

TRAVEL

# Chances with wolves

Minnesota trip yields opportunity to study feral predators



Shadow is one of the "ambassador" wolves at the International Wolf Center in Ely, Minn.

Snowshoers track gray wolves near Moose Lake, one of the many waterways in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Tracking is part of an Elderhostel program sponsored by Vermilion College in Ely, Minn.



BETH PARKS PHOTOS

BY BETH PARKS  
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Beep ... beep ... beep ...  
The chirping was stronger in my right ear. "Frank, the signal's getting louder," I shouted over the roar of the propellers. The pilot jabbed his index finger toward the right of the plane's nose and shouted back, "I think they're just over that ridge!"  
The twin-prop Cessna rose slightly to clear the tree line and then banked sharply to the right. As the plane dropped, the beeping in my earphones began to equalize until the intensity was just slightly greater in my right ear.

There, just off to the side and perhaps no more than a hundred feet below us, a broad swath of red overlaid the new-fallen snow. In the center of the scarlet stain, two wolves tugged at the fresh carcass of a white-tailed deer. Another wolf stood patiently nearby, while a fourth merely lay in a drift and watched.

"Farm Lake pack," Frank shouted. I glanced down at the map on my lap and tapped the home-range ellipse that a researcher had outlined in black. Minnesota is home to some 2,600 wolves, and the Farm Lake pack is one of several that inhabit the northern region near Ely and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. To find the territory on your map, look north and west of Lake Superior up near the Canadian border.

As Frank circled the area again, I pressed my camera to the glass and tried to capture the scene. But we were moving too low and too fast, and I missed the shot.

No matter. The image was indelibly burned into my mem-

ory. If I were an artist, I suspect that I could faithfully reproduce every detail on canvas today or even decades from now.

Wolves were what drew me to Minnesota at a time when most Mainers were craving the first flowers of spring. I checked the weather in Ely (pronounced E-lee), where we would be staying, the night before I left Maine. "Coldest spot in the nation today," proclaimed the local Web site.

As a former coyote researcher, I was used to cold weather and long treks on snowshoes. Northern Minnesota and the Boundary Waters didn't scare me. My suitcase

was crammed with clothes guaranteed to keep me warm at 40 degrees below zero.

I had considered working with internationally recognized wolf guru Dr. L. David Mech (rhymes with peach) in northern Minnesota when I finished my graduate degree in wildlife at UMaine 25 years ago. These were likely the descendants of Mech's wild research animals below me on the ridge.

But other biologists were studying the wolves now. I felt a sharp pang of envy. Every pack in the area contained one radio-collared animal. Today's researchers, given adequate funding, can follow pack movements at will. No more assump-

tions. No more speculation. Science and nature hand in hand.

"Frank," I shouted at the pilot. "Any chance we can snowshoe up to the kill site tomorrow?" He shrugged. Later, he sent word that the site was inaccessible. Nothing likely would be left to examine, anyway.

That night brought about an inch of fresh snow followed by a cool, cloudy day and perfect tracking conditions. We had

considered hiking to an abandoned wolf den, but instead decided to snowshoe around one of the many lakes near the Boundary Waters.

Track patterns brought all kinds of little surprises. Here a mouse left its paw and tail marks as it hopped along before darting under a branch. There an otter scrambled over a mound and then slid downhill on its belly, leaving a ribbonlike imprint that wound its way

down to an icy brook. Beneath a clump of trees, a partridge obviously had strutted. Its macaroni-and-cheese droppings would serve as a reminder of its presence long after the snow had melted away.

The big thrill came as we crossed a ridge and looked down on the frozen expanse of yet another lake. Bisecting its surface was the unmistakable straight path of a lone wolf.

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## Wolves

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The tracks formed a dotted line across the snow-covered ice and scaled the bank just ahead of us onto the tote road. They were so fresh we could even see the hair patterns between the paw pads.

You can't imagine the size of wolf tracks until you see them yourself. You can put your entire hand into them. The feet that make them are markedly webbed, serving as natural snowshoes to support an animal that may weigh between 80 and 100 pounds. The rear foot steps into the print created by the front foot, conserving energy for an animal that may eat only once a week.

The gray wolf that made the prints likely saw us, but we never saw it. Wolves are highly elusive creatures. I followed the tracks looking for additional sign, but there was none. Although the wolf had crossed deer paths several times, it registered no interest. Perhaps it had feasted recently.

The subspecies of gray wolf that resides in Minnesota is *Canis lupus nubilus*, known as the Great Plains or buffalo wolf. A single wolf can eat between a dozen and 16 white-tailed deer a year, or about 40,000 of a deer population estimated to be approximately 800,000. If you think that's a lot of deer eaten by wolves, hunters take about 200,000 annually, cars kill another 15,000 and predators such as coyotes, bears and bobcats take an additional 60,000.

