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wonder

The early nickname of America's first national park is as apt today as when Yellowstone was founded, in March of 1872. Here, we celebrate this miraculous place—while examining a history that has too often excluded its original stewards—and consider how to ensure its survival for generations to come

land

YELLOWSTONE AT 150

PHOTOGRAPH: MITCHELL ROUSE

Yellowstone National Park's magnificent Grand Prismatic Spring, the largest natural hot spring in the United States

Geysers percolate off the historic Grand Loop Road

Opposite: A bison in the Lamar Valley

The Stories We Tell

By Lauret Savoy

WE CUT OUR GEOLOGIC TEETH HERE. Turned loose to face questions in a college summer field course—*What happened to make this landscape? What is the evidence?*—my fellow students and I tramped the Yellowstone Plateau, Beartooth Mountains, and elsewhere in Wyoming and Montana in search of answers.

Yellowstone gave us volcanic superlatives. The list is long: Three gigantic explosive eruptions, among the hugest known, occurred here over the past two million years, blanketing vast swaths of the continent with ash and other spewed debris. As magma chambers emptied in each blast, their ceilings collapsed to leave giant basins called calderas. Visitors notice more recent lava flows, including the largest known rhyolite outpourings on Earth—the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone's spectacular yellows and rusts formed in rhyolite that had been altered by thermal waters. And Yellowstone Lake, another sought-out site, formed behind a lava dam to become the largest high-elevation lake in North America. But what most excited us were the geysers, hot springs, fumaroles, mud pots, and steam vents. Yellowstone contains the densest concentration of active geysers in the world in one of the most extensive hydrothermal systems. This land born of Earth's molten interior is still being shaped by it. Thousands of earthquakes jolt each year, and the caldera surface rises and falls—almost like magmatic breathing.

That summer in one of Earth's most dynamic places taught me to recognize different scales of perception, to consider an internal igneous world and the immensity of time. Names alone evoked power: Mammoth Hot Springs, Grand Prismatic Spring, Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone River, Old Faithful. It was easy to appreciate this park for its geologic wonders—for hadn't it been set aside to preserve them and this wilderness?

I had visited Yellowstone before, with my parents when I was about five years old. Beyond geology and wildlife, park materials and rangers told of French trappers calling a Missouri River tributary Roche Jaune—Yellow Rock, perhaps a translation of a Minnetaree name. Of John Colter, a veteran of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, being the first known white man to explore the area in 1807–08. Of other trappers, like Jim Bridger, spouting tales of the area's bubblings and boilings.

PHOTOGRAPHS: CHRIS POPLAWSKI

Rangers told of geologist Ferdinand V. Hayden's surveys in 1871 and 1872 bringing science—geology, botany, zoology, more—to understand Yellowstone. Of the imagery these surveys generated—Thomas Moran's paintings, William Henry Jackson's photographs, Henry Elliott's sketches—igniting Congress's resolve to protect this land. Of how the park's grandeur and preservation symbolized the country's greatness. Rangers also told us that "Indians" feared geysers and avoided the area. As a child, I couldn't recognize myth or invention, omission or erasure—so I believed them.

When I ask my students now what "history" is, one common response is that it's "what happened in the past." They soon realize that history can also refer to what is *said* to have happened—that is, narratives created to recount what mattered and thus control meaning. But what mattered is far from simple, innocent, or agreed upon by all. Those wielding the power of accepted voice chose what to emphasize; they would also ignore, distort, and erase much more.

To make an uninhabited wilderness park required depeopling the land in actuality and in myth. When Congress established Yellowstone in 1872, several different tribal groups were within its borders. Indigenous peoples had lived in and moved through the region over thousands of years. Consider the oral traditions that speak to a rich intimacy with, and deep regard for, this land. Consider the hundreds of site remains by hot springs, geysers, lakes, and rivers—or the scores of quarries around Obsidian Cliff. But Crow, Shoshone, the Tukudika band of Mountain Shoshone, Bannock, Blackfeet, Nez Perce, and other tribal peoples would find themselves expelled and dispossessed. Many would be removed to reservations. One superintendent, General S.B.M. Young, directed a report to the president and Congress in 1909 stating that the park's story was "a sequential link in the chain of epochal events" that included "conquest of the savages, and all the epic deeds which achieved at last the winning of the west."

