

Personal Encounter

An Elusive Wolf—and the Months Spent Tracking Him

By Tom Gable

Over the past four summers, I have studied wolves in Voyageurs National Park (VNP) in northern Minnesota. I rarely see them, and when I do it is usually for a fleeting moment. Dense summer vegetation makes the forest appear impenetrable, and observing wolves often enough to study them is practically impossible. Instead, I must often resort to tracking wolves around the woods, trying to understand what the animals have been doing or thinking based on places they have been and the signs they have left.

This is the story of one wolf and the months I spent “chasing” him around

where “the green, dark forest was too silent to be real.” (Thanks, Gordon Lightfoot!)

On May 16, 2016, I was on the Moose River with Austin Homkes, who also studies wolves in VNP, checking traps we had set a few days earlier on an old railroad grade that runs along the river just outside the park. We were trying to catch wolves and fit them with GPS collars as expeditiously as possible so we could follow them throughout the summer.

When we climbed out of the boat, we saw that we had captured a wolf along the railroad grade—and then noticed it was wearing a collar and ear tags. Here

was Wolf V028, the breeding male of the Moose River Pack.

V028 was first caught in fall 2014 and fitted with a GPS collar that recorded locations every six hours. However, in summer 2015 the collar stopped working, and we lost contact with the wolf.

Austin and I quickly got our equipment together, sedated Wolf V028, and started to process him (change the collar, monitor vital signs, collect samples, etc.). While doing so I noticed that he had sustained a few injuries since we first caught him. The most obvious was a large gash that had scarred over on the top of V028's head. I could only presume that such an injury was from getting kicked by a deer or a moose. Similarly, on the wolf's front leg was a two-inch laceration, deep and partially healed that had split the flesh open. I had no idea how this might have occurred. In addition to these injuries, many of V028's teeth were missing, broken or substantially worn down. It was apparent that V028 was a rugged animal who had figured out how to survive in a hostile world. Indeed, we estimated V028 to be 8 years old—much older than the typical wolf living in and around VNP. After collecting all the necessary data, we administered the



Above: Photograph of V028 caught from a game camera in early spring of 2015.



Right: Picture taken when V028 was re-collared in May 2016.

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drugs to wake V028 up, and within an hour, the wolf was on his feet and back to patrolling the northern wilderness.

We had fitted V028 with a GPS collar that recorded locations every 20 minutes in the hope of understanding the wolf's hunting habits. Summer wolf predation in Minnesota is poorly understood because observing wolves hunting prey is nearly impossible in dense vegetation. Further, wolves mainly hunt small prey (e.g. beavers, white-tailed deer fawns) during the summer, and finding evidence of predation can be challenging because wolves can almost wholly consume small prey in a short period. During the winter, researchers can study wolf predation by searching clusters of GPS locations from collared wolves to locate wolf-killed prey. Austin and I were optimistic we could use this same technique to locate kills from V028 in the summer, and thus understand where, when and how often V028 was hunting and killing prey.

From May through November, Austin and I had a singular goal: to follow V028 day-in and day-out. Wherever V028 went, we went also. This exhilarating experience was also physically and mentally challenging. Much of the Moose River Pack territory is remote and hard to access, often requiring us to bushwhack five to 10 miles just to reach a few clusters of locations. The summers in northern Minnesota can be quite unpleasant, with a combination of insects, heat, rain and humidity to challenge the most stoic individual. Most summer days we found nothing at clusters but bed sites, as V028 killed prey only once—maybe twice—per week. Because of this, it felt as though we spent the summer locked in our bug shirts, visiting random points scattered across the vast forests of VNP. Still, I was always amazed that in just a few hours V028 traveled distances that took me an entire day to cover.

Despite all the challenges, I felt, in the end, that I understood (or at least had the illusion of understanding) how this wolf lived and what it was doing. I was able to discern patterns in its behavior and movements, and understand where the wolf was going and why. Throughout the summer, V028 would frequently run the same route among a handful



Austin Homkes

Above: Game camera photograph from August 2017 of V028 (wolf with ear tags) and two other members of the Moose River Pack.

Left: V028 photographed howling with another pack member via a remote camera in August 2017.

of beaver ponds, visiting a pond, bedding down next to a beaver trail, moving one or two miles to another active pond, and repeating. In fact, for a little while, V028 became so predictable that I could guess which pond the wolf would go to next based on the pond he was currently visiting.

Interestingly, though, of all the places where V028 killed beavers, it was never at one of these ponds. What was it about these ponds? Was there an obvious clue I was missing?

From May to November, Austin and I spent more than 200 days in the field following V028, trying to understand how he survived. Yet, despite all our time in the field, we never actually saw V028, though we were often less than a few hundred meters from him, according to GPS collar locations. In early November 2016, V028's collar dropped off, as programmed on the edge of an active beaver pond. I hiked out to the pond on Nov. 10 to collect the collar, which V028 (or his pack mates) had buried in mud. Collar in hand, I headed to the far side of the

beaver pond where V028 had provided his last cluster of locations. V028 had visited this pond more than 15 times during summer and fall, presumably to hunt beavers, but was never successful. The last cluster, which occurred three hours before the collar dropped, was a beaver kill just below the active dam.

Over the months I followed V028, I gained an intimate perspective on his habits, behavior and life. Although V028 no longer has on a GPS collar, game-camera photographs show that he still roams the northwoods, surveilling his territory and hunting prey. ■

Tom Gable is a PhD student at the University of Minnesota, studying wolf predation on moose, deer and beavers in Voyageurs National Park (VNP). He recently completed his master's at Northern Michigan University where he studied wolf-beaver interactions in Voyageurs. In his free time, Tom enjoys exploring northern Minnesota's wild places, which he thinks go well with Gordon Lightfoot and John Denver ballads, and any Sigurd Olson book.