

Wolves at the Door

For 20 years Jenny Ryon has entered a secret enclosure in the Nova Scotia wilderness, the only place in the world to observe the full life cycle of wild wolves. Her patience is paying off.

Article by Bramwell Ryan

At the fading of the light Jenny Ryon meets wolves. She first unlocks thick chains cinched around two three-and-a-half-metre-high chain link gates. The slim, blond 51-year-old passes through and fastens them shut behind her. They clank and rattle like the slamming of a penitentiary door. She crosses the forest clearing inside the fence, her rubber boots trampling grass and tufts of stiff deer fur. One side of her body is tilted toward the heavy white plastic bucket of dog food she's lugging to the waiting wolves. The long shadows swallow her dark clothing as she enters the forest. The wolves melt through the trees, watching every step. A little way into the bush, Ryon empties the bucket on the ground, spreads its contents with her foot and retreats. They grey-brown coats of the wild animals blend in ghostly harmony with the trees, but in the exhausted rays of a setting sun, the glint of their golden eyes shimmers between the trunks.

"Only a mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf," says a promotional video from the Canadian Centre for Wolf Research in Nova Scotia. After 20 years of watching wolves at the centre, and listening to their midnight howls, Ryon understands the sleek animals more than most of us but hasn't yet unraveled the whole mystery.

She stumbled upon her life's work in the early 1970s as a fine-arts student at the University of Oregon. Between classes she read a book called *The Wolf: The Ecology and Behaviour of an Endangered Species* by L. David Mech (Natural History Press, 1970) and heard the call of the wild. Ryon was entranced by the quintessential symbol of the wilderness, the beast of fairy tales that is the pure distillate of the word *wild*; an animal that so closely resembles Rover asleep on the living room couch but at the same time is so utterly different.

When Ryon discovered that Dr. John Fentress, a professor on campus, kept several wolves for study purposes, she pestered him until she got a job. Eventually she began caring for the wolves, dropping her art studies to devote all her time to the pack. Three years later when Fentress accepted a job as the head of the psychology department at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Ryon flew northeast with the animals. Fentress made it a condition of his employment that the university build him a large enclosure where the grey wolves could live

and continue to be studied. By 1975, eight acres of forest near Halifax were circled by an immense fence, buried more than a metre in the earth, soaring three-and-a-half metres above ground and topped by double barbed wire. The enclosure became home to the pack and a second home for Ryon.

Wolves disappeared from Canada's most eastern province more than a century ago, hunted to extinction by settlers worried about livestock and the wild game they needed to feed their families. Wolves were seen as competition. Perhaps it was that ancient battle for the same resources that gave the wolf a starring role in fairy tales of death and destruction. But that image of the big, bad wolf, fed to most of us with our Pablum, is not what Ryon sees when she studies the pack.

"Hi, sweetie. How are you doing?" It's a soft, dewdrop morning, and Ryon is back in the wolf enclosure. Less than three metres away is Xyla, an unusually curious female wolf. "Did you have a good night, precious?" The wolf watches Ryon carefully but keeps a buffer of air between herself and the human. Unlike most people, who would be terrified of entering a pen with 11 wild wolves, Ryon isn't worried. The wolves are far more frightened of us than we are of them, she insists. In two decades Ryon has never been attacked or injured.

Each morning Ryon rises with the sun (as she has for the past 20 years, with no more than the occasional week-long break) and drives to the secret wolf compound. The exact location is kept a mystery so the curious won't be tempted to gawk and feed the animals. Once she arrives, Ryon ties the white observation trailer located near the entrance, checks on the welfare of the wolves and makes a few notes on wolf behavior.

By midmorning she drives back home to the small bungalow where she lives with her nervous black poodle, Arty. It's a tidy house next to a barn. In the kitchen are lists of things to do. One list, stuck to the refrigerator door, has 26 points; two more lie scattered on the counter, each with more than a dozen future activities scribbled in pencil. In the living room are shelves crammed with art books; a harmonica sits on an instructional book of country and blues for the "musically hopeless."

The rest of Ryon's morning is spent writing research papers and cataloguing a few of the thousands of hours of videotape of the wolves. Standing in her office, she runs her fingers along the bookshelves that holds the tapes, each one marked

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by dates and short captions such as “pack feeding” or “marking”. “These are my life,” she says quietly.