And there are still further omissions from Yellowstone's popular history, such as the presence of people of African descent. Mountain men of color like James Beckwourth, who also lived among the Crow, traversed the region decades before the park's formation—and African Americans worked in the

park from its early years on, as army soldiers, hotel waiters, servants, and in other roles. Like the history of the land itself, Yellowstone's human history is long and complex.

National Park Service holdings are among this country's most prominent sites of public memory. Whether iconic "wilderness" parks or national monuments, memorials, battlefields, or historic sites, their making—and the elements preserved within them, and told about them—are important pieces of the nation's history, pieces tied to often unspoken or unexamined narratives about what and who *we the people* are.

Yellowstone set visitor records in 2021, welcoming about 4.8 million tourists with the lifting of many pandemic travel restrictions. Crowding and congestion centered around geysers, the canyon rim, the lake—and wherever bison, bears, and elk caused traffic jams. Although the Park Service has tried to add broader perspectives to public stories over the last few decades, Yellowstone's deep human history remains largely obscured behind natural wonders, charismatic animals, and the park's celebratory preservation.

Public history that doesn't acknowledge complexity and erasure continues to reinforce what old stories had long privileged—and silenced or ignored. But now, for the first time, the highest officials responsible for national parklands are Native Americans: Debra Haaland (Pueblo of Laguna), as Secretary of the Interior, and Charles Sams III (Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation), as Director of the National Park Service. Both envision a park system that protects for future generations not only the nation's scenic treasures but also the many cultural and historical threads defining our larger American experience.

To support their work, I believe a question of personal responsibility needs to be answered: What is my relationship with history, told and untold, on this land? I plan to honor Yellowstone National Park on its 150th anniversary by *re*-membering: putting together the pieces, and acknowledging what was eroded, to see a greater whole.

LAURET SAVOY IS THE DAVID B. TRUMAN PROFESSOR OF ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES AND GEOLOGY AT MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE, AND THE AUTHOR OF *TRACE: MEMORY, HISTORY, RACE, AND THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE,* AMONG OTHER WORKS.

PHOTOGRAPHS: FRANK CARINO, L'OEIL D'EOS

From left: Mammoth Hot Springs' hill of dazzlingly colored travertine during a winter storm; looking for wildlife in the Lamar Valley

My Yellowstone

Michael Poland
Scientist-in-Charge,
Yellowstone Volcano Observatory

"You can learn so much at Yellowstone, geologically. We find out things from mineral deposits that are carried by hot water. We learn how the ground moves: Water passing through the sub-surface can teach you the subtleties of how earthquakes form, how the ground rises and falls. There's just so much to investigate. Another aspect of Yellowstone that I appreciate is just being able to watch it change. It's constant, and that's what makes it so fascinating, especially to volcanologists. The geyser behavior shifts over time; some of them will have fluctuations in temperature, and that will affect their color. We discovered these thermal areas a few years ago that weren't there in the 1990s or early 2000s—the ground heated up and killed off the trees, and suddenly we went from forest to thermal area. That type of dynamic nature is endlessly interesting and exciting—the feeling that every time you go to the park you may see something different. These are things we can see and experience in our lifetime. The past is also the key to the future: The kinds of things that happened once will happen again."

AS TOLD TO JESSICA PUCKETT

Keepers of the Land

By Jacqueline Keeler

IN 1870, AN EXPEDITION led by Montana politician Henry D. Washburn bore witness to the tremendous power of Yellowstone's geysers. The trip had been difficult, and yet even in their damp and disheveled state, Washburn and his group of travelers were overcome with wonder. So much so that Washburn gave Old Faithful its name that very day. Just two years later, President Ulysses S. Grant signed the Yellowstone National Park Protection Act into law. With the stroke of a pen, the first U.S. national park was born.

