



by James Ring Adams

Tap Dancing With Wolves

Washington unleashes its favorite pet on Yellowstone.

Yellowstone National Park, Wy. By the time the road along Lamar River and Soda Butte Creek leaves the northeast corner of Yellowstone National Park, it will top elevations of 9,000 feet. In the crisp late June evening, herds of elk and mule deer drift to the higher altitudes, seeking summer forage and relief from the lower-lying insects. Clusters of re-established bison graze year-round along the narrow highway, often sauntering malevolently across the potholed macadam to stare down motorists. But the cars and vans that crowd the frequent turnoffs are looking for another kind of wildlife. The motto etched into the dust on one Wyoming car says it all: "Spot Wolf or Bust."

The wolves of Yellowstone, reintroduced to the region in the newest and possibly most controversial federal wildlife program, have become one of the park's biggest tourist attractions. Even in this environmental age, few animals have so aroused the imagination of the East, or sparked a bigger fight in the West, as Yellowstone's newest residents. Since the first pack was released in the park in March 1995, newspapers in Montana and Wyoming seem to have devoted more space to killings of livestock by wolves (and wolves by humans) than to homicides. Indeed, before the animals were even released, the Environmental Impact Statement required for all federal programs that could affect natural surroundings drew formal comments from over 160,000 groups and individuals—quite possibly

JAMES RING ADAMS is an investigative writer for *The American Spectator*.

the largest such public response to any type of federal proposal in our history.

The return of the wolves arouses a strong reaction and heated conflict along every segment of the social and economic spectrum. Extreme environmentalists see the animals as a wedge to expand federal controls on land use. Cattle and sheep men fear a federal assault on their way of life. Upscale professionals and immigrants to resort centers like Jackson Hole look on the wolves as long-distance pets. Cowboys, still a substantial working class in this part of the world, pass on stories from their fathers about the havoc the animals brought to livestock before they were wiped out of the region in the 1920's.

The occasional wolf-killing creates still other divisions. The Park Service praises some ranchers for their cooperation in investigations, but comes down hard on others suspected of hunting the protected animals. Ugly rumors circulate here that rich, well-connected stockmen get off easily while smaller ranchers face jail time. In the welter of gossip and argument, there is agreement on one thing: when the East turns sentimental about some federal policy in the West, people who live in the West are going to pay dearly.

The wolf controversy was created by eighty years of failed federal policies, 180-degree shifts, and bureaucratic cover-ups. Is the wolf a scourge of humanity, to be extirpated, or an essential regulator of the ecosystem, to be protected and restored? In the history of Yellowstone, the government has followed one policy and then the other, each time denying publicly what it was doing.

Is a federal program to reintroduce wolves, with rabies shots, radio collars, and helicopter relocations really a restoration of the wilderness? Is it good, bad, or even necessary, as wolves return on their own? The story is much more involuted than eastern sentimentalists might suppose.

Montana writer Alston Chase first told the tale in his 1986 classic, *Playing God in Yellowstone*, a rare case of clear-headed policy analysis from a committed conservationist. A tall, patrician former college professor, Chase gave up his tenured position as chairman of the Macalaster College philosophy department to move to the Yellowstone River valley north of the park. His rigorous critique of ecological assumptions has made him as popular in the park as Socrates was in Athens. *Playing God*, Chase's account of federal park mismanagement, was banned from Yellowstone's gift shops by the Reagan administration. Neither that book nor his recent, more thorough-going attack on "eco-system" theory, *In a Dark Wood* (Houghton Mifflin), are yet to be found in the park's bookstores.

By all accounts wolves roamed Yellowstone in 1872, when it became the first of America's national parks. It was a time in which the white man was producing a drastic shift in the West's animal populations. At first, the changes greatly benefited the wolves. The slaughter of the buffalo herds littered the plains with carcasses, a fortunate feast for the canine scavengers. Wolf numbers surged with the abundant nutrition.

With the buffalo on the way out, ranchers moved in herds of livestock in the great cattle boom of the 1870's. Deprived of one feast, the proliferating wolves quickly developed a taste for beef, and then lamb. Their legendary efficiency in killing cattle and sheep still makes them hated by western ranchers. Heavy pressure from cattle and sheep interests at the turn of

the century put the federal government into the business of destroying predators injurious to agriculture and animal husbandry. In 1907, the U.S. Biological Survey, formerly devoted to protecting water fowl, undertook the job of exterminating the wolf.

At first Yellowstone stayed exempt from the slaughter because it was under the control of the U.S. Cavalry. But in 1916 the newly organized National Park Service took over. It saw wolf-killing as a way of winning friends among its neighbors. The task became top priority for the first park rangers, who received part of their pay in wolf pelts. By the mid-twenties, the last wolves had been eradicated from Yellowstone.

