



WILDERNESS WATCHER

The Quarterly Newsletter of Wilderness Watch

Volume 27 • Number 1 • Spring 2016

Of Wolves, Elk, and Wilderness: The Battle in the River of No Return

By Dana Johnson

It's January in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness—the largest contiguous expanse of Wilderness in the Lower 48. From the south, the Middle Fork of the Salmon River makes its way north for over 100 miles until it joins the Main Salmon. From there, the river cuts west, unimpeded, carving one of the wildest canyons on the planet. Rising roughly 6,300 feet from the river bottom, old forests, rocky bluffs, and jagged crags connect with a massive network of ridges and drainages—refuge for the undomesticated. The elk have moved to lower elevations, browsing on south facing slopes, while mountain goats and bighorn sheep navigate the windswept scree and crags above. A mountain lion leaves its solitary trail in the snow.

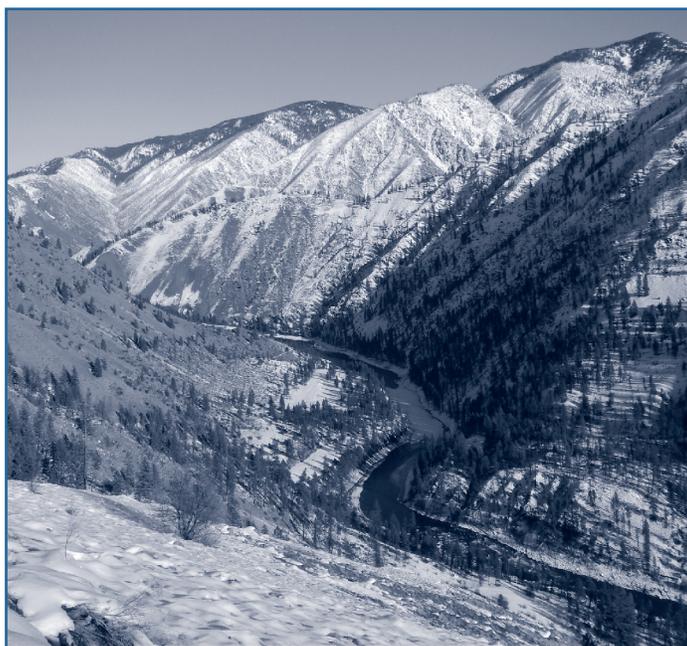


Photo: Brett Haverstick

manding full, visceral attention. Avalanches pierce silence like a shotgun. Wolves project their long, mournful howls across the ridges. Trees, bending under the growing weight of winter, abruptly snap.

Always, the crystalized silence settles once again awaiting the next carnal interruption. This January is different. Helicopters approach over the ridges and into the heart of the Wilderness, their mechanized thumping growing in intensity. Herds of panicked elk flee across their wintering grounds, legs scrambling to maintain the impossible trajectory. The helicopters hover and swoop until close enough for the passengers to take aim. The

net-gun fires—one is hit. The helicopter touches down long enough for the passengers to jump and then returns to a hover over the entangled, waiting animal. She is “processed.” This scene replays over and over. When the helicopters leave, 64 animals will return to their wild companions carrying something new and out of place.

This year, in January, the Forest Service authorized Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) to make 120 helicopter landings in the River of No

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Anyone who has spent time in wilderness in the depth of winter knows that the stillness is striking. The absence of noise makes any deviation from the status quo an acute jarring of the senses—the present moment de-

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Return Wilderness to place radio telemetry collars on 60 elk. To our knowledge, this is the most extensive helicopter intrusion ever authorized in Wilderness. IDFG said the project was necessary to study an elk-population decline that has occurred since the return of gray wolves to the Wilderness. The objective of the project is to gather data that will inform IDFG's decisions concerning hunting, trapping, and "predator control" actions in the Wilderness. Wilderness Watch, Friends of the Clearwater, and Western Watersheds Project filed suit in Federal District Court on January 7th—hours after receiving a copy of the signed special use permit authorizing project implementation. Within the next three days, while the suit was pending and before we could get before the judge, IDFG inundated the River of No Return Wilderness with repeated helicopter flights and landings. And, even though it was abundantly clear that IDFG was not authorized to harass and collar wolves, IDFG nonetheless "mistakenly" captured and collared four wolves. Those 60 elk and four wolves now have collars transmitting radio telemetry data, including precise location points, to IDFG—an agency with an unapologetic history of wolf extermination efforts and a current plan to "aggressively manage elk and predator populations," including exterminating 60 percent of the wolves within the Middle Fork Zone of the River of No Return Wilderness. As I write this article, IDFG, along with Wildlife Services, is carrying out aerial wolf gunning activities in the Lolo area north of the River of No Return Wilderness.

IDFG's activities, authorized by the Forest Service, constitute an affront—the latest in a long line of affronts—on Wilderness. Our complaint sets forth the legal framework for this position, and you can read it on our website. We'll post additional case filings as they become available. With the limited space here, I'd like to step beyond the case filings and address the legitimacy, relevancy, and urgent necessity of wild spaces—of nature's own wild order.