Native people are continually forced to explain the

The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, as seen from Artist Point

PHOTOGRAPH: NAVID BARATY

My Yellowstone

Wes Martel
Senior Wind River Conservation Associate, Greater Yellowstone Coalition, and Member of the Eastern Shoshone Tribe

"For our people, Yellowstone is so many things: our pharmacy, our garden, our grocery store, our church. It has many attachments and values for us. Whenever our elders and ancestors planted or hunted on that land, it was always in the spirit of reciprocity: You take care of us, we take care of you. We've lost that. If it wasn't for the removal of Native people, there would be no public lands. Think about all the areas and sites throughout this country that are important to us, and how we've been systematically excluded, removed, and denied any type of interaction with Congress. Our tribes have a long-standing connection with Yellowstone National Park—it's a very special and sacred place. Our research has shown us that there are at least 49 tribes that have some type of ancestral affiliation with Yellowstone. For most of us, the park isn't really anything to celebrate, because they killed us and forcibly removed us to create it. The one thing we do have to celebrate, I believe, is that we're still here. This anniversary gives us an opportunity to show that. Several months ago, we released 50 buffalo onto our ranch at the Wind River Reservation. The federal government tried to eradicate the buffalo, which is one of our relatives, in an effort to eradicate us. They almost succeeded. When I saw those buffalo running across our prairie, it was such a wonderful feeling. I thought, It sure is good to see you because you're coming back stronger than ever."
AS TOLD TO MEGAN SPURRELL

need to preserve sacred lands—take the fight over the recently restored Bears Ears National Monument in Utah or the Dakota Access Pipeline near the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North and South Dakota. But the members of the 1870 expedition who had seen the terrain, though indifferent to the people who already inhabited it, understood its power. They saw that its value had nothing to do with mining, ranching, logging, or even property ownership and turning virgin land to the plow. This was not the first reserve to exist in the United States. There was Yosemite, which the state of California had already established as a park; and the hot springs in Arkansas that, owing to their therapeutic properties, had been set aside by an act of Congress. But the formal establishment of Yellowstone represented the first time the country had sought to safeguard an area simply out of respect for the land itself.

Yet this respect for the place did not extend to acknowledging the humanity and value of the Indigenous people who had called it home for millennia. Consider the forced removal of the Mountain Shoshone people from Yellowstone, after it became a national park, to the Fort Hall Reservation in Idaho and the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. After some 11,000 years, they were driven from their homeland to make room for "pleasure-seekers," as Lieutenant Gustavus C. Doane, a member of Washburn's expedition, proudly wrote about the trip. Calling himself "the man who invented Wonderland," he took credit for "the discovery and development of a new source of pleasure and instruction for the human race." His name has yet to be stripped from the park's most famous peak.

Due to Doane's desire to turn the land into a tourist destination, what exists today is only a glimpse of the culture that once existed in Yellowstone. (There are more than 1,850 identified archaeological sites across the park, and that is with less than 3 percent of Yellowstone inventoried.) However, as the planet warms,

clues to that history are being revealed. In 2010 a researcher found a 10,300-year-old atlatl dart recovered from an ice patch near the park—the oldest found anywhere in the world. What could we have learned from the Mountain Shoshone?

Another clue to the park's history lies in specimens of mineralized lodgepole pine wood collected by scientists as part of the Greater Yellowstone Climate Assessment last summer. Radiocarbon dating of the samples pins them to between the early 13th and mid-14th centuries—extraordinary in itself. But there was another reason the finding made headlines: For trees to grow on its geyser mound, Old Faithful would have had to cease erupting for several decades, likely due to severe drought.

