

**SPECIAL 20-PAGE
TRAVEL SECTION**

FABULOUS FUNGI: COMPLEX, POWERFUL AND SOMETIMES MAGICAL



CANADIAN Geographic

WATCHING WOLVES

**CITIZEN SCIENCE
MEETS TOURISM
ON HUDSON BAY**

INTO THE VOLCANO

DANGER AND DISCOVERY
INSIDE MOUNT MEAGER

CANOE THERAPY

A HEALING JOURNEY
IN THE GREAT LAKES



**FORT CHIPEWYAN AT THE
FOREFRONT OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS,**
THE FORGOTTEN CPR DINING HOTELS,
STORIES ABOUT SAND DUNES, SPIDERS,
STARGAZING AND MUCH MORE!

OPOYASTIN: WOLVES OF THE BIG WIND



AT A FLY-IN WILDERNESS LODGE ON
HUDSON BAY, GUESTS IMMERSE THEMSELVES
IN A RARELY STUDIED WOLF PACK

BY **ALICIA RAE-LIGHT**
WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CHRISTOPH** AND **FABIENNE JANSEN**

"HELLO BEAUTIFUL," a guest whispers as a wolf coyly approaches. A pale, rose-gold light illuminates her raised hackles in the rising sun. A nearly full moon still hangs in the sky. Careful with each step — her paws are like snowshoes on the crusty layer atop deep snow. The hair on the back of my neck raises, too. She doesn't seem afraid, but she stays vigilant. Humans are not all that common in this remote landscape in northern Manitoba. She digs her snout in the snow in search of mice and looks up again, her nose dusted in white. She stares each of us in the eye, then saunters away. We are decidedly uninteresting, for now.

"I've watched wolves for a long time," says Albert Saunders, better known as Butch, an Elder of the York Factory First Nation and a longtime guide at Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge, a fly-in wilderness lodge operated by Churchill Wild on the southwestern coast of Hudson Bay. Though many people are terrified of wolves, he explains, they generally won't bother you. "Just like any other animal that I've been told about by the Elders, you've got to have respect," he says. Wolves that live near communities are scared because they have been harassed, says Saunders, but here on the coast they rarely see people and are curious.

We arrived at the lodge yesterday by Cessna Caravan, flying over the open and wild landscape from the small city of Thompson, Man. Flying is the only way to access this remote part of the Canadian Subarctic. The early spring, when I visit, is one of the best times to spot these wolves, as they move from the forest to open ground to mate and hunt.

One of the world's largest wetlands and an important peatland ecosystem, the 320,000-square-kilometre Hudson Bay Lowlands is teeming with other wildlife, too. The waterlogged region feeds rivers that flow into Hudson Bay and the Churchill River estuary — the summer habitat for more than 4,000 beluga whales that come each year to feed, mate and give birth. The area encompassing Wapusk National Park is a maternal denning site for polar bears, a critical nursery for the climate change-threatened species. The last polar bear mother and her cubs made their way onto the Hudson Bay ice to hunt seals just days before we arrived.

For the next seven days, we'll use the lodge, between Wapusk National Park and the Kaskatamagan Wildlife Management Area, as our basecamp while Saunders and others introduce us to a pack of *Canis lupus*, better known as grey wolves. Photo opportunities abound, but this experience

CHRISTOPH JANSEN



ABOVE: This pair stuck close together and came close to the photographers on multiple occasions. **LEFT:** Albert "Butch" Saunders is an Elder of York Factory First Nation and a longtime guide at the lodge. **OPPOSITE:** The entire pack moves together on a windy day.

offers guests more: a chance to participate in citizen science by sharing our observations, photographs and videos with researchers to shed light on this rarely studied pack.

MAHIHKAN IS THE CREE word for wolf, Saunders tells me. He often shares Cree words on the daily itinerary board. Guests are excited to learn the Cree names of the flora and fauna they'll be seeing, but it's

also important to Saunders to share his language.

