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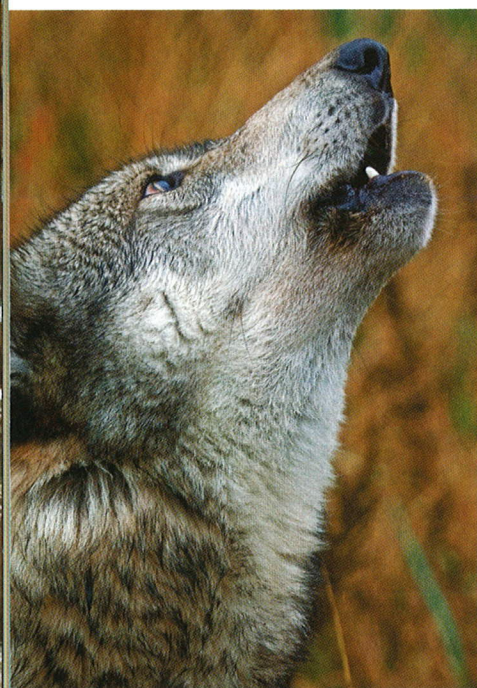
Riding With The Wolves

INDIANS

A GROUP OF RIDERS HELPS TRACK WOLVES IN MONTANA'S BACKCOUNTRY, LEARNING FIRSTHAND THE CHALLENGES OF KEEPING LIVESTOCK SAFE AND WOLVES ALIVE.



By Guy de Galard



EVER SINCE 14 WOLVES WERE REINTRODUCED INTO Yellowstone National Park in 1995, the issue of wolf preservation has been controversial. The reintroduction was part of a larger effort to increase the wolf population after the species was placed on the Endangered Species List in 1974. For wildlife enthusiasts, this move was good news—and a success: Today, an estimated 1,250 gray wolves roam the tri-state region of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, a number sufficient enough to prompt the federal government to remove wolves from the Endangered Species List last May.

The downside has been that more wolves means more livestock lost to these predators, a potentially devastating result for local ranchers. So seven years ago, in a collaborative effort to help reduce wolf attacks on livestock grazing on public land, Keystone Conservation, a Bozeman, Montana-based wildlife organization, and the Madison Valley Ranchlands Group, which seeks to maintain the economic viability of family ranches in southwestern Montana, came up with the Range Riders program. This joint initiative keeps wolves and livestock safe through tracking, telemetry, herding, keen observation, and non-lethal hazing techniques. Since its inception, the Range Riders program has acted as a buffer between wolves and cattle and has considerably cut down on livestock losses.

For the first time last summer, as a fundraiser for Range Riders, the two founding entities offered guest riders the opportunity to participate in four days of ecotourism. We would not only experience Montana's beautiful and untamed backcountry but also meet with ecologists and ranchers and learn firsthand, through moving stock and tracking, what it takes to coexist with wolves. Trip leaders Tim Beardsley and Mike Myer of Adventures Outfitting in Ennis, Montana, emphasize the



Riders head into Montana's scenic backcountry. "We need to learn to live with wolves," says Adventures Outfitting co-owner Tim Beardsley, "but at the same time we need to come to a balance where ranchers won't lose their livelihood because of the wolf."

importance of wolf management. "We need to learn to live with wolves," Beardsley says, "but at the same time we need to come to a balance where ranchers won't lose their livelihood because of the wolf."

Tucked at the foot of a timber-covered mountain, the Adventures Outfitting lodge overlooks the Madison Valley. Owners Beardsley and Myer have a true appreciation for the Montana and Yellowstone backcountry they call home, and both enjoy sharing their love of the outdoors with their guests. Beardsley, who has more than 30-years' experience as a guide and outfitter, including numerous encounters with wolves and personal observations of their interactions with livestock, is a natural to lead the trip.