It's a bread crumb that cannot be ignored. Since 1950, temperatures in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem have increased by 2.3 degrees Fahrenheit, and average annual snowfall has decreased by nearly two feet, a matter of grave concern. Snowpack is a savings account for water; it melts and provides needed resources for plants and animals in the spring. The area is also home to the headwaters of major tributaries to some of the largest rivers in the West: the Columbia, the Missouri, and the Colorado. Higher temperatures could severely impact the availability of water downriver, which would in turn affect farmland and urban centers.

The climate assessment found that average temperatures over the past two decades have been higher than at any period in the last 20,000 years, while the mean annual temperature is projected to increase by 5 degrees Fahrenheit between 2061 and 2080. If it does, Old Faithful may stop spouting once again.

Yellowstone is home to 10,000 thermal features, not just geysers but hot springs, mud pots, and fumaroles—a landscape so dramatic that it led the early explorers who stumbled upon it to vividly compare it to hell. Now, as we approach the 150th anniversary of the park's creation, the beauty of those thermal features is exactly what draws so many people to the park. True hell would be failing to protect these unearthly wonders for generations to come.

JACQUELINE KEELER IS A DINÉ/DAKOTA WRITER LIVING IN PORTLAND, OREGON. SHE IS THE AUTHOR OF *STANDOFF: STANDING ROCK, THE BUNDY MOVEMENT, AND THE AMERICAN STORY OF SACRED LANDS,* AND EDITOR OF *EDGE OF MORNING: NATIVE VOICES SPEAK FOR THE BEARS EARS.*

PHOTOGRAPHS: CHRIS POPLAWSKI

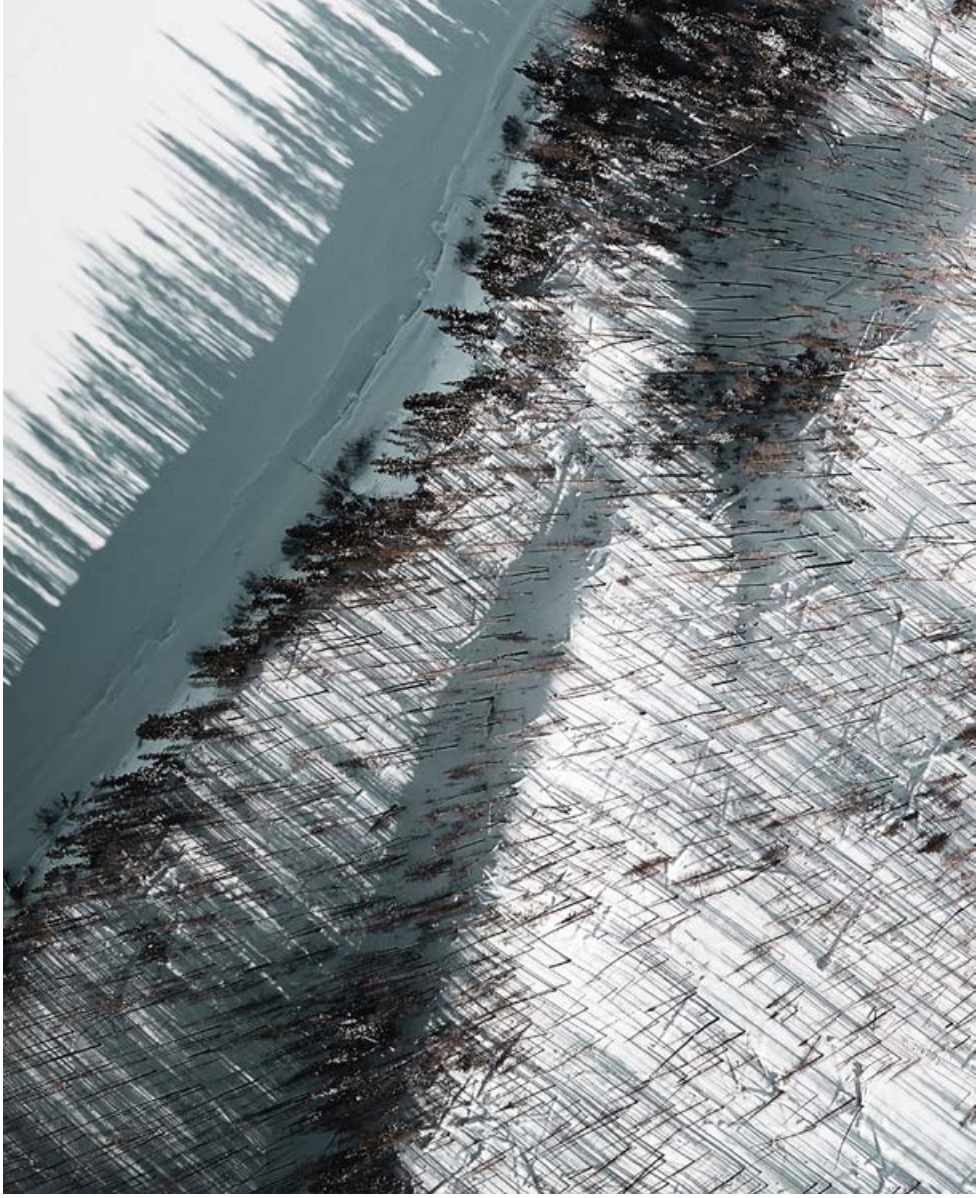
From left: The river and rock formations of Tower Fall, in the northeastern part of the park; a creek runs through a thermal area off Firehole Lake Drive