He was just six years old when he was sent south to Brandon, Man., to attend residential school there for two years. "Everyone had to learn English, and if you were caught talking your language, you were strapped," he shares. Later, as an adult, he relearned Cree by listening to the Elders. "When I was out on the trapline with my late uncle Stanley,

he'd talk in Cree all the time and would tell me what each word meant and how to put them into a sentence. That's how I got my language back — also from my mom and dad and aunties and other Elders. Even to this day, I repeatedly ask what some words mean until I get it."

When it comes to the land, Saunders' wisdom is unmistakable.

Alicia-Rae Light (@aliciaraelight) is a writer and photographer based in Kigali and Vancouver. Christoph and Fabienne Jansen (@arctic_wild) specialize in northern wildlife and landscapes.



Early in the morning, we speak next to the crackling fire heating the cosy main lodge, coffees in hand, waiting for the sun to rise — the best time to spot wolves. His eyes dart around, keeping tabs on every movement outside through the large picture windows designed for wildlife viewing. In the first few days here, we've already spotted a wolverine, a cross fox and an Arctic hare. And, best of all, the pack of 12 wolves sleeping on the frozen Hudson Bay.

"A lot of people read books and that to become experts. They haven't been on the land to see what it's really like," says Saunders, who has spent every summer and fall for more than four decades on this coast. Here with the wolves, he says, it takes time.

Churchill Wild calls these wolves *Canis lupus nubilus*, the Great Plains wolf or "cloud wolf." One of five subspecies of grey wolf, this subspecies is presumed to have originated on the central plains of North America, but was nearly eradicated in much of its historic range by the 1960s. There is a small population around the western Great Lakes region in the United States, but *nubilus* is still considered by western science to be extirpated in Canada, where it once roamed the southern reaches of Manitoba and Saskatchewan.



Currently, the wolves' designation is an ongoing topic of study and debate. Similarly, the origins of the wider grey wolf species in North America remain a bit mysterious, says Paul Paquet, an adjunct professor at the University of Victoria and a senior scientist for the Raincoast Conservation Foundation. An authority on conservation science, Paquet visited the Hudson Bay Lowlands population in the early 1980s while working on his PhD on the behavioural ecology of grey wolves.

"Whether [grey wolves] were regionally from North America and then later moved to other parts of the

world, or they possibly came from Eurasia and into North America at some distant time thousands of years ago, there's still discussion around that," says Paquet. "Cree Elders and northern [Indigenous] Elders will tell you they've been there for millennia."

Until a few years ago, no further major study had been done on this pack in the Hudson Bay Lowlands. But in 2021, photographer, naturalist and explorer Jad Davenport created a new wolf expedition for Churchill Wild. The program is being carried out with the support of scientists and researchers from Princeton University, Michigan Technical University and the



Yellowstone Wolf Project, all of whom were eager for access to wolf data and DNA samples from the region, as well as the opportunity to record the bioacoustics of the pack. Guests' observations are also being used to conduct a multi-year citizen science study of the wolves using the platform iNaturalist. The study will include area maps, information on the wolves' interactions with other wildlife, and oral histories from First Nations and Inuit from the region.

What makes **Churchill Wild's wolf program** unique is the integrative approach to citizen science – the program pairs traditional **fieldwork** with **Indigenous oral history**.

What makes Churchill Wild's wolf program unique is the integrative approach to citizen science — the program pairs traditional fieldwork with Indigenous oral history. These wolves have always had a relationship

with the First Nations people on the coast who have traditionally hunted moose in this area. "We suspect they have been there from the last ice age. Before that, the area was covered by an ice sheet," says Davenport, now the director of wolf programs for Churchill Wild. "The Elders say the wolves have always been there, as far back as their oral histories go."

Davenport calls these animals the Opooyastin wolf pack. Traditionally,

wolf packs are named for their location, and opoyastin, a Cree word meaning "big wind," is a name that Cree Elders gave to a nearby river in an area that has been frequented by wind storms.

