

Special Report



A young Toklat mother and pups (two are outside the picture) ignore the photographer and a park shuttle bus while traveling the Denali road. June 1990.

Wolf Behavior Around People in Denali National Park

Written & Photographed by Gordon C. Haber

At Friends of Animals, we acknowledge that wolves have inherent value—that is, their individual lives, their futures, and their freedom have meaning and value to them, regardless of whether we deem them endangered or plentiful in numbers, and whether or not we see them and believe they are beautiful. In the following essay, we provide our readers with the view of an independent scientist whose research we support. Dr. Gordon Haber provides us with a perspective on the complex issues that arise when park visitors and wolves use the same areas.

In 2002, Paul Anderson, the superintendent of Denali National Park, Alaska, declared that the “fearless” behavior of Denali wolves is unnatural, potentially endangers park visitors, and must be reversed. The National Park Service (NPS) began advising Denali visitors and employees to throw rocks at any wolves within throwing distance to make them afraid, to “be aggressive” toward any wolf that approaches within 100 meters, “to send a clear message to the wolves that they are not welcome.”

NPS gave implied consent to visitors to use virtually any weapon available on a wolf perceived—accurately or not—to be dangerous. It began experimenting with its own, mostly covert, aversive measures, including shooting at wolves with a paintball gun and luring them to a booby-trapped tent where a pepper spray discharge awaited.

Never mind that not a single instance of any such aggressive wolf behavior has been reported in Denali. Forget the permanent damage that could be done to a wolf by a blow to the head with a rock or from using pepper spray on highly tuned sensory organs.

Is this a prelude to even more serious measures, especially for the well known Toklat (East Fork) family whose use of a traditional denning area near the Teklanika

campground has been the focus of NPS’s concerns? What about the devastating impacts on this decades-old family and the world-class viewing and research opportunities it provides if NPS decides to relocate “problem” wolves or deter the use of traditional dens to put more distance between these hubs of summertime wolf activity and certain campgrounds?

The new NPS policies assume that fearless behavior by Denali wolves around people is unnatural (it is not “wild”), that it has emerged only recently, and that without NPS intervention it will progress to a more aggressive, dangerous form. The Denali wolves are now described as “habituated,” a scientific term that for the most part is being used as another way to imply unnatural behavior. None of this thinking holds up to scrutiny.

Are Denali wolves behaving unnaturally?

It is the conventional wisdom that wolves and other creatures should inherently fear people, and if they do not, something must be wrong with them. For wolves in particular, it is more likely the other way around: Fearless, bold, inquisitive behavior around people is much closer to “natural” and “wild” for wolves than are fear and wariness.

It isn’t possible to draw clear lines between natural and



Four Toklat adults and two bears interact while ignoring nearby vehicles and people, including many just outside the picture. August 2000.

unnatural, wild and habituated in the way wolves respond to people, in part because of expected variation among individuals and groups, and over time. It is clear, however, that free-ranging adult wolves generally show little fear of other non-human species. They typically approach other creatures closely in a markedly bold, inquisitive, inves-

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tigative way, although for species like bears, moose, and porcupines they attempt to kill in only a low percentage of the encounters. There is little reason to assume that, absent some highly unusual (unnatural?), powerful incentive such as persecution, they should behave in an entirely different way around people.

It is also apparent from the historical literature and accounts from frontier areas, at least where open terrain predominates, that wolves generally show little fear or wariness of people at initial contact, unless and until there is persecution or harassment. With few exceptions in Denali (e.g., certain high ranking adults attending pups), recolonizing wolves act indifferently around people very soon after they begin encountering them in the absence of harassment. This happened after the human-caused turnovers from the Savage to Headquarters and Sanctuary to Margaret family groups in the eastern area of Denali in 1983 and 2001. The Savage family was largely fearless when I began my studies in 1966, well before park visitation increased dramatically. It is much easier to reconcile these and other observations by recognizing fearless behavior toward people as mostly natural rather than a product of habituation.