My Yellowstone

Sarah Davis
Chief Ranger,
Yellowstone National Park

"In 1988, when I was 16 years old, I went on a trip called the Teens' Camping Tour of the West. It was 30 sixteen-year-olds and four adults, and we drove from our home in North Carolina to California and back, hitting as many national parks as we could in 23 days. I got to see the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, Yellowstone, Zion, Big Sur, and the Redwoods. It's what made me realize that I loved our national parks. On that first trip to Yellowstone, I remember seeing a grizzly bear along the lake—but we were also there when that year's historic wildfires were going on. It was very smoky, and there were flames all along the shoulder of the road. I remember coming home and watching the news and seeing the flames near the Old Faithful Inn and realizing what a significant impact this would have on this park. I've been very fortunate to travel a lot. I've gone on safari in Africa numerous times, and every time I go, it's a spiritual experience. Seeing wildlife in its natural habitat—cheetahs and lions and leopards and hyenas—is amazing. Yellowstone is a very similar experience for me. The springs, the geysers, the rivers, the animals; seeing bison migrating through the valleys, doing what they've done for thousands of years; elk rutting, wolves playing outside their den, Old Faithful going off on a crisp bluebird day. There's nothing like it. It's very meaningful to think of everything we've done to protect this area—and it makes me feel proud of what we do."