I meet the rest of the inaugural group over dinner at the lodge. Charlie is a Florida restaurateur, lifelong horseman, and polo player. "I've been coming to the Yellowstone area for years, but this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to ride in this beautiful country and learn something new at the same time," he says. Ryan and Vicki are from Wyoming. "The Range Riders concept seems like a very practical solution to the livestock/wolf conflict, and I wanted to see what it truly entailed," Ryan says. Adds Vicki, "We saw it as a good

opportunity to possibly see wolves, educate ourselves about wolf biology, and learn more from the ranchers' perspective as well as ride in some beautiful country."

Jacqueline Rieder Hud, executive director of Keystone Conservation, soon joins us. "We have been working to protect and restore native predators and their habitats in the Northern Rockies since 1991," she points out. "Our interest is in balance. The wolf is the keystone species that keeps the ecosystem healthy."

Ready to ride, the next morning we head to the corrals to meet our horses. Our destination for the day is a mountain camp where we'll spend the next four nights. With Beardsley in the lead, we start our ascent up a narrow trail, which meanders along the Continental Divide through aspen groves before opening up to a lush alpine meadow carpeted with wildflowers. At 8,000 feet, the view is stunning: The Centennial Range looms over the horizon with large patches of snow glistening in the sun. While we break for a tasty picnic lunch, Beardsley walks over to a ridge, pulls out his binoculars, and scans the surrounding hills and meadows, looking for wolves.

After lunch we start our descent through a timber area, with the starkly beautiful Antelope Basin below us. Our



The first night, riders camp in a lush mountain meadow surrounded by forests with the Centennial Range as a backdrop. After waking to the aroma of coffee and bacon, the group saddles up and heads off to a wolf den discovered earlier by Range Riders.

camp has been set up in the most scenic spot, a lush mountain meadow surrounded by forests with the Centennial Range as a backdrop. Later that evening, we gather around the campfire for a glass of wine before migrating to the coziness of the mess tent, where a wood pipe stove purrs in a corner.

Guides by day and chefs by night, Myer and Allan Johnson treat us to an exquisite dinner of barbecued pork tenderloin garnished with potatoes and mushroom gravy. Over dinner, guest speakers give us a look at the wolf issue from different perspectives.

"In Yellowstone Park, wolves get used to humans," says Todd Graham, a rangeland consultant for grass management. "Once out of the park, they have no fear of humans. If there are more than 15 wolves in a pack, their protein requirements are so high that they need to kill every day. We need a stronger human presence to harass them and chase them away. They need to become afraid of humans again. Harassing wolves keeps them alive."

"Where there are wolves, cattle are going to die, and where cattle are dying, wolves are going to die," adds John Crumley, president of the Madison Valley Ranchlands Group. Over the next two nights, other guest speakers include representatives from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; the U.S. Forest Service; and the Range Riders. According to Hud, the importance of this gathering is not just about teaching people to coexist with

wolves, but about teaching people how best to work with each other. "This is cross-cultural," she points out. "We have to break the barrier by talking to each other."

W

AKING UP THE NEXT MORNING TO THE aroma of coffee and bacon, we saddle up soon after breakfast. The objective for the day is to ride to a wolf den discovered earlier by the Range Riders. As we climb to a ridge, dark clouds move in. A cold wind suddenly sweeps over the range, followed by the first raindrops. A few minutes later, it's a downpour. We seek protection from the heavy rain in a draw lined with aspen trees. Riding on, Myer leads us to the den, pointing out its entrance with his flashlight. Although no longer occupied, the den is easy to picture full of tumbling wolf pups, frolicking under their mother's watchful eye.

The rain stops during the night, and we wake up to a glorious morning. Today we are riding with Range Riders Jim and Marilyn Powers. Few cattle and no wolves were lost during the first three years of the couple's tenure, despite a growing wolf population. Two years ago, however, the large Horn Mountain pack killed three calves. That same year, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks removed 60 wolves for control purposes, including two of the Horn Mountain pack.

Experienced trackers and lifelong cattle hands, Jim and Marilyn relish spending their summers horseback attuned to the rhythms of wildlife, following the area's top predator. The rugged terrain and vast acreage of Montana, however, make watching livestock a tough proposition. Together, the Powerses watch more than 1,200 head of cattle grazing across 35,000 acres above the Madison Valley, about 40 miles west of Yellowstone. Mountainous but not overly steep, the terrain is made of sagebrush basins that lead to timbered ridges and buttes at higher elevation.

