

INTERNATIONAL WOLF

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SUMMER 2025



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continue their comeback **10**

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Insights from Flying D Ranch **13**

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4

Jad Davenport

Gray wolves, white bears

A citizen-science study on Manitoba's Kaskattama Coast explores interactions between gray wolves and polar bears. Wolves, known for preying on polar bear cubs, share this unique biome where forest, tundra, and sea meet. Led by Jad Davenport, the research team—comprising guides, guests, and First Nations hunters—tracks wolves, documents encounters, and gathers oral histories. Their efforts reveal a complex coexistence between these apex predators, advancing understanding through non-invasive methods.

By Jad Davenport



10

Malia Byrtus,
California Wolf Project

California's gray wolves continue their comeback

California's gray wolf population has grown to seven packs with about 50 wolves, including 35 pups born in 2024. Their return, hailed as an ecosystem success, follows protections under the Endangered Species Act. The California Wolf Project aims to balance conservation with ranchers' concerns over livestock predation. Scientists and stakeholders are collaborating to address ecological and social challenges while shaping the future of wolf management in the state.

By Kevin Harter



13

Courtesy of Turner Enterprises

Mythical vs. real wolves: Insights from Flying D Ranch

Wolf recovery faces challenges rooted in myths portraying wolves as destructive predators. Research led by Val Asher at Flying D Ranch in Montana dispels these myths, showing wolves have minimal impact on livestock and big game. From 2009 to 2024, Asher's studies documented the Beartrap Pack's resilience and coexistence with humans. Her findings affirm that private lands like the Flying D can support wolf conservation while maintaining ecological balance and economic viability.

By Mike Phillips



International Wolf Center

On the Cover

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An adult babysitter with two pups from the Kootenay wolf pack in Kootenay National Park, BC, Canada, featured in John's book, *The Kootenay Wolves: Five Years Following a Wild Wolf Pack*, which can be found on Amazon.com.

Departments

From the Executive Director	3
Tracking the Pack	18
Wolves of the World	20
Personal Encounter	24
A Look Beyond	29
Book Review	32

Gray Wolves, White





Bears

A citizen-science field study on interactions between wolves and polar bears on Hudson Bay's west coast

Photos and story by JAD DAVENPORT



Butch Saunders, an elder with the York Landing First Nations, climbs off his snowmobile and crouches beside the fresh polar bear tracks. Saunders slips off a moose-hide mitt and uses his fingers to brush spin-drift from paw prints the size of dinner plates. Then he points out two sets of parallel tracks, smaller than tea saucers. Three-month-old cubs.

It is early March on the Kaskattama Coast of northern Manitoba, but the country is still locked in winter. The white and black spruce trees are blobbed with snow, and drifts taller than surfing waves stagger out to the frozen Hudson Bay.

Saunders and I are leading a small group of guests from Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge on an expedition to photograph mother polar bears and newborn cubs.

Every February and March mother bears emerge from their earthen maternity dens dozens of miles back in the boreal forest. These are the southernmost polar bears in the world and spend six months of year on land when the Hudson Bay thaws. After eight months of fasting onshore, birthing in early January and nursing cubs for a few months, the sows are eager to reach the sea ice. The ice is home to their primary prey, ringed seals.

Normally it's a straight-shot journey of a week or less for mom and cubs. They make a beeline north for the bay. But something is wrong with these tracks. Less than a quarter mile from the ice and seals, the bears make an abrupt turn that becomes a frantic scramble back into the forest.

"She's trying to hide," Saunders says. "From us?"



“Five times a year, guests join me in the field for a week as we track wolves on foot, by snow machine and with drones, count wolf numbers, identify packs, outline territories, investigate kill sites, set up trail cameras and review their videos, and observe wolves as they hunt, play and go about their lives on this remote coast.”

—Jad Davenport



He shakes his head.

Adult polar bears can weigh more than a ton and, when standing, can look down through a 10-foot-tall regulation basketball hoop. So, what is spooking the largest predator walking the planet today?

Saunders stands up, scans the shoreline and spots them. “Wolves.” At the edge of the jumbled ice, nine gray wolves trot single file, pausing now and then to sniff the snow. “Wolves and polar bears don’t like each other,” Saunders explains. “If (wolves) can separate a cub from a mother, they will kill the cub and eat it.” The north wind keeps the scent of the mother bear and her cubs safely hidden from the wolves. For now, at least.

As Saunders and I climb on our snow machines to head to the lodge, we watch as the wolves disappear behind a jumble of sea ice.

“They’ll be back,” he says. “They like the cubs.”

When Saunders and I had this encounter in 2017 it spurred my interest in this little-understood relationship between wolves and polar bears. Curious to know more, I came up with an idea. The guides, staff and guests at the

lodge, together with First Nations seasonal hunters, are the only humans on the land. We’re there from July until December and again from February through March. Would it be possible, I asked wolf biologists, including Kira Cassidy at the Yellowstone Wolf Project, for nonscientists to contribute to wolf science through a non-invasive, observation-based field study?