But the law that established the Park Service charged it with preserving its wildlife "for the enjoyment of future generations." Faced with the contradiction, Yellowstone's managers did the natural thing. They lied. Through the early 1970's, the official line was that wolves still lingered in remote areas of the park, even though rangers and field biologists never saw any signs of them in on-going studies of the park's elk herds.

Critics warned that elk over-population was destroying the park; the animals were over-grazing the grassland, consuming "browse" such as willow and aspen essential for the vanishing beaver, and squeezing out other ungulates (hooved wildlife such as mule deer and antelope). Disappearance of the once abundant beaver was especially dangerous, since its network of dams and ponds had stemmed erosion and preserved ground-water. In 1961, the park began organized slaughters to reduce the elk herd, in horrifying scenes that soon raised a public outcry.

Then, in 1967, a shift in park personnel produced a scientific breakthrough. A new team of park biologists announced that mortality rates would soon bring the Yellowstone elk herd into equilibrium with its food supply, without the help of slaughter or natural predators. Independent biologists couldn't see the evidence for the new theory. (Literally—the park refused Freedom of Information Act requests for its data.) As outside academics were cut out of the loop of the park's biological research, they began to suspect that the "natural regulation" theory was a

political convenience for the park bureaucracy, rather than science. The elk herd continued to grow.

Just as the park managers desperately needed some means to check the elk explosion, wolves made a sudden reappearance. In December 1967, a summer ranger driving down the Lamar River Valley on vacation saw a flash of gray cross the road. He managed to grab a movie camera, and produced Yellowstone's first irrefutable wolf sighting in thirty years. The creatures continued to show themselves for the next five years, gradually drifting north toward Canada. Then they disappeared.

Chase blew the whistle on the episode. He found park employees who confirmed at second hand what locals widely suspected. Park officials, went the story, had covertly imported the wolves from Canada. The Yellowstone supervisor rewrote the record of past sightings, to show that wolves might have hung on in the park. Although the Park Service denies there was any covert program, leading wolf biologists now agree with Chase that the wolves of 1967 had been transplanted to the area by human means and decided to go back home.

In the face of such well-founded suspicions of evidence tampering, perhaps the Park Service has only itself to blame for the view of some local critics that the wolf reintroduction program is a hoax designed to beef up appropriations. Chase recalls that he was personally present when the Yellowstone party line changed abruptly in 1985: "William Penn Mott, Reagan's Park Service director, made a grand entrance to Yellowstone. After talking to advisers that day about wolf reintroduction, he said, 'I'm in favor of it.' All of a sudden, the official park position went from 'we don't need wolves because we have them' to 'we need wolves.'"

But as government plans progressed to trap wolves in Canada and fly them south to Yellowstone, wolves began to return to the park region without any help. In 1992, a moose-hunter named Jerry Kysar shot a large canid south of Yellowstone. It was too big to be a coyote, so he called in park rangers to make an identification. After six months of delay, the forensics lab of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

finally confirmed that it was a wolf.

As a national fad took off for wolf movies, T-shirts, and posters, Wyoming natives began to snap up a poster of their own. Quoting Kysar, it read: "There are no wolves in Wyoming. Clinton will cut your taxes. And Elvis lives in Jackson Hole." Without bothering to tell reporters from the east, the Rocky Mountain wolf lobby redefined the issue. The main alternatives now, according to the Interior Department's Environmental Impact Statement, were reintroduction of an "experimental population" and natural recovery. The federal program would restore the Yellowstone population by the year 2002. On their own, said the statement, wolves would make their comeback by 2025.

Such is the bizarre world of wildlife protection, however, that this choice made some opponents of the wolf decide that they were better off with the reintroduction program.

The key to such Lewis Carroll logic is the 1973 Endangered Species Act, the most anti-scientific piece of legislation since the ban on the teaching of evolution. If the wolf came back on its own, it would be a protected species, hedged around with rigid rules. It couldn't be shot, for instance, unless it directly threatened human life. Humans could forget about making a living from the land around its habitat. But a change to the act in 1982 allowed looser rules for "experimental populations." It was this amendment, in fact, that made wolf reintroduction possible, says Hank Fischer, northern Rockies field representative for Defenders of Wildlife and a long-time leader in the wolf lobby.

Under the wolf program, ranchers could shoot wolves they found attacking their cattle. Land use limits were far less draconian, and would end when ten breeding pairs set up housekeeping. In addition, Fischer proved an unusual Green in his willingness to admit that stockmen had valid concerns. He persuaded his group to set up a fund to reimburse ranchers for losses.