In the late afternoon, Ryon goes back to the enclosure and often spends several hours studying the wolves. As dusk falls she feeds them. The pack receives high-quality dog food but occasionally they feast on treats of dead deer, road kill from area highways given to Ryon by the provincial transportation department.

The pack at the research centre is wild, but since they are in a circumscribed space, this is the only place in the world to observe the full life cycle of wolves. In the wilderness, such study is impossible since the animals are highly mobile and extremely wary of humans. At the centre, however, they're right there. They loll about in the sun on a rocky outcrop of this strong-boned land in central Nova Scotia. They play together, mate, vie for dominance, give birth and die. “I let the animals tell me what they want to tell me,” says Ryon. “A lot of people don't think that's science. They prefer manipulations.”

There are two ways of conducting research on animal behavior. You can slice open an animal head, tinker with a section of brain, sew the incision back up and watch how the behavior changes. Such invasive methods have been used for years and produce quick study results. The other method, preferred by Ryon, is simply to watch. There's nothing fast about observation, however. “It takes a long time,” she says. “They yield their secrets very, very slowly, and you really have to put in the time. Whenever I discover something, I get the impulse to yell thank you to the wolves. I call it a eureka moment. When I finally understand something I've watched for years, I get the feeling that they're saying, ‘Are you only getting it now, you dummy?’”

One of the biggest eureka moments for Ryon was when she finally understood wolf play. Unlike our image of a pack, where one male rules the crowd like a despot, Ryon says although there is a dominant male and female, interactions among pack members are rather charming. Wolves love to play with each other, chasing, nipping, jumping and wrestling together. Each wolf has favorite games. “We used to say play was practice for real life or just exercise. We never gave the animals credit for being creative or having fun. Their play is like culture, and the games change over time. It's like the hit song of the summer, but then you get tired of it and change it, adding a new element”

Ryon, like all scientists, is driven to study mysteries. Centuries ago the high priests of society pondered the unknown mind of God. Today the deacons of our rationalist age plumb the otherness of our fellow creatures. Both theologians and scientists usually

relate their work to humanity. Ryon says her study of wolves can eventually have an enormous impact on us. But staring into a freezer in a shed at the centre, it's hard to determine how hundreds of bagged urine and feces samples could have anything to do with men and women. “Here's my collection,” she says with a giggle. “Talk about anal retentive.”

The samples were gathered by Ryon the previous winter. She scooped the poop and carefully sliced yellow-stained snow crusts, placing them all in separate marked bags in the freezer. “I believe in the scientific method but I think the yellow snow study is the funniest thing I've ever done.” Although collecting the samples prompted laughs, the results of the work are serious and will end up in several studies, one looking at the marking behavior of wolves. The other hormonal study examines such things as stress and aggression in animals. “We'll be able to biochemically measure wolf love and feelings. For example, you can watch wolves with puppies, both male and females, and know they love them, but the scientific way to prove that love is biochemically, by collecting urine and feces.”

Since wolves and humans are among the most family-oriented species on earth, understanding wolf love for offspring could, Ryan says, help sort out some of the messes our society has created. “In the spring, when the pups are born, all wolves – both male and female – experience a surge in prolactin, one hormone associated with parental care. There's a possible parallel in human society. In a lot of urban ghettos there's family breakdown, fatherless families. Perhaps there wouldn't be as much violence in urban ghettos if young men were in the same loop as male wolves, cohabiting with the female and young, with the same hormone surge.”

In two decades, Ryon has produced 15 scientific papers and watched generations of animals inside the centre's enclosure. She says that soon it will be time to take on an additional project, perhaps working in the West, researching nonlethal ways to keep the estimated 50,000 wolves away from farmers' livestock. “It would be a big payback to these animals who have given me so much,” she says, biting her nails, her eyes growing red. “It's satisfying work, a never-ending mystery. They're companionable, engaging. They have a great sense of humor. They're smart. They have life dramas just as we do, and watching their lives is like getting involved in a soap opera.”

As night falls again in central Nova Scotia, Ryon scoops more dog food into the white plastic bucket. Being midwife to the mysteries of the wolf is a lonely occupation, almost as lonely as the howls of the night.