With generous advice and mentoring from Cassidy and other researchers, I developed a proposal. In 2020 I approached Churchill Wild, the owners of Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge, for support and partnership. In the fall of 2021 we launched our first wolf expedition. Now, five times a year, guests join me in the field for a week as we track wolves on foot, by snow machine and with drones, count wolf numbers, identify packs, outline territories, investigate kill sites, set up trail cameras and review their videos, and observe wolves as they hunt, play and go about their lives on

this remote coast.

Wolves and polar bear interactions are difficult to document. Polar bear researchers, including Dr. Ian Stirling, and wolf biologists, including Dr. David Mech, noted that wolves and polar bears rarely share ranges. Wolves are hunters of the boreal forest and tundra while polar bears prefer to stay far out on the frozen sea.

There is something unique about the Kaskattama Coast, however. Despite having the same latitude as Scotland, the lower reaches of the bay are home to the planet’s southernmost polar bear population. Unlike more northerly polar bears, which spend their lives mostly on the frozen Arctic Ocean, the bears here have adapted to half the year on land—from July to December the Hudson Bay is open water. Sows dig their maternity dens not in snow drifts but in riverside peat banks.

The coast is also unusual in that three biomes which normally transition from one to the other over dozens and dozens of miles—the boreal forest to the arctic tundra to the marine environment—here change in quick succession in under half a mile.

From a wildlife standpoint this means arctic animals like polar bears live alongside boreal creatures like black bears. Moose graze willow thickets at estuary mouths crowded with beluga whales. Red fox hunting the forest often chase and kill arctic foxes on the narrow band of coastal tundra. And crossing all

biomes with ease (including the sea ice in winter) are the packs of gray wolves.

Until the early 1980s, no documented reports noted wolves hunting and eating polar bears. Then, in 1983, just 40 miles west of where the lodge is today, polar bear researchers Dr. Ian Stirling and Malcom Ramsay made the first scientifically documented report. In his 2011 book, *Polar Bears: The Natural History of a Threatened Species*, Stirling wrote that he and Ramsay "...found evidence of a pack of wolves in the Churchill denning area that had learned to kill polar bear cubs when they were on their way to the sea ice from their maternity dens. Tracks in the snow revealed that some wolves would worry and distract the mother while another seized a cub and apparently escaped with it." The cub, Stirling recounted, had been completely devoured. Stirling noted several other wolf-bear encounters, but no further mortality.

The second documented report happened in April 2004, 1,300 miles north on the sea ice off Banks Island, a high-arctic island in Canada's Northwest Territories. In the September 2006 issue of *Arctic*, a journal published by the Arctic Institute of North America, Canadian researchers on an aerial polar bear survey—Dr. Evan Richardson and Dennis Andriashek—wrote about following tracks of a mother polar bear with two cubs. Wolf tracks intercepted the trio. A half mile later, "it appeared that the wolves had caught up with the bears...separated one cub from the mother and killed it. The carcass of the cub was found covered in snow... both the head and right forelimb were missing, as well as most of the rib cage. The body cavity was empty, and the entrails had presumably been consumed." The researchers later spotted a pack of 11 wolves a mile south of the kill site.

One of the most fascinating aspects of our study has been collecting oral histories from native people. I began by interviewing members of the York Landing First Nation. These Swampy Cree had once lived just 20 miles west of where the Nanuk lodge is today and have a deep knowledge of the land and wildlife. Despite having been relocated

160 miles south of their original settlement by the Canadian government when York Factory closed in 1957, community members maintain a seasonal goose- and moose-hunting camp three miles from the ruins of the trading post, in the heart of the country where wolves and polar bears meet.

Despite being a people with a strong tradition of hunting and trapping, few of the Cree I interviewed had any interest in harvesting wolves. "They are too smart to trap," one told me. "It's a lot more work to skin out a wolf than a marten, and the skins are less valuable," said another. But the most common answer on why the Swampy Cree don't hunt or trap wolves here is simply, "they are our brother hunters."

Among the local First Nations and the indigenous Metis, wolves were well-known for their seeming dislike of polar bears. A woman told me about her great-

grandfather, who was a First Nations hunter at York Factory. He spent time hunting the area in the early 1900s. "One day he found four abandoned wolf pups, and he didn't know where the mother was," Donna Munro says when I ask her if she has any stories about wolves and polar bears. "So he raised them, they were part of the family. They would follow him while he hunted moose. He liked having them around. Polar bears were a big problem, they would smell the moose meat and come into camp. His wolves would sleep around the outskirts of camp. When they smelled or saw a bear they would howl and chase it away."

Former lodge manager, Nolan Booth, had the most detailed account of wolves hunting polar bear cubs. Booth, who grew up in the town of Churchill, which is 146 miles northwest of Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge, remembers a September day in 2019.