AS TOLD TO MEREDITH CAREY



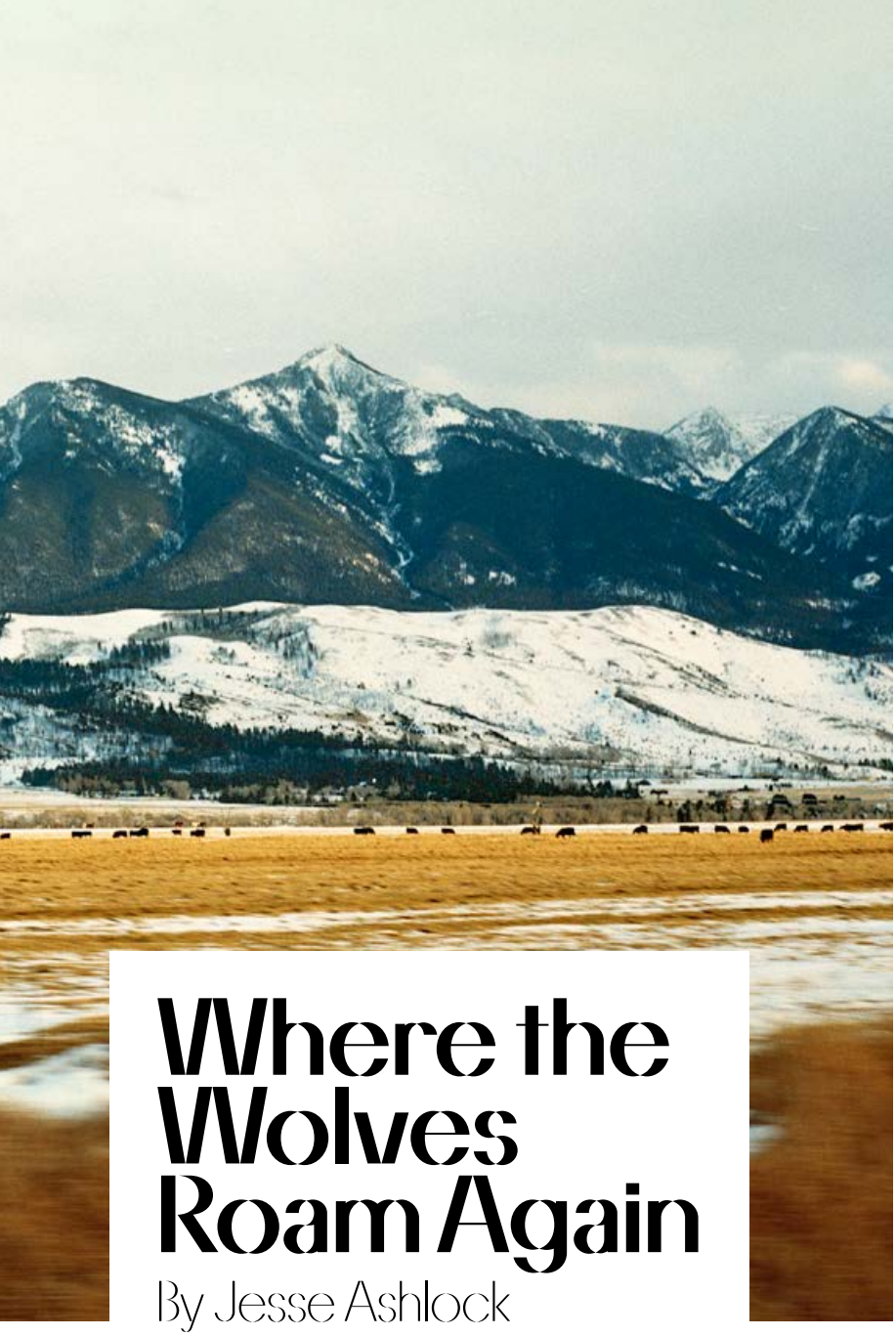
From left: Yellowstone after a snowfall; coasting along State Highway 540, also known as East River Road, near Pray, Montana

PHOTOGRAPHS: MITCHELL ROUSE, JAKE STANGEL, FRANK CARINO

My Yellowstone

Lisa McGee
Executive Director,
Wyoming Outdoor Council

"I have been changed by my experiences in Yellowstone and have spent many nights camping out there in awe of the landscapes, the beauty, the wildlife. The park is full of so many different geologic wonders: It has the Norris Geyser Basin all along the western side of the park, with mud pots, boiling aquamarine hot springs and the Grand Prismatic Spring, and geysers. There's a whole contingent of enthusiasts called geyser gazers, who visit for that aspect of the park alone. And then there are parts of the front country, like Hayden Valley and the Lamar Valley, where people get up early in the morning to see grizzly bears or bison or wolves. What's magical for me is the backcountry camping and hiking. The park is over two million acres, so once you're even a mile or two from the road, you're by yourself. But social media has changed the way parks are used. Now people are seeking out and promoting places that were once local secrets, which is leading to illegal user-created trails and erosion and impacting wildlife. The enthusiasm for experiences here is only growing. So the question is: What decisions can we make as a society to not love these places to death?" AS TOLD TO SHANNON MCMAHON



