

## **Wolf Land**

By Carter Niemeyer. 2016. Bottlefly Press, 3314 Cherry Lane, Boise, ID, USA, 83705. 256 pages, 18.00 USD, Paper.

Carter Niemeyer's new book *Wolf Land* was a very enjoyable read, highlighting his experiences capturing and following wolves throughout Montana, Wyoming (including Yellowstone National Park), Idaho, and (more recently) Oregon. He retired from his positions as Idaho wolf manager for the US Fish and Wildlife Service and government trapper for Wildlife Services. He is a recognized expert on wolves, livestock depredation, and trapping.

Niemeyer was a major factor in the reintroduction of wolves into the Northern Rockies in the mid-1990s, responsible for coordinating capture operations in Alberta and British Columbia, which he describes at length in his first book *Wolfer* (2010) and summarizes in *Wolf Land* (pp. 11–17). These accounts include a rather comical situation of having a wolf-skinning contest in the living room of a Canadian trapper's cabin. With stories like that, Niemeyer is a perfect person to

provide a first-hand account of one of North America's greatest wildlife success stories. His likeable personality literally enabled the first wolves to make it from Canada to the US, securing buy-in to the project from local Canadian trappers. In *Wolf Land*, Niemeyer's second memoir, he takes us across the rugged West as he tracks wolves, shares in their lives, and seeks middle ground for these iconic animals, both on the land and in our hearts. The book clearly demonstrates his sense of humor with many funny accounts that get one to laugh out loud (for instance, in his suggestion to watch for butterflies when looking for wolf scat, or sleeping in his car with Yellowstone Wolf Project Manager Dr. Doug Smith under a stinky horse blanket, or his use of swearing in descriptions of certain experiences). He has a unique ability to interact with all kinds of people from the stereotypical opposites – conservative ranchers and liberal environmentalists – to all groups of people in between, most just wanting to quietly learn to live with the West's newest predator.

In some respects, this book was deeply personal for me as I have observed and written about, in my book *My Yellowstone Experience*, some of the wolves that Niemeyer discussed, including the Rose Creek, Crystal Creek, Druid, and Nez Perce wolves. Learning his special insights about how he was contracted to capture and radio-collar members of these wolf packs was fascinating, including his connection to the Rose Creek pack members' original capture in Canada and their eventual reintroduction to Yellowstone. The following statement from the book (p. 91) completely resonated with me and my past 15–20 years: “The vast and magnificent Lamar Valley (in Yellowstone) kept popping in and out of my life, or more precisely, I seemed to be making periodic pilgrimages to it”. Niemeyer went from foothold trapping some of the Rose Creek pups when they escaped from their acclimation pen (designed to hold the wolves inside an acre area to keep them from roaming too far once when released) to darting other packs from helicopter. In fact, he helped pioneer darting wolves in Yellowstone in winter, which eventually became a standard way to capture wolves for research. There is a fascinating account, among many others, of a formerly ostracized (another wolf pack killed most of his pack) sub-adult male wolf (#6, p. 101) becoming one of the largest wolves – at 141 pounds – documented in the Northern Rocky Mountains. He and his progeny formed the Mollies pack in the central part of Yellowstone, which is still an existing social unit.

In other passages, I read equally mesmerizing accounts of wolves from ranch lands of Montana and wilderness areas of Idaho, places I have yet to visit. Given that he has driven about one million miles while

on the job (p. 8) in the Northern Rockies, it is no surprise that most people, even residents of the area, would be familiar with some – but not all – of the areas that Niemeyer takes us. And it is no surprise that a man who would drive that far would practically live in his truck. As he stated (p. 189), he was married to his job, probably the reason over the years why so many wolf biologists end up divorced and living alone.

