arizona Game and Fish Department that show where signals have been picked up from radio-collared wolves, she is occasionally rewarded by the sight of wolves or wolf tracks.

I met Jean last December in the Williams Valley, the day after a heavy snowfall. A week before Christmas, she and Michael Robinson — a conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson — and I were the only people in the valley. On that silent, raw-edged morning, we found fresh tracks of the Hawk's Nest Pack along snow-covered Forest Road 88B. Walking downhill under a snow sky, we followed multiple sets of tracks, several wolves moving alongside one another, occasionally stepping in the same track, crisscrossing into the woods to the east, the meadow to the west. Elk tracks came up from the meadow, heading into the woods, oddly crossed at one point, like skis above a mantel. In the course of the day, we watched elk at the edges of forest, elk weaving among the trees.

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One set of wolf tracks moved straight ahead until, nearing a road reflector, it veered in toward the reflector, where the wolf marked its territory, then veered back to its straight track.

The Hawk's Nest Pack, one of the most successful packs, has stayed away from livestock, but has, nonetheless, met with violence. Both the alpha male and a second male were found shot in the summer of 2010 — 2010 was a lethal summer. The alpha male of the San Mateo Pack was also killed, while the alpha male of the Paradise Pack disappeared.

Dave Parsons, a wildlife biologist who managed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wolf recovery program from 1990 to 1999, calls the Mexican gray wolf "the most unique subspecies of wolf." Living farther south than other wolves, isolated by glaciations, it has a long history of adapting to its environment. Yet now, with a fast-approaching limit to how many generations can be captive-bred before losing the genes for wildness, is its long genetic history to be sacrificed?

The more generations produced in captivity, the more genes for wildness are lost. Not getting wolves out of captive facilities squanders opportunities to get those nearest their wild heritage into wilderness. Currently, 307 wolves live in captive facilities across the U.S. and Mexico, two of them at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum in Tucson. Last January, two wolves captured as pups in 2007 were released into the wild. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plans to release a new pack this summer, although, as of this writing, more analysis was necessary to make certain the release area was appropriate.

In December 2010, Michael Robinson and I hiked a little of the Blue Range Primitive Area, about 8 miles east of the Blue River, that could be considered appropriate. Crossing healthy grass matted down from snow the day before, we saw it as available food for elk, a more hopeful landscape than the overgrazed terrain we had walked a day earlier on the Gila, looking for signs of the San Mateo Pack. According to Michael, about 550,000 roadless acres in the Blue Range Primitive Area and adjoining roadless areas are without resident wolves.

In the gray cold of the winter afternoon, Jean, Michael and I walked to the planned Green Fire Overlook, a short distance from the junction of forest roads 26 and 24. There, in Bluestem Pack territory, we stood atop rock cliffs, looking north to cliffs on the far side of the Black River. The dark stream wound its narrow, swift way through the canyon far below. A hundred and one years ago, from the north rim, Aldo Leopold, the father of conservationism, shot a wolf at the edge of the river. In the process, he changed forever everything about how we look at land.

It is to that shot we owe the possibility of Mexican gray wolf restoration. Watching "a fierce green fire dying" in the wolf's eyes, Leopold wrote, he understood how all things in nature are connected. Without the wolf, the deer's numbers increase until it eats away the mountain. With no vegetation holding the mountain together, storms cause mudslides, streams become silted, deer starve, a wildland is destroyed. To keep the mountain, Leopold said, we need the wolf.

David and I left Bear Wallow Wilderness via the Cienega Trail, a trail with as many blow-downs as the Reno Lookout Trail. It was almost dark when we reached the trailhead. Two hunters, stopping at the trailhead by chance, gave us a ride back to our truck. We camped nearby. We did not see wolves.

But I have been in your country, Rim Pack, I thought, *and I am grateful.* ■