

# Yellowstone Science

A quarterly publication devoted to the natural and cultural resources



Tales of Yellowstone's First Tourists  
The Value of *Nature Notes*  
A Wolf-Coyote Face-off  
Nature on Display

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# A Drop in the Historical Bucket

Have you ever wondered about the first visitors to Yellowstone—how difficult a journey they might have had, and what their impressions would have been of the strange things they experienced? The first party was not unlike that of George Mallory and company when, in their attempt to surmount the world’s tallest peak, they “hiked off the map” into unknown territory—with little of the preparatory whirlwind that can accompany a park visitor today. No pre-drawn “trip-tik”; no reserved lodging or campsite awaiting; no web sites, guidebooks, or CD-roms to suggest “can’t miss” highlights of Yellowstone. In the wake of reports from the Washburn and Hayden expeditions of 1870–1871, Clawson, Raymond, and friends set out to explore what was to become the world’s first national park. Lee Silliman shares excerpts of the travelers’ accounts, which perhaps leave us with as many questions as they answer.

Thomas Patin paints a picture of how later visitors to the more well-traveled park might stand at an overlook to enjoy the view, and experience what exhibit designers tried to conjure up in a cyclorama display. Was this by design or accident? Will a “magisterial gaze” at the live Yellowstone ever be supplanted by the vicarious visit to the TV travelogue or the multidimensional web site? Or will there always be plenty (perhaps even an excess) of people who must experience the real thing, a place that will never be as static as a museum display?

For nearly 50 years, people living and working in the park shared their experiences and natural history observations in *Nature Notes*. This simple but popular old newsletter spawned many other communiques, and still offers researchers valuable snapshots of Yellowstone’s past. In tribute to its continuing popularity and worth, we reinstitute nature notes as a recurring feature and encourage readers to submit relevant cultural and natural history accounts for inclusion in the ever-growing record of *Yellowstone Science*. Some future reader will sift through the bucket of accumulated stories to form their impressions of this time and place.

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# NATURE NOTES

## A Wolf-Coyote Interaction

by Betsy Robinson and Steve Gehman

Wednesday, May 5, 1999, dawned partly cloudy and cold on Yellowstone's northern range. At 6:30 a.m. we watched two grizzly bears foraging, one at the base of Specimen Ridge and the other north of the Lamar River. We then made our way to Slough Creek to look for the Rose Creek wolf pack. At about 7:00 a.m., we joined a small group of friends at an overlook above Slough Creek where they were watching six members of the Rose Creek pack. The wolves had made a kill the previous night along the banks of Slough Creek and were resting after feeding. The kill was at the bottom of an embankment, out of sight from where we were standing. Two of the wolves made their way northwest over a ridge and out of sight, leaving three wolves lying on a sage-covered hillside about one-quarter mile from the kill.

At approximately 7:30 a.m., the alpha male, #8, appeared carrying a chunk of meat and made his way west to where the other wolves were lying. Two of those wolves joined him and they slowly made their way up the ridge and into the trees, disappearing from view. The remaining black wolf, one of last year's pups, walked over to the kill and fed for approximately 10 minutes. The wolf then walked a short distance to a shallow pond and drank some water.

At that point, a coyote appeared along the shore of the pond and approached the wolf. We all tensed and waited expectantly for the wolf's reaction. Wolves and coyotes are competitors, and we have witnessed wolves chasing and harassing coyotes. Also, wolves have killed a number of coyotes in the park since the wolves were released in March of 1995. The wolf looked at the coyote, which continued to approach. When it got within 20 meters of the wolf, the coyote assumed the "alligator gape" posture, with tail tucked, back arched, and mouth gaping open. The wolf stood its ground and continued to watch the coyote. The coyote then did a surprising thing—it adopted a playful attitude which we have seen many times before among dogs. The coyote dropped down on its front legs, tail out and wagging, seemingly inviting the wolf to play. The wolf continued to watch, and the coyote repeated the display. After the second time, the young wolf responded and trotted off after the coyote.



For the next five minutes, the coyote led the wolf through the sagebrush, back and forth, up and down. A pattern emerged, with the coyote running ahead at a faster pace than the wolf, then waiting for the wolf to catch up and get within 10 or 20 meters before running ahead again. There never appeared to be menace in the situation, and the wolf never appeared to actually pursue the coyote with any seriousness. Several times the coyote and the wolf stood face to face at a distance of less than 10 meters.

All the while it seemed to those of us observing that the coyote was leading the wolf somewhere, and had a motive. After about five minutes, the coyote had led the wolf to the top of a small rise where another coyote appeared, and the situation changed very quickly. The two coyotes abruptly turned on the surprised wolf, chasing it and trying to bite its hindquarters. The wolf ran away at full speed, with its ears back and tail between its legs. The two coyotes pursued for several minutes as the wolf dodged through the sagebrush and finally escaped up the ridge and out of sight into the trees, at which point the coyotes broke off the chase.

It appeared to those of us watching that the entire thing had been a setup, and that the first coyote deliberately waited until only one wolf remained in the area. It then lured the wolf to the vicinity of the second coyote. Perhaps there was a coyote den in the area and the coyotes wanted to drive off the lone wolf, or perhaps the coyotes were merely bullies. We'll never know the real story, but this time the coyotes turned the tables on the wolves.



*An original drawing by Harold J. Broderick that appeared on the cover of a 1946 issue of Nature Notes.*

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