Perhaps the most striking illustration of this point was when two newcomer adult males joined the Toklat family (just west of the Savage-Headquarters-Sanctuary-Margaret area) and took it over in spring and summer 2001, shortly after the Toklat alpha male died while being radio-collared. These two (ear-tagged) wolves had lived 200 miles away until April 5, 2001, in a wolf control area with a long history of hunting and trapping. Within a month they were residing in the protected Teklanika-Igloo area of Denali. They began interacting closely with people almost immediately, mostly on and near the park

road, prior to the onset of the regular summer visitor season and prior to much if any interaction with the established Toklat wolves.

Their behavior was predominantly if not exclusively fearless, as is still the case. Essentially they exhibited the same behavior toward people, vehicles, roads, and structures within two or three weeks that Toklat and other groups had exhibited for decades.

How could wolves with nothing but an adversarial history with people so suddenly and dramatically reverse their behavior? It would be a strain, to say the least, to explain this as a habituation-related shift *away from* natural, wild behavior. A simpler explanation is that highly intelligent creatures such as these quickly recognize when they are not being harassed and return easily to behavior that is inherent. Being fearful, not fearless, is the aberration for this species. The former, not the latter, is what probably requires the most difficult learning.

In short, NPS emphasizes that it must “keep Denali’s wolves wild,” but the conventional wisdom it is adopting is more likely to move them further from than closer to their natural, wild behavior.

It is questionable as to whether “habituation” even applies here. A key issue is whether the interactions with people are of a passing nature or seemingly the wolf’s objective. There have been few if any cases of Denali wolves interacting with people other than in a passing way, i.e., as an *aside* to some other hunting or related travel objective, or in response to an intrusion at a den or rendezvous site with pups present. Wolves pass through a campground, stopping briefly to check something out and perhaps carry off a small camp item for a short distance. Wolves trot past people within five or ten feet on the park road or continue down the center of the road at a normal pace while ignoring a string of shuttle buses and other vehicles following just behind for a half hour or more. These are routine examples of fearless wolf behavior around people in Denali, none of which involves the prolonged fixation on them that habituation usually implies.

Food conditioning—when an animal associates people with handouts or other ways of obtaining food (e.g., at a campground)—is the most likely way that habituation could become a problem. There has not yet been any evidence of food conditioning of Denali wolves, thanks to NPS’s ongoing efforts to prevent this for bears as well as wolves.

Is fearless behavior new for Denali wolves?

Denali wolves have exhibited much the same fearless

behavior around people for the entire 38 years I have been studying them. It did not emerge prominently, as NPS claims, in 1999 with Toklat's latest round of summers (five so far) using a natal den near the Teklanika and Igloo campgrounds. There are many accounts of this behavior in my 1977 Ph.D. dissertation, for example. In one of these, from June 1967 near the Savage family's natal den, eight Savage wolves approached me from 400 yards away. They displayed a range of fearless behavior, from the acceptance and indifference of one of the males



Four Toklat adults hunt along the road while ignoring a closely following vehicle. July 1996.

while lying down calmly 10 feet away, looking the other way, to the subsequent highly assertive barking, growling, and other defensive bluffs of the alpha male (in a typical pup-protection mode).

Nor is denning near campgrounds, frequenting these areas, and interacting with campers anything new for Denali wolves, especially at Teklanika. It is arrogant for NPS to advise current Teklanika campers to “make the wolves feel unwelcome,” given the evidence for an ancient history and prehistory of occupancy of this site by wolves as well as humans. Carbon dating indicates that humans began using this location at least 10,000 to 12,000 years ago, originally as a campsite for hunting activities. Wolves used the same site for a major natal den beginning at least centuries and probably millennia ago, judging, for example, from the size of the debris cone below the main burrow complex. The last known wolf

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use of this den was in 1961.

The site is an obvious choice for any intelligent hunter, and subsequent use of the area by people for other purposes beginning in the early 1900s is almost certainly a consequence of the earlier activity. The wolf den appears to have been the anchor site in a cluster of homesites that includes an upriver natal den now used by the Toklat wolves, probably with much the same alternating within- and between-summer occupancy patterns that I have observed throughout the park since 1966.

The Teklanika dens were within the Savage family's territory when I arrived in 1966 and until this group was eliminated, almost certainly by hunters, in winter 1982-83. Savage used the upriver Teklanika den during all or portions of summers 1971, 1972, 1978, 1979, and 1980. Toklat annexed this area shortly after Savage was eliminated and used the upriver den during all or portions of summers 1988, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, and probably 1989.

