

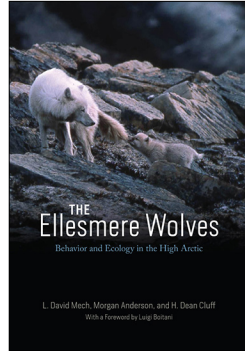
## ZOOLOGY

**The Ellesmere Wolves: Behavior and Ecology in the High Arctic**

By L. David Mech, Morgan Anderson, and H. Dean Cluff. 2025. University of Chicago Press. 288 pages, 20 colour plates, 20 halftones, and 19 tables, 149.50 CAD, Hardcover, 41.95 CAD, Paper. Also available as an E-book.

*The Ellesmere Wolves* is a detailed and unique account of Arctic Grey Wolf (*Canis lupus arctos*) living ~800 km from the North Pole. Also known as white gray wolves, members of this subspecies live mostly undisturbed from *Homo sapiens*. As they have never been persecuted, they are unafraid of humans, so this gives the authors a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study wild wolves. The stories and pictures in this tome are simply extraordinary for a normally secretive species. Readers who enjoy nature, wolves and carnivores, wildlife, and wilderness areas will appreciate this book. The authors write with authority and provide a profile of wolves that is unparalleled in the wolf world. Rick McIntyre's accounts of, and five books written on, the wolves in Yellowstone National Park (e.g., see Way 2022 and 2024) provide a comparatively detailed account of wolf behaviour and society, but the authors herein have more intimate encounters and get much closer to 'their' wolves, often within mere feet (~one to three metres), of their study subjects.

The book mostly spans from the primary author's (Dave Mech's) first trip to study the wolves in 1986 through 2010. The other two authors (Anderson and Cluff) provide additional research from 2014 to 2018. Mech spends 24 out of 25 summers (he misses 1999 due to a wrenched back; p. 62) in the Eureka area of Ellesmere Island, Nunavut, Canada, a logistically challenging and expensive place to visit; for safety, he is always with one or two colleagues (pp. 6, 34, 65–66). There, he learns about wolf behaviour around dens (when he can locate one, which is always the objective as the project depends upon finding one; pp. 66–67, 89) and wolf hunting behaviour on Muskoxen (*Ovibos moschatus*) and Arctic Hare (*Lepus arcticus*), their two main prey. He often follows the wolves on his ATV while they travel and hunt, because they are more tolerant when he is sitting on one versus standing up and walking around (p. 24). Mech's daily encounters with the wolves make him feel like part of the pack (p. 25), which is a "dream come true" for a seasoned wolf biologist (p. 30). These up-close encounters give him valuable personal knowledge that



is intimate and sometimes difficult to convey as he is so absorbed living with the canids (p. 31). Mech watches various wolves, including Mom, Whitey, Explorer, Left Shoulder, and Brutus (p. 85). These wolves are from Table 10.1 in the book, but I also noticed that Blackmask (BM) in 1991 appears in many sections of the book, especially pp. 47–50. However, I was confused by BM's appearance in the tome and wondered if that might have been the same wolf as Left Shoulder based on chronology, but it was never specified.

Individual wolves like Brutus are disproportionately important to the wolf population that Mech and his colleagues monitor (p. 86). He is the largest wolf (41 kg or 90 lbs) monitored at the time of his capture in July 2009 and is very tame and blatantly bold, often sniffing Mech on his ATV (pp. 70, 87). He leads the largest pack documented in the area at 20 to 28 animals (pp. 78, 97, 201).