Still, there are more deer than the land can reasonably support. I've never seen so many. We counted more than 40 deer along the road during one short ride between Ely and the Boundary Waters. Roadkills provide hearty snacks for eagles, ravens and

other critters brave enough to gorge themselves. Cars, trucks and campers speed dangerously close, sometimes turning the scavengers themselves into carrion.

The International Wolf Center, located just north of Ely, relies heavily on roadkilled deer and other carrion to feed its "ambassador packs" of arctic wolves. This subspecies of gray wolf carries the scientific name of *Canis lupus arctos*.

Recognized as the world's premier wolf interpretive facility, the center was developed by Mech and others to help educate the public. It features outstanding educational displays and a life-size diorama that will blow your socks off. Children can even crawl in and out of a model den to feel what it's like to be a wolf pup.

If you want to watch wolves up close, the center is the place to do it. Huge windows overlook a wooded enclosure where two white arctic wolf males, Malik and Shadow, spend their days hunting, playing, napping, and trying to outwit the ravens that seem to want to lure them into playing tag.

In another enclosure, out of sight but visible on television monitors, resides the "retired pack" of wolves. These animals provide scientists with data that help them better understand the health problems that aging wolves face in the wild.

But "puppies" is the magic word this spring, and there's real excitement at the Wolf Center as I write this. The center has requested three new pups, preferably two females and one male, with one that's black. The pups will be born between April 24 and May 6 and will be on display at the center after June 1. You will be able to watch them online at [www.wolf.org](http://www.wolf.org), and you can read about their progress at that site.

Even if you don't care for wolves, there's a lot more to do and see in the Ely area. It's a bit of a trek from Maine, but it's well worth the trip if wilderness attracts you.

Never heard of Ely, Minn.? Check it out. You may be pleasantly surprised.

### Wolves

- Visit the International Wolf Center at [www.wolf.org](http://www.wolf.org), where you can watch live wolves. Check out the center's educational offerings. You also can call 1-800-ELY-WOLF for more information.

- Enjoy the benefits of being 55 or older at Elderhostel (you can be as young as 35 if you room with someone in the older age bracket). Visit [www.elderhostel.org](http://www.elderhostel.org) for this year's programs or call 1-877-426-8056 toll-free for more information.

- Sign up for "Wolves in Winter: Track the Pack in the Minnesota Northwoods." This five-day program enables you to track wolves on snowshoes (provided) and from the air. You also will have a chance to howl with wild wolves. You'll stay in one of the comfortable cabins at the Outdoor Learning Center on beautiful Fall Lake, and you'll attend classes presented by Vermilion College and the National Wolf Center. Get your name on the list, though. This popular new program is booking way ahead.

- Elderhostel also offers a program called "Wonder of Wolves: Intergenerational Wolf Discovery." Grandparents may participate with their grandchildren ages 9 to 12, with one adult per child. This program takes place in June. Space was still available at the time of this writing.

### Ely opportunities

- **Winter:** Mush a team of huskies for one day or several and learn about the region's history, scenery, ecology and

- **Winter:** Mush a team of huskies for one day or several, and learn about the region's history, scenery, ecology and wildlife. If you like, spend a night or two in a Mongolian-style yurt or give ice fishing a try. Plan your visit for early March and you can catch the opening ceremonies of The Beargrease Dogsled Marathon in Duluth. Named for legendary Native American mail deliverer John Beargrease, the 400-mile jaunt along Lake Superior is the longest race in the continuous forty-eight states.

- **Summer:** Canoe the pristine lakes of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Hike, camp and take photographs to your heart's content. Choose from a host of experienced guides who will work to make your experience memorable.

- **Shopping:** If you're the outdoorsy type, you'll think you've died and gone to heaven when you see all the outfitters in Ely. Wintergreen Designs, for example, crafts its own renowned garments right on the premises. Try Steger if you crave mukluks, a type of moosehide footwear with canvas or hide upper portions. Walking in mukluks in winter is like walking barefoot in the snow, although your feet stay warm and dry.

- **Museums and Art:** Ely attracts more than its share of artists, photographers and crafters. You might want to check out the Ely-Winton History Museum, which presents 12,000 years of local history, or the Soudan Underground Mine, where you descend 2,400 feet in a "cage" and ride through the old iron mine in a rail car. You might also enjoy the Dorothy Molter Museum, which shows how a nurse brewed homemade root beer for wilderness visitors for over fifty years.

- **Vermilion Community College:** Vermilion Community College sponsors a variety of Elderhostel programs. In addition to the wolf experiences, Vermilion offers educational activities that focus on skiing, snowshoeing, dog sledding, hawks and other migratory birds, moose, eagles, plants and trees, geology, saunas, hightones, Burnside Lake, and Lake Superior. For its regular students, Vermilion offers degrees that include such outdoors-related fields as Parks & Recreation, Water Resources, Wildlife management, and Wildland/Wildlife Law Enforcement.