OPPOSITE: A wolf howls to communicate with the pack.
ABOVE: Guests photograph a wolf spotted walking along the gravel runway outside the lodge.

Of course, there are no guarantees when it comes to spotting these wolves, known to roam up to 20 kilometres in a day, but, lucky for us, we see wolves daily on this trip. We're close enough to see identifying markings on at least six of the 12 wolves, including stripes under their eyes, scars and different colourations, all documented through photography and video.

IN THE MORNING, three days into our stay, a crisp hoar frost encapsulates the bare branches of the willows. They glisten in the sunlight against a clear blue sky. The wind whips the snow on the ground into sculpture-like formations. Ptarmigans dart across the crystallized landscape, leaving wide tracks



OPPOSITE: ALCARAE LIGHT; ABOVE: FABIENNE JANSEN



ABOVE: A gene mutation results in this rare black wolf. **BELOW:** A recent blizzard creates a clean snow surface for fresh tracks. **OPPOSITE:** The photographer describes the sunsets here as “endless.”

in the snow with their feathered, Muppet-like feet. Wolf tracks are everywhere, their prints double the size of my hand.

Over the week, we learn how to follow the wolf tracks, noting which direction the pack is moving. Seated in snowmobile-drawn komatiks (otapanask in Cree), traditional Inuit sleds, we keep a close eye on the ground as we weave in and out of the willows along the Mistikogan River, dodging woody stalks of devil’s club and water hemlock. Through the pack’s crowded and forking tracks, we see how they travel together, break off into smaller groups or go solo and then come back together.

“The thing that I really try to stress, if I’m out with guests, is patience — that’s the one thing you have to have while you’re out there,” says Saunders. “A lot of old-timers I went out in the bush or hunted with, I’d ask them ‘when are we going to see something?’ They’d tell me in Cree, ‘just wait, be patient,’” says Saunders. “Ganna papasi, which means don’t be in a hurry.” That concept is fundamental in Cree culture, he tells me.

One afternoon, we watch the pack in the distance for over an hour. Suddenly, Saunders calls in over the radio from his position nearby to tell us to relocate a couple of kilometres south. He anticipates a lone wolf will approach from there — he’d spotted its ears behind a log.

We move and see the solitary wolf way out on the ice, visible only through a long lens or binoculars. It moves swiftly across the ice, greyish brown eyes fixed on us. Drawing closer, it stops, then circles our group

next to the komatiks, all the while maintaining eye contact. The silence is eerie as we hold our breath and stand completely still. “Lip Lip,” identifiable by his distinctive scarred and split lip, is the breeding male of the pack. He comes within metres of us, so close we can distinguish the colour variations in his fur: thicker along his back and thinner and reddish behind his ears. When he reaches a little too close for comfort — less than a foot away — guide and photographer Boomer Jerritt puts out an arm and calmly tells him to back away. He understands. The wolf’s grace, and the realization of how misunderstood these animals are, moves some of us to tears. “You’ll never get that close to a wolf again,” Saunders remarks later that evening as we trade stories around the fire.

THE NEXT DAY, we make our way up the Mistikogan River toward the Mooswa shipwreck, a steamship that

once transported pelts south from Kihciwaskahihan, or York Factory, the historic operational headquarters of the Hudson’s Bay Company. Our komatik and snowmobile slow to a trudge through the slushy river that’s now beginning to thaw this late in March. The polar bear cubs and their mothers have all left their dens, and soon this waterlogged landscape will be green again. The tundra wildflowers will burst into purples and pinks, the belugas will come back into the estuary, and the wolves will retreat to their forest hunting grounds.

Our last evening at the lodge calls for a bonfire, mulled wine and s’mores on the ice at sunset. The horizon blazes in hues that match the flames at my feet. Later that evening, the sky is moving, tinged with neon green and foggy white light, swirling in front of a bright full moon. The Opoyastin wolves make their presence known one last time. The pack howls. 🐾

BOTH PAGES: CHRISTOPH JANSEN