"We were having lunch one day near the Opoyastin River right near the lodge and we spotted a mother polar bear and two cubs sleeping on a sandbar," Booth said. "Suddenly, sixteen wolves came trotting in from the east, across

the flats. You could tell by their behavior the instant they scented the bears. The hunt was on. Ten wolves circled the bears and started attacking the sow. The rest of the wolves sat back, just watching what was unfolding."



The mother bear fought hard, Booth remembers, sometimes sitting on her cubs to keep them from running. "We thought she was going to drown them. All the time she was trying to move toward the sea where she and the cubs could escape in the water. The wolves were constantly trying to separate a cub from mom. Some of the wolves were latching on to the mother bear's throat. She would swat at them, and when they grabbed onto her she would stand up and spin and send them flying through the air. Wolves were literally airborne."

The attack lasted 20 minutes before the mother and cubs escaped into the sea. "We saw them a few days later and, other than some blood on mom, they were fine. The cubs were untouched," Booth said. The wolves fared worse. Many were bloodied. "One of the black wolves had a severe injury to his left shoulder and leg (which) was crushed up. He curled up in a hollow in the willows and laid there for two weeks. The pack would sometimes bring food back for him, but he never came out of the hole. I didn't think he was going to make it. Then one day, a month after the attack, he got up and walked away as if nothing had happened."

Over the past four years, guests and guides at Nanuk have recorded other encounters. In one, a pack of seven wolves surrounded a full-grown male polar bear that was walking across the tidal flats. The wolves had been feeding on the remains of either a seal or beluga whale carcass. As the bear approached, the wolves engaged it, circling and nipping and darting away. Initially looking annoyed, the bear soon seemed fearful, and it left at a full run with the wolves chasing it.

Most of our observations revolve around the Opoyastin "Big Wind" Pack, the same wolves Booth watched attacking the sow and her two cubs. Based on reports from bush pilots, lodge staff, guides, guests and conservation officers we believe the pack defends a 600-square-mile territory which includes 60 miles of coastline. With the help of local Churchill bush pilot Jason Francouer, who keeps meticulous notes on his aerial wolf sightings, we

have identified four more wolf packs and outlined their territories in the surrounding areas. All these packs inhabit dense polar bear denning areas.

Trail cameras have given us insight into the wolf population and their travel habits in the area. Locating and documenting moose kills has given us insight into the winter diet of the wolves. Our field notes include stories of wolves hunting and killing willow and rock ptarmigan, snow geese, Richardson's collared lemmings, red foxes and river otters, along with spending hours feeding on blueberries and cloud berries.

While we have documented no fatal encounters between wolves and polar bears so far, in late October of 2024, a bush pilot reported spotting eight or nine wolves of the Kaskattama Pack to the east of the lodge feeding on a polar bear carcass. "It was big, it looked like an adult bear. We couldn't tell what happened to the bear, why it died, but about 100 yards south of the carcass there had been a big commotion in the snow. It could have been that the wolves attacked and killed the bear. It's also possible another bear killed the bear and was feeding on the carcass when the wolves chased it off. It's a mystery."

Although the exact nature of the relationship between polar bears and wolves may continue to remain a mystery, it's one that we, as citizen-scientists, hope to help unravel. With every oral history recorded, every wolf expedition completed and every wolf and polar bear sighting documented throughout the year by local pilots, First Nations hunters, lodge staff, guides and guests, we are filling in gaps, trying to understand how these two apex predators coexist in one of the only places on the planet where geography and climate

force them together for long periods. Our plans include getting permission to conduct scat surveys and DNA analysis using non-invasive methods.

Recently I expanded my work into the summer months searching for wolf dens and rendezvous sites. Last July I was sitting behind a spotting scope on a gravel beach ridge, scanning the coastline for wildlife. A mother polar bear and a cub-of-the-year came trundling along the beach. The insects were biting, and now and then the bear cub would shake its head and rub its face into the sand, seemingly exhausted by the flies.

Suddenly the mom stopped. She stood up and sniffed the air. The cub alerted and huddled beside mom. In an instant mother and cub turned and whirled. Within seconds they were bounding into the coffee-tinted waves of Hudson Bay. For a moment I wondered if she had been spooked by a male bear.

Male bears sometimes attack and kill cubs. I scanned the green and brown tundra for the familiar butter-color of a polar bear. There was none.

But then my eyes caught a flicker, and the bears' hasty departure made sense. A lone wolf, looking lean in its summer coat, emerged from the willows and trotted down the beach. It reached the spot where the bears had plunged into the sea and stood and gazed out. Through my scope I watched the mother and cub still swimming. The wolf sat down facing the sea. Within fifteen minutes, the bears had vanished from sight. The wolf stood and stretched and with one last glance out at the dancing waves, trotted away. ■

Jad Davenport is the director of wolf programs for Churchill Wild and a photographer for National Geographic.



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