The wolf issue also exposed a hypocrisy in the Endangered Species Act that has cost the American economy untold bil-

(Continued on page 91)



by Jonas Bernstein

Not Yet the Worst

As long as you ignore Chechnya and the corruption.

Boris Yeltsin's convincing election defeat of Gennady Zyuganov is proof that most Russians are perfectly capable of distinguishing between bad and worse. Just prior to the second round of voting July 3, one Moscow newspaper departed from the Soviet-style pro-Yeltsin propaganda which had been proliferating for weeks in the press, and ran a short interview with a small-time trader who explained why he would vote for the incumbent. With suffocating taxes, bribes to voracious officials, and onerous mafia protection payments, he said, it's tough to be a small businessman. But with Yeltsin, at least, there's a chance to make a go of it. The interview, unlike many election-related items in the Russian press during the campaign, had the ring of authenticity.

On the day of the run-off vote, I was in the city of Tula, a hundred miles south of Moscow. It is home to an elite airborne division that Aleksandr Lebed, Yeltsin's national security czar, commanded for six years. In the first round of voting, Lebed had tied his future boss in Tula voting. Around midday I dropped by Lebed's local campaign headquarters, which was now working in tandem with the Yeltsin campaign. Staffers were very nervous: voter turnout was light. Yeltsin had pulled another disappearing act, and a Zyuganov victory seemed possible. They talked at length about the shallowness of support for Yeltsin in the region. As it turned out, there was a last-minute wave of voting in the evening, just before the polls closed, and Yeltsin took Tula by a comfortable margin.

JONAS BERNSTEIN is a journalist in Moscow.

This pattern of last-minute voting occurred throughout the country, apparently because some rocket scientist at state television had decided to air a very popular Brazilian soap opera late afternoon election day. People used the fact that voting day was an official holiday to go shopping, and then went home to catch the soap opera. One could imagine them saying to their families and friends around 7 p.m., "Well, I guess we'd better go vote for Boris Nikolayevich; dead or alive, he's better than the Commies."

Such behavior displayed a healthy attitude, and was refreshing compared, for example, to the hagiographic outpourings after Yeltsin's victory from ex-privatization czar Anatoly Chubais. One of the masterminds of the Yeltsin campaign, Chubais held a press conference several days after the runoff to announce that he had absolutely no interest in securing a post in the president's new government. But he hailed Yeltsin as a historical figure greater than such industrializers and reformers as Sergei Witte, Peter Stolypin, and Czar Alexander II; indeed, he said, Yeltsin was on par with Peter the Great. Soon afterward Chubais—author of last year's blatantly collusive privatization scheme, which Yeltsin had blamed back in January as the main cause of the Communists' comeback—was offered the position of presidential chief-of-staff. Yeltsin, they say, values "loyalty." Chubais stopped playing the coquette, and took the job.

The next in line to pay tribute to Boris the Great was U.S. Vice President Al Gore, in town for his seventh gab-fest with Prime Minister Chernomyrdin and to praise Russians for having chosen "a bright future." In

other words, to thank everybody for providing Clinton, Talbott & Co. with a foreign policy "victory" in time for November. Yeltsin, who was recovering from whatever it is that's wrong with him, blew off a scheduled meeting with the veep, leaving the Kremlin for a government health resort outside Moscow. The meeting instead took place the next day, after which Gore—who'd reportedly been miffed about the last-minute brush-off—pretended to have found Yeltsin "in a very good spirit" and to have discussed many weighty issues with him "in depth." Gore said "in depth" three times, in case there was any doubt.

Unfortunately for Al, his celebration of Russian democracy coincided with the Kremlin's decision to renege on its pre-election promise to end the war in Chechnya. The military was busy carrying out massive attacks on rebel positions in and around a string of towns and villages, making a mockery of the May cease-fire and killing dozens of civilians in the process.

The State Department had condemned the new fighting in Chechnya and the loss of civilian lives on the eve of Gore's trip. But during a joint press conference with Chernomyrdin, the most righteous indignation the U.S. vice president could muster was: "I believe that this conflict has all the characteristics of the kind of conflict which will almost certainly never yield to a resolution through violence." Long clung to by Westerners as a dove, Chernomyrdin replied simply that, while his government was committed to peace talks, he was not optimistic about their outcome since the Chechen rebels were to blame for the cease-fire's end. Terrorism, he sternly warned, would be "neutralized."

The same day of that press conference, a group of apparently non-neutralized Russian soldiers in an armored personnel carrier shot up several civilian cars near Grozny.