Both groups acted about the same fearless way around people in the nearby campground areas and on the road during their earlier summers at the upriver den as Toklat does today. Likewise for Toklat at and near a campground 20 miles westward during much of the 1960s and 1970s, while this family occupied another traditional cluster of dens in that area.

Will fearless Denali wolves become aggressive?

From my first days in Denali, I wondered if the fearless behavior of these wolves would progress into anything more serious and have watched closely for even the subtlest indications. My interest was fueled by encounters such as the one in June 1967, where an outright attack by an angry alpha male certainly seemed possible.

I have not seen the slightest hint of any such escalation. One of the first ways it would be expected to show up is when high-ranking wolves protect their young pups. Threat displays such as in the 1967 encounter almost always involve an alpha male with pups present and amount to defensive, bluffing actions. This behavior was common in the 1960s and 1970s. I have seen much *less*

of it over the last couple of decades, even though high ranking wolves remain sensitive to human presence near the pups and are still likely to move them from disturbed sites.

Any progression from fearless to aggressive should also become obvious during extreme hunger, especially for a high-ranking adult wolf still in the prime of life. The former Toklat alpha female died of starvation in July 2002 at only 6–8 years of age. Her death was one of the lingering consequences of the radio collaring death of her mate, the alpha male, in 2001, via her separation from the Toklat family less than a year after the two newcomer males took over. She did not do well on her own.

By sometime in May 2002, her status as a loner was seriously affecting her ability to obtain enough to eat, even though she remained primarily within Toklat's established territory. She was in an advanced stage of starvation in June (as determined during necropsy). By that time, the summer increase in park visitors was underway, and as usual her travels on and near the park road brought her into close contact with people. On June 22, I circled overhead in an airplane and watched intently as she passed

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within 50 feet of several surprised hikers in open alpine tundra atop Polychrome Mountain.

She had been almost completely at ease around people since at least 1998, exhibiting calm, trusting, non-aggressive behavior, though always as an aside to a hunting, travel, or other non-people objective. In none of the 2002 incidents was there any detectable change in this behavior, and certainly no hints of any aggression, even though she was well on her way toward starving to death. The Polychrome Mountain encounter happened only because she was following the easiest and most direct route toward a moose below the next ridge (she ended up looking the moose over a little more closely but not descending the

ridge). She virtually ignored the hikers, who were on her route by coincidence, while calmly continuing toward and remaining focused on the moose.

Other than in some responses to intruders at dens and rendezvous sites, the fearless behavior I have observed in Denali over the decades continues to feature about the same often-curious, typically relaxed and trusting demeanor (much more laid-back than typical dog behavior), for the most part as if the wolves are viewing people neither as a threat nor as prey. Wolves can be highly selective as hunters, not even attempting to take certain large classes of potential prey—most of the moose, bears, and porcupines they check out, for example. They are intelligent enough to avoid these classes of prey upon examining them (“fearlessly”) at close range because of the danger of getting killed or injured. I can only guess why they do not attempt to kill in most of their close encounters with people. The point is simply that selectivity is nothing unusual in the hunting repertoire of these highly intelligent creatures and, for whatever reason, people are almost always on their excluded list even where there is no persecution.

Better guidelines

Any wolf-people problems in Denali are most likely to originate from avoidable people mistakes, not unnatural, dangerous wolf behavior. That is where NPS's preemptive efforts should focus—controlling people in a way that allows the wolves to continue their status quo rather than vice versa. This means no more throwing rocks at wolves or implied consent to use other weapons on them, no more covert aversive measures, and no wolf relocations, interference with denning patterns, or other such actions. If a problem seems imminent, an emergency visitor-use closure should be the first course of action, including of the Teklanika campground for one or more entire summers if necessary.

Food conditioning (wolves learning to obtain food from people) is the most serious potential problem. As noted, NPS has done an excellent job of preventing this from happening in Denali. Given that a lapse could easily lead to rapid conditioning, this should remain the highest possible priority, especially with regard to cooking, food storage, garbage, and related policies at Teklanika campground.