*The Ellesmere Wolves* includes many important details of wolf behaviour, including: litter sizes related to prey (p. 102); regurgitation and how it generates social bonding (p. 104); play (p. 106); nursing (p. 101); licking behaviour to solicit a regurgitation (p. 111); caching (pp. 117–121); urine-marking caches (pp. 121–122); prey hunting (throughout the book), with a focus on Muskoxen (Chapter 15) and Arctic Hares (Chapter 16); travel patterns (pp. 152–155); feeding routines (e.g., pp. 172–173); life around the den, which involves a lot of resting (p. 175); howling specifics (pp. 186–188); scent-marking and ground scratching (Chapter 21); and social dynamics (throughout the book; e.g., p. 201). The authors' proximity to their study subjects allows readers to learn many intricacies of wolf behaviour, like the fact that males do not feed females after they wean their pups; instead, the males give all food to the pups or even yearlings (p. 172). The book has some good graphs and pictures of wolf-hare interactions in the section that discusses why hares are more local and predictable prey compared to Muskoxen, so much so that the total number of wolves in the study area is directly related to the summer Arctic Hare abundance index (pp. 144–145). There are also some exciting encounters between the authors' pack and outside wolves; the local wolves scent-mark and ground scratch more frequently when strange wolves are in their territory (pp. 195–199). It is only possible to make these types of observations on a place like Ellesmere where up-close sightings of habituated wolves are possible.

One of Mech's obsessions early in the project was to radio-collar wolves to learn what they were doing and where they were going when he wasn't around (pp. 39, 65, 75, 78). Brutus was the first wolf to wear a GPS radio-collar (in 2009). Later in the study (2014–2018), Mech's colleagues Anderson and Cluff GPS-tag 10 wolves. Interestingly, they discovered that Arctic Grey Wolves are smaller than most Gray Wolves, with females averaging only 31.3 kg (69 lbs) and males 37.1 kg (81.8 lbs). These collars provided knowledge that was previously impossible to gather using the 'old-school' method of directly recording behaviour with notepad and pen. Arctic Grey Wolves have enormous territories and live at some of the lowest recorded densities for wolves, which is expected given the similarly low density of their prey, especially Muskoxen (pp. 201, 207–208). They also move tremendous distances, often in a short amount of time (pp. 130, 152–153).

The first nine chapters of the book are in chronological order from 1986 to 2010 during Mech's 24 summers in Ellesmere. Chapters 10 to 24 focus on specific aspects of behaviour like den and rendezvous site characteristics (Chapter 11), feeding (Chapter 13), hunting (Chapter 17), life at the den (Chapter 19), and howling (Chapter 20). The details provided are fascinating, but there is also a fair amount of repetition throughout the book. Mech refers to his field notes a great deal, and I found it interesting to read those transcripts. He often uses shorthand in these sections, and there are places where he probably should have explained what the shorthand is referring to for the reader (e.g., using 'm.o.' for Muskox).

The book has a great insert of 20 colour pictures in glossy paper after p. 112—I especially liked Plate 10, which depicts Mech on an ATV with five Arctic Wolves following him. This one image really embodies the contents of the book. There are also many black and white pictures, graphs, and maps. While the black and white photos are not as high-quality as the colour photos, they relate directly to the immediate text, so I appreciated those images more (e.g., an image of two wolves fighting; p. 200). I especially liked the maps depicting wolf movements on Ellesmere;

however, Figure 21.3 must have an incorrect scale, which is probably related to the inset and not the main map, as Brutus surely didn't move 1500 to 2000 km north–south and over 500 km east–west; that would be a truly gigantic area (p. 202).

I learned some new terms by reading *The Ellesmere Wolves*, including 'obsequious' (meaning attentive to an excessive degree; p. 85), peripatetic (travelling from place-to-place; pp. 40, 176), ebullient (cheerful and full of energy; p. 22), and busman's holiday (a period of leisure spent doing something similar to one's occupation; p. 214). I also discovered a new food source from Mech: Muskox testicle, which he collected from a carcass, then sliced up, fried, and ate (p. 182)!

This is an important book, adding to the sizable body of work already published on wolves. I greatly enjoyed reading it. The authors write with tremendous perspective (Mech alone has been researching wolves for over 65 years!) on their research on Ellesmere Island over 30 years. There were some errors that I found, but that didn't distract much from the read. One oddity, however, was the fact that the book is written in first-person narrative with the use of "I" throughout the text, yet there are three authors. To me, it seemed that Mech should have been the sole author, with credit given to Anderson and Cluff for their contributions—mainly from 2014 to 2018. While the GPS radio-collaring of those 10 wolves by Anderson and Cluff provided valuable new data previously unavailable to Mech (except for the one wolf, Brutus, that he and Cluff radio-collared in 2009), that information was just a small part of the overall book.

### Literature Cited

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