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At One With The Wolves

STORY BY ANN GIBSON // SEPTEMBER 21, 2018

Wildlife biologist Linda Thurston never intended to get into ecotourism.

But, while working with Yellowstone National Park's wolf reintroduction project in the mid-1990s, she met her future husband, fellow researcher Nathan Varley. Together, they realized that guide services were virtually nonexistent in the park, so they decided to fill the gap with [Yellowstone Wolf Tracker](#).

Today, both Linda and her husband are full-time naturalist guides for the company. They also work with a general manager and four other full time guides during the peak summer season.



Interestingly enough, Linda explains, peak visitation doesn't coincide with optimum wildlife viewing.

"The best time to see wildlife is in late fall, winter, and early spring—when wolves are really active and people aren't around," Linda says. "Wildlife is actually least active in the hottest months of the year."

Linda counts herself among Yellowstone's ecotourism pioneers.



“Driving through the park on your own is such a superficial way to see Yellowstone. Our guides identify what people don’t recognize as a good opportunity to see wildlife and take you right there.”

With years of experience tracking wildlife in the park, nicknamed ‘The Serengeti of North America,’ Linda has an intimate knowledge of Yellowstone’s wolf packs and knows how they use the landscape.

“In a single morning, we take visitors to see wolves and bears in their natural habitat. We tag on these great encounters with herds of bison, migrating sandhill cranes, an osprey nest,” Linda says.



“People say they never dreamed they’d ever see so much wildlife,” she notes. “An experienced naturalist knows what’s going on right now on the ground, so you get to see the high points.”

Private tours run all year, with as many as four a day departing in the summer. The rest of the year they run package tours to Lamar Valley and across the Northern Range, with catered meals and evening workshops on photography and wildlife management. Some tours include lodging at the historic Lamar Buffalo Ranch deep inside the park.

Guests use spotting scopes to watch wolf activity, sometimes from up to a mile away, with guides describing pack composition and territory, as well as characteristics of other animals that come into sight.



“Wolves are top predators, predators of some of the largest animals out there like elk and bison,” Linda says. “To some extent, the wolves regulate the behavior of these prey animals, which trickles down to other aspects of the community like the vegetation and other small animals. What they do reverberates throughout the whole community. They’re big players.”

“You start to recognize and relate to individual wolves,” she adds. “Since the very early years of doing this, we’ve recognized that, at some point, usually not that far into the future, the wolves we’re watching are going to meet with disaster. It’s one of the most difficult things about our work.”

Another challenge Linda and her team face is meeting the expectations of guests.

“Some visitors have been to places like Africa, where you can drive right up to animals that are used to people. We can’t do that, especially with wolves and bears,” Linda explains. “That’s just not how Yellowstone works.”

In fact, it’s because the wolves are *not* aware of human presence that guests are able to observe natural pack behavior—behavior that leads to life-and-death drama.

“The wolves live as a team and rely on each other to survive,” Linda says. “They work together to take down large prey or fight off a rival pack, and those pack rivalries are a common way wolves are killed. You see events that shape their lives and you sense their mortality. It makes you realize that, as human beings, we have it made.”

Linda collaborates with ongoing ecological studies in the park, including studying ways to manage livestock to minimize conflict with wolves. Suffice to say, she’s a big promoter of the benefits of ecotourism.

“Wolves that leave the park in fall and early winter can be hunted or trapped,” she says. “We work with the state to recognize that Montana and Wyoming benefit from ecotourism and see that wolves are valuable—more valuable than a hunting license.”



Linda and her husband are also active on the Bear Creek Council, a grassroots volunteer organization focused on local issues.

“For Gardiner, Montana—the doorstep of Yellowstone National Park—a lot of our local issues are wildlife issues,” Linda says. “We work to create coexistence measures that

help people deal with the challenges of living on a wild landscape with predators like wolves and bears.”

The best way I can give back,” she continues, “is by helping these animals that are so important to our business.”