At the heart of *Wolf Land* is recognizing that Carter Niemeyer, an Iowa native (p. 40), is a trapper. In fact, he put himself through college and helped provide for his family by killing animals, like foxes, for the price of their pelts. He was then hired by the US government to kill problem wildlife such as skunks and then coyotes. He was particularly good at it too, as he skinned more than 6,000 coyotes in his career (as told in *Wolfer*). However, as we transition to *Wolf Land* we go on a journey of Niemeyer mostly trapping wolves for research purposes whereby foothold trapping and aerial darting became his specialty. This allowed biologists to radio-collar and then track those study subjects.

*Wolf Land* is also about one man's personal transformation from a trapper for the US government program Wildlife Services, whereby he killed for a living, to becoming a vocal champion for wolves and anything wild when he became the wolf recovery coordinator in Idaho. Niemeyer provides enough background material, without redundant rehashing of information from his first book *Wolfer* (which describes his entire career beginning in the farmlands of Iowa), to give us a good grasp of his transition from government trapper to advocate for predators, wolves in particular. His philosophical shift was a gradual one, taking years to fully bear out. At first he believed that he simply needed to do whatever he could to make sure wolves got a fair shake, since most ranchers and his colleagues simply wanted to blame wolves for a kill so the rancher could be reimbursed and the trapper could be employed to kill the “problem wolf”. But Niemeyer (p. 45) believed a wolf didn't deserve to die just because it was a wolf. And he also just got tired of killing for a living, believing that it was bad for the soul (p. 83).

For Niemeyer, being told what to think and do made his hackles go up (p. 83). Over time he also realized that killing animals didn't solve anything, as year after year Wildlife Services would come back to the same allotments to do more predator control, a euphemism for killing. Niemeyer asked important questions (p. 210), such as “Why don't ranchers have to do a better job of taking care of their animals?” and “Why should the government be involved in killing predators, especially on public land?”. Public land is holy ground to Niemeyer, as it is to millions of Americans from all walks of life. And, perhaps equally important, Niemeyer notes

how ironic the anti-Fed attitude of many western ranchers is, given that they directly benefit from government programs (p. 40), not to mention that their rural lifestyle is often subsidized by the US government. But the key to *Wolf Land* is that Niemeyer points out these absurdities and hypocritical viewpoints but doesn't dwell on them. The backbone of the paperback is Niemeyer's travels to areas where wolves live and how he would get to know those pack members so he could figure out how to get wolves to come to an area of a few square inches, so they would step on a hidden trap and become entangled and eventually captured for research purposes.

At the beginning of the book Niemeyer says that the reintroduction of wolves in Yellowstone and Idaho in 1995–1996 changed the course of his life (p. 7), from contracted killer for the government to utilizing his skills to help wolves recover. He eventually became top man for Idaho wolf recovery, and during his tenure as the leader of the wolf recovery program, the Idaho wolf population increased but the number of wolves killed by the government and the number of livestock lost to wolves declined. Niemeyer can be credited for much of this success; unfortunately, western politics often got

in the way of truth and reason and wolves were vilified and eventually slaughtered when wolf management reverted back to state control around 2010.

*Wolf Land* is a great book. It is easy to read and is of interest to people fascinated with wildlife, especially predators, and western adventure. It has 14 chapters that are distinct from one another but flow in a readable path. A minor complaint might be that the book kind of just starts: there is no Table of Contents or Introduction. However, it was so easy to read, especially since I had already read *Wolfer*, that I felt that I knew Carter Niemeyer as a long-lost friend. It is a credit to his writing style, as well as having the stories to make the book sell! I highly recommend the investment in *Wolf Land*. It is well worth your time.

#### References

- Niemeyer, C. 2010. *Wolfer*. Butterfly Press, Boise, Idaho, USA.  
Way, J. 2013. *My Yellowstone Experience*. White Cottage Publishing, Trinidad, Colorado, USA.

JONATHAN (JON) WAY

Eastern Coyote/Coywolf Research, 89 Ebenezer Road, Oosterville, MA, USA, 02655