

# Wolf Patrol

**On the side of apex predators that are the Steward of the Wild**

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Winter is approaching in wolf country. The last of the sugar maples have surrendered their leaves, and there's a colder bite in the air that tells you its time to die. It's nature at its realest, the life cycle of the wild that will never be stopped. Winter is coming and if you are not strong, you will not survive.

I'm chopping wood. I live on the land mass commonly referred to as the Great Lakes bioregion, in an old wooden home, with only a wood stove for heat. The three trees I felled a few weeks ago lay neatly stacked outside my back door, but I still need to gather two more cords of wood, just to make sure...so we don't freeze to death.

The wolves I'm getting to know in this region are doing fine. They are the masters of their domain. The wolf has returned as a steward of the wild here in the Great Lakes, in a place where native folks long ago called him Brother.

That's why I'm back in the woods—last fall and this fall again—to see how humans are interacting with this prodigal dog's return. The tribes have spoken, and they are outraged that white people still want to eradicate the wolf.

The Anishinaabe legends say their own future can be foretold in the wolf's treatment, so every tribe in the Great Lakes is against the recreational hunting and trapping of wolves that began in 2012 in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan. In December 2014, wolves were returned to federal protection after a lawsuit charged states with mismanagement of wolves.

The organization I work with, Wolf Patrol, investigates legal hunting and trapping practices that negatively impact the wolf's return to the Great Lakes, primarily in Wisconsin. We've spent all summer and fall investigating bear baiting and bear hound training, both activities that have caused the state's number one source of conflict between wolves and humans.

Bear baiting begins in April. Establishing feeding stations for wildlife alters not only bears' behavior, it conditions other animals to identify these sites as their food source as well.

In many of the areas where we find bear baits in Wisconsin, signs of wolves are also abundant. In the Moquah Barrens, an isolated portion of the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest on the farthest northern tip of Wisconsin, wolves in the area began to kill bear hunters' hounds.

Historically, one or two might get killed over the entire summer; but this year a pack of wolves killed seven bear hounds in an area heavy with bear baits. During bear hound training season, bear baiters and hound trucks frequent the dirt roads threading through the Moquah, repacking bear baits and loosing hounds on a bear's scent.

Seen as intruders, the GPS-collared dogs are not just killed by wolves, they are eaten. Recently, I read of a hound hunter hearing wolves tearing into his hounds, but by the time he could reach them, it was too late. The photo on his Facebook account shows him holding his dog by the GPS collar, only there's nothing below the dog's ribcage.

In mid-October, I returned to the Moquah to see if I might be able to hear or see any of the pack that had made Happy Meals out of so many bear hounds last summer. The bear baits were finally abandoned, the distant baying of hounds, such a common sound just a week or two earlier, was now noticeably absent. In its place was the silence of nature.

This is where I saw my first wolf in the wild. We were driving down a forest service road when a tall, long-legged dark creature danced across the road in front of us. I had seen countless coyotes before, but this bigfoot-looking dog just waltzed a few paces across the road and left. I saw him wink at us.

Wolves in the Great Lakes region demonstrate what it means to be wild. In the absence of this apex predator, man sculpted a landscape where he was the master of all else. Now, wolves are back. The woods of northern Wisconsin are invaded annually by thousands of individual packs of bear hounds that are legally allowed to chase bears beginning July 1. Many of these chases begin at bear baits, where hounds can easily pick up a bear's scent. The summer months are when wolves are taking pups from their den sites, for the first time, to rendezvous areas, where pups are sometimes left while their parents hunt. This is also when wolves are fiercely territorial and protective of their young, and will kill any dog that trespasses on their territory.

In 2014, over 30 hunting hounds were killed by wolves in Wisconsin and this last summer's events in the Moquah are not unusual. Wolves are not predators that take meddling with the environment lightly, and when nature is out of balance, they will move to correct it. That is the job that wolf first came here to do, according to the old legends. Wolves will not be saved by us, we will be saved by wolves.

I fight for wolves because, like us indigenous people, they choose to live on their own terms, by their own rules. They will not accept being coddled by well-intentioned activists who believe they are gentle beings. Wolves are fierce predators that kill the weak, the sick, those that don't belong in the wild.

In October, the USDA's Wildlife Services issued a wolf kill order in central Wisconsin's Colburn State Wildlife Area after wolves there demonstrated a lack of fear of humans. This occurred after one man claimed he was attacked and fired shots that wounded a wolf. But state agents were never able to find a body. Traps were set, but no wolves were caught. The pack is believed to have moved on.

I'm a pragmatic person that knows people and wolves will always be at odds, but I'll always fight for the wolves' right to be who they really are, and not what some humans want them to be. When wolves kill hunting hounds, or take down sheep, sometimes it's simply because they are the Stewards of the Wild.

It is something bigger than what even they can control. It's the spirit of the Wild reminding us that we can make all the laws we want, but nothing is ever going to stop the wild from being wild. That's why, win or lose, you will always find me on the wolf's side, on its trail.

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