Our intelligence as a species has always been a double-edged sword. Scientific and technological advances have allowed the human population to increase rapidly and exponentially, which in turn has significantly taxed the basic elements needed for our survival. Indeed, an

alarming number of our non-human counterparts have recently made their untimely departure to the world of extinction. Computers, Wi-Fi, and cell-phones have made it easier to stay connected, organize for causes, and access information, yet we find it more and more difficult to disconnect from the pressures of modern life and to meaningfully connect with other people and the land around us—the real world. Ed Abbey duly noted that "[h]igh technology has done us one great service: It has retaught us the delight of performing simple

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and primordial tasks—chopping wood, building a fire, drawing water from a spring." There is a profound reason for this delight. We are rapidly losing something immeasurable and very old. Something that runs much deeper than our new-world focus

on recreation. Something much deeper than our abstract economic and scientific labels. Something that is not compatible with helicopters, drones, satellite collars, industrial clear-cutting, motorized and mechanized transport, corporate sponsorships, Facebook, and text messages. We are destroying this very old thing—sometimes with the best of intentions.

The drafters of the Wilderness Act saw this threat. In 1964 and the years preceding, these wilderness visionaries knew that the rapid expansion of the human population coupled with the rapid progression of technology and mechanization was inevitable. They also knew that this trajectory posed significant irreparable harm to our last wild places and to our own human existence. They understood that even though they could not know all of the forms that our technological advancement might take, they could define its opposite, the wild baseline, and put forth a firm intention to protect the wild above all else. They envisioned and promoted various human uses of Wilderness, including scientific and recreational uses, but they expressly subjected each of those uses to compatibility with a primary purpose: the preservation of wilderness character. And what is Wilderness? What is wilderness character? The drafters provided this definition of Wilderness:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man

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himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.

In a speech promoting the Wilderness Bill, Howard Zahniser, drafter of the Wilderness Act, did not mince words when describing the essence of Wilderness and the fundamental purpose of the Wilderness Act: “We describe an area as wilderness because of a character it has—not because of a particular use that it serves. A wilderness is an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man. (Untrammelled—not untrampled—untrammelled, meaning free, unbound, unhampered, unchecked, having the freedom of the wilderness).”

Luckily for us, and due in large part to wilderness designation, we still have pockets of untrammelled, primordial space—landscapes protected from our relentless industrial and technological growth and from our unending conquest to defy physical space. With 7.4 billion people now on this planet, and with our insatiable appetites for consumption and control, the pressures against these primordial spaces are mounting. The Wildernesses of central Idaho are comparatively and contiguously massive. We have a real opportunity, and a real obligation, to protect this wild space from the types of intrusions inflicted by IDFG, and authorized by the Forest Service, this past January.

Compounding the legal and moral precedent of allowing intensive helicopter intrusion into the heart of the River of No Return Wilderness, IDFG's current elk (and wolf) collaring project is part of its broader plan to manipulate wildlife populations in the Wilderness to enhance elk hunting opportunities—an agenda that is fundamentally antithetical to preserving “an area

where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man.” And this is only the beginning. IDFG stated in its project proposal that it will need five to 10 years of successive helicopter-assisted collaring in the Wilderness to obtain valid data. Its ultimate goals are clearly spelled out. IDFG's Elk Management Plan calls for restoration of elk population levels to those observed in the 1990s—before the return of wolves to the Wilderness and before the restoration of natural predator/prey dynamics—and for “aggressive” predator control activities to achieve this end.

IDFG's motives and actions in this case should not tarnish the value of scientific study of wilderness, generally, or human enjoyment of wilderness. Quite to the contrary, wilderness provides a unique opportunity to observe an untrammelled ecosystem with scientific curiosity, and wilderness is the best place to immerse oneself in the wild. These pursuits are expressly contemplated by the Wilderness Act, but not at the expense of wilderness itself. We need wilderness much more than we need more information about wilderness. And, if that information leads ultimately to

control of wilderness, it does not preserve wilderness. Through the Wilderness Act, we made the decision to limit our power, to exercise restraint and humility. Wilderness is a place where we've decided to let time move slowly, let distances remain great, let wildness do its thing without interference, and let danger and uncertainty exist without temperance. We would have much to learn if we could only resist our urge to meddle.

I fear that with each passing generation, our memory of truly wild landscapes will fade. I can't imagine a world where that long, mournful howl of the wolf doesn't stop me in my tracks. I can't imagine a world where a fresh griz track doesn't make every hair on my body stand on end and make the sound of a single falling pine needle strike the intensity of thunder. I can't imagine a world where a handheld device tells me—shows me—what to expect around every corner, or a world where once fiercely wild animals roam the wilderness with collars on their necks—their every movement transmitted to a computer, manned by a human who works for an agency that does not value things it cannot control. If anything must be controlled, for the sake of wilderness, it is us. 🐾



Photo: Brett Haverstick