As we ride, Jim explains what it takes to be a Range Rider. "The first qualification is to be able to read cattle and know immediately if something is going on. Cattle tell you if they're happy or if something bothers them," he says. The Range Riders average 20 miles a day, every day. Many days, Jim and Marilyn ride in the late afternoon and into the evening and again before sunrise. Considering that a wolf can easily cover 50 miles a day, this is routine. "We monitor the rendezvous spots or the bedding spots," Jim says. "These are part of the wolves' social activity. They usually like where there is water and tall grass. The grass is just flattened out all over, and bones are scattered everywhere. It's like they had a big party. It's awesome to see that."

We come upon a small herd of cattle. As we calmly ride through them to detect any sign of anxiety, I remember Graham's words the night he joined us at camp: "If the cattle are kept in a tighter bunch, they're less likely to be attacked by wolves because [wolves] prey more on isolated animals. It's also easier to keep an eye on a bunched-up herd."

Today, the cattle rest easy, and after giving us an inquisitive look as we ride past them, they go back to grazing. We break for lunch under the shade of aspen trees. The sun is warm, and the aspen leaves shiver in the light breeze. Marilyn continues our education: "The pups are usually born around April and are out of the den after six weeks; they learn to kill by August. Fall is a crucial time of year because the pups are larger and need more food. It's also the time wolves prey more on cattle if wildlife becomes scarce." Adds Jim, "If we see wolves, we harass them by riding toward them and scaring them until they run off. If we keep putting enough pressure on them, they'll eventually leave the area and go somewhere else."

Later, we ride by a pond across some lush grass. We stay on the lookout, hoping to catch a glimpse of wolves, or at least some scattered bones. But wolves are nowhere to be seen. We hope the hazing is working, and that wolf populations are thriving, and meeting their protein requirements, elsewhere. There may not be a single solution to raising livestock around predators, but attentive management like the Range Riders provide is key to keeping livestock safe and wolves alive on a wide scale. As far as getting up close and personal with wolves, there is always tomorrow.

Range Riding

Ride Montana's untamed backcountry for yourself, harass some wolves (to keep them, and you, safe), learn more about how to protect the local wildlife and ranch land, or stop in Ennis for some shopping and gallery-hopping. There's plenty to see and do in these parts, with or without a wolf sighting.



Adventures Outfitting has been providing hunting, fishing, and pack trips to locations in southwestern Montana, especially the Lee Metcalf Wilderness and Yellowstone National Park, since 1986. Owners Tim Beardsley and Mike Myer enjoy sharing their

love of the outdoors with participants on their trips. To learn more, visit www.adventuresoutfitting.com.

Ennis, Montana, is a quaint and authentic Western town. Located in the heart of the Madison Valley and surrounded by three ranges of the Rocky Mountains and three million acres of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, Ennis offers art galleries, antiques shops, restaurants, a wildlife museum, and fishing and boating on Ennis Lake. For more information, visit www.ennismontana.org.

Keystone Conservation

will host the next Riding with Wolves adventure July 8–13. You can share the writer's unique experience and learn more about the significance, impact, and preservation of gray wolves.



For more information on this and other outdoor adventures, including spring wildlife watching and backcountry llama trekking in Yellowstone National Park, visit www.keystoneconservation.us or contact Jacqueline Rieder Hud at 406.587.3389.

The Madison Valley Ranchlands Group works to protect the ranching way of life and the biologically healthy open spaces on which ranching depends. For more information on tours or how to donate and help preserve Madison Valley, visit www.madisonvalleyranchlands.org.



Randy and Kristin Wimberg are documenting the Range Riders through film. Randy has filmed for the National Geographic, Travel, and Discovery Channels and is as comfortable shooting sharks underwater as he is scaling

the sides of El Capitan to capture climbing action. To learn more about Randy and Kristin's work, visit www.wimbergproductions.com.

—G.G.