Dog activity at Teklanika and elsewhere is a close second to food conditioning in its potential for triggering problems. One of the best known characteristics of natural wolf behavior is the intolerance, in general, of an



The Toklat alpha male glances casually at a park visitor and nearby buses while continuing westward on the road. August 2001. J. Hein

intact, established family group toward outsider canids, especially near a den. Dogs are also often treated opportunistically as prey.

Nonetheless, Denali superintendent Anderson continues to reject professional advice to prohibit dogs in these areas. Park visitors bring their dogs to Teklanika, tether them outside their campers, and routinely walk them up and down the park road through some of the Toklat wolf family's most heavily used areas; the road itself is a major Toklat travel route. NPS employees take the NPS sled dogs for daily summer walks along the road from park headquarters westward for several miles or more. It doesn't seem to register that the Margaret wolf family dens only a short distance further up the road and regularly hunts eastward into this area.

Dogs pose other serious risks for wolves, notably by vectoring viral and bacterial diseases. NPS is ignoring these risks as well, and even encourages dog-mushing in the park. Allowing visitors to bring their dogs into high-use wolf areas in the summer is the ultimate inconsistency, given NPS's current worries about keeping people and

wolves apart. Even without a progression to aggressive behavior while protecting their young, during hunger, and in other circumstances, it is tempting fate to the limit to expect the Toklat and Margaret wolves to continue ignoring dogs in their midst.

Sooner or later, wolves will attack a dog being walked

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along the road or tied outside a camper, and this will trigger a host of related problems. NPS should ban all dogs and other pets except perhaps in Riley Creek campground (near the park entrance), on the first few miles of the road (westward to headquarters), and only inside vehicles on the next twelve miles of the road (to Savage River, the westward extent of unrestricted vehicular travel).

Park visitors should follow a few easy preemptive

guidelines but keep the issue in perspective. While a wolf attack is possible, it is highly unlikely. There are many serious risks for people at Teklanika campground and throughout Denali from hazards other than wolves, most of which rank much higher than wolves in their likelihood of occurrence. More people, by far, are attacked, injured, or killed in Alaska by moose, bears, goshawks, dogs, and other people, for example, than by wolves. There is probably a comparable likelihood of being struck by lightning or crushed by an old spruce tree falling onto a tent in the middle of the night during a wind. I have interacted closely with Denali wolves for 38 years but still consider myself in much greater danger from a variety of hazards on the streets of Anchorage, one of the safest cities in the world.

A wolf approaching in a quiet, calm way is probably following the easiest route to some travel destination (especially if this happens on the park road) or diverting temporarily in a natural investigative mode. One should hold his or her position, standing somewhat assertively but calmly, looking the wolf (or the most assertive wolf of a group) straight in the eyes. Talk to the wolf in firm but otherwise normal tones.

If the wolf approaches within about ten feet, seems to want to come closer, and isn't simply trying to pass (on the road or another narrow route), it would probably be a good idea to pump these responses up with some arm-waving and maybe foot-stomping and mean-face-yelling, even if the wolf still seems curious rather than aggressive. If a wolf comes into a campsite obviously to steal or beg food, combine all of these responses into the fiercest-looking-and-sounding crescendo possible, so that hopefully the wolf will remember this unnatural foraging attempt as an unpleasant experience. Meticulously adhering to NPS's food-handling procedures will remain the best preventive measure.

Wolves might belong on the long list of risks that young children face in Denali. If so, it is near the bottom, and this list isn't as long as the one for most cities. Parents should watch their children closely—never leave them unattended even briefly—but keep in mind that this is hardly a wolf-specific precaution.

Gordon Haber, Ph.D., has been doing field research on the Denali wolves since 1966. His research is supported by FoA.



In this sequence of photos from a circling airplane, two Toklat wolves traveling the road meet two oncoming hikers and overtake a shuttle bus. The black alpha male pauses briefly to watch as the first hiker (red shirt) photographs his mate. The wolves continue toward the bus and second hiker (blue shirt, crouching next to the bus, taking pictures) as the first hiker talks with an arriving driver. The bus moves on as the wolves trot casually past the second hiker. The wolves overtake the bus and continue a normal pace for the next half hour with the bus following only 50–100 feet behind. June 2002.