

BLACK PHANTOMS

An excerpt from *Wolf Land*, a new memoir by Carter Niemeyer
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I grabbed the elk, or what was left of it, by one hind leg and dragged it across the two-lane highway, over broken glass and skid marks. Down a small hill and across a hundred yards of sagebrush we went, past where seven of my wolf traps lay waiting in the cool dirt. A light rain began to fall. In a few hours, it would be dark.

It was early June 2007 when Idaho Department of Fish and Game officers reported wolves – all of them black – eating on the elk carcass along the edge of the highway near Ketchum in an area called Phantom Hill. People kept calling. Observant drivers slowed and stopped on the shoulder of Highway 75. Others sped by without noticing a wolf was standing just feet away. The wolves were fast becoming famous around the Sun Valley area, something that seemed to irritate wolf managers back in Boise.

The state was now in charge, and had been since the feds handed over the reins in January 2006. If left to themselves, Idaho Fish and Game biologists would have been mostly tolerant of wolves, but they were under strict orders from the governor's office via the Fish and Game Commission to “manage” wolves with an iron fist, mostly because the feds had dared to bring them back. In the first years after reintroduction, the Nez Perce Tribe had monitored wolf populations in Idaho – something the state was supposed to do, but the Legislature forbade. Softhearted state biologists kept their opinions to themselves for fear of inadvertently shortening their careers. Nurturing the sour taste left after reintroduction, Idaho politicians grumbled loudly about what wolves might do to elk and deer populations as well as ranchers' cows and sheep munching away on federal land – a good 60 percent of the state. State lawmakers wanted wolves gone, but Idaho, like Montana and Wyoming, is stuck with federal Endangered Species Act rules to ensure that the near extinction of this animal will never happen again. Trying to balance it all, state biologists were undoubtedly sick of the whole thing, and they were only getting started. Now their phones were ringing about the Phantom Hill wolves.

I was on the state's payroll as a seasonal trapper as I had been the year before. Being able to catch wolves was important enough to the new wolf managers that they were willing to overlook my status as a retired fed, heavily involved in reintroduction, and an outspoken advocate of all wildlife, but especially wolves. Wolves had become my specialty, and I believed I had gotten them in pretty good shape in Idaho before management changed hands and I retired. I drove mountain back roads looking for signs of packs whose collars had quit functioning, narrowing down the wolves' locales and setting traps to catch them. Sometimes I accompanied new biologists who hadn't ever trapped a wolf, and taught them how. Other days, I ventured out to talk to people who were having trouble with wolves bothering their livestock. For every person who hated wolves, I found four or five who didn't.

As for the Phantom Hill wolves, I hoped to keep them away from the dangers of the highway – and closer to my trap line – by moving the elk carcass. All day, the wolves had visited the carcass, taking away softball-sized chunks until there was little left but bones and hide. The wolves were just being opportunistic. They hadn't killed the elk. It was a car casualty. Cars do at least as much killing as wolves ever will.

Once the work of the day was finished, I sat in my truck on the highway shoulder, about a hundred yards from where the elk carcass had been, and wrote in my field journal. I noted everything that happened, as I have done every day of my career since 1973. The Phantom Hill wolves were spending a lot of time next to the highway. No wonder everybody had seen them. I wrote a brief account of the fifteen or twenty cyclists who had passed me an hour or so earlier. The ones in the lead never looked up from the pavement, but one guy in the middle shouted and pointed, "There's a wolf!" Then the ones in the back nearly piled up trying to get a look. The cyclists spooked one younger animal and it slinked up the valley. The old gray-faced male, one I'd looked at good and long through binoculars yesterday, tore off another piece of elk and followed. I also jotted a few notes about a guy who pulled up next to me and rolled down his window.

"Man, this is cool!" he said about the wolves up ahead. "This is the second wolf I've ever seen." I wasn't too surprised to learn the fellow's last name was Wolf.

These side stories were incidental to the facts of the day. I wrote in detail about who I met, what we talked about, how many traps I'd set, where they were. Everything. In the back of my journal were three or four pages filled with names and phone numbers, gate codes to U.S. Forest Service roads, all kinds of stuff. The hard cover spine was fraying and the journal's pages were nearly all filled. I'd need a new one soon, I murmured to myself.

I closed the book and tucked it away. I needed to go see if my tent had blown over during a wind that had moved through earlier. Then three dark dots appeared in the valley about a half-mile in front of me. Three Phantom Hill wolves were walking toward my traps. One was the lanky wolf that was scared of the cyclists. Its fur was not completely black, but slightly salt and pepper in parts. The group sniffed the air, then approached the elk carcass I'd dragged there. I thought I might have a wolf snapped at any second.

Suddenly truck headlights appeared behind me and a man got out and slammed his door. I watched him in my rearview mirror. He crunched his way up to me in the gravel. I didn't want him seeing what I was seeing in case he was one of those idiots who shoot from the road at whatever is moving out there. I'd already started my engine.

"Did you know there are wolves around here? People have been seeing wolves right along this highway," he announced louder than he needed to.

"Yeah, I've heard that, too," I said, and wished him a good evening as I drove off.