Where the Wolves Roam Again

By Jesse Ashlock

FOR THE BETTER PART of an hour I'd been watching through a long-range scope as a tightly clustered herd of more than a hundred elk milled about on a distant ridgeline, alert to some unseen danger. Suddenly, the moment arrived: Eight—no, maybe 10 gray and black wolves descended from the upper right, fragmenting the herd. The elk fled in disorganized ribbons that moved like dye in a glass of water, their mottled coats streaks of brown against the wheat-colored mountains of Yellowstone National Park in October. In the melee, an elk yearling was left exposed. The wolves pounced.

On my second day of wolf-watching in northern Yellowstone with the tour operator Travel Montana, I'd been lucky enough to witness a kill. It was a visceral reminder that Yellowstone is a place where nature's sometimes brutal laws still rule the land—a fact that too many selfie-mad visitors ignore, unfortunately, instead seeming to believe they're vacationing in a theme park. The very presence of the wolves, who were controversially reintroduced to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem in 1995 after being gone for nearly a century, is about restoring nature's balance. As apex predators, the wolves have helped bring the elk population under control, in turn reducing the overgrazing that for decades prevented aspen, cottonwood, and willow trees from flourishing in the park's saddles and valley floors. Yellowstone is more beautiful because of them.

I was visiting the park with a small group led by Jon Trapp, a conservation biologist who flew fighter jets in the Air Force before studying landscape ecology on the G.I. Bill and then working with wolves for the federal government, states, nonprofits, and various tribal entities. His experience as a pilot comes in handy for aerial wolf monitoring, as well as in his other job as a firefighter and fire-behavior analyst. He frequently draws comparisons between wolves and fire, both of which humans have tried to eradicate, with disastrous consequences. "Wolves have an ecological role to play on the land, as does fire," he said. "It isn't good or bad. It is what it is."

But there are entrenched camps that do see wolves as either good or bad, with very little nuance. This is a dichotomy that goes back centuries, even millennia: There's the myth of Romulus and Remus suckling on the she-wolf before growing up to found Rome, and there's the Big Bad Wolf scheming to eat Little Red Riding Hood. And as with so many things in American life, this tension has been exacerbated by partisan rancor. Anti-wolf constituencies compare the animals to illegal immigrants; their defenders accuse the neighboring ranchers who want to protect their livestock and livelihoods of being unfeeling killers. Hunters complain about the competition the wolves have created for elk, while proponents point to the estimated $65 million a year created by the wolf-tourism economy and the good-paying jobs as guides that now keep young people from leaving the region. "There's over four million visitors to Yellowstone a year," said Rick McIntyre, a retired National Park ranger and one of the world's foremost experts on wolves, "and, for most, their number one or two goal is to see a wolf."

When you go wolf-spotting—usually in the northern part of the park, where it's easier to see them from the roadside—you likely won't get close enough to behold their beauty with the naked eye, as you might the animals on an African game drive, or even the bison and moose right here in Yellowstone. But that's part of the magic of watching them; it's like peering through a keyhole into their private world. On our first morning, we set up on a bluff in the Lamar Valley near the Slough Creek Drainage to watch a half dozen members of the Junction Butte Pack, including a couple of pups. Across the great

expanse, they rolled on their backs, nuzzled noses, jumped onto and off of boulders. When they wandered across patches of snow, they suddenly became much easier to make out, especially the grays, whose tawny coats blend with the earth. Winter, I realized, must be prime time for wolf-watching.

But all this carefree frolicking belies a difficult life. "Wolves are routinely getting stabbed and jabbed," Jon told us. "So their immune systems are pretty bomber." Even so, the average life span of Yellowstone's wolves is 3.9 years. They are at risk from other packs, disease, starvation, cars, and hunting. That last threat has become more pronounced since Montana's governor relaxed the quota of one wolf per hunter and district. Now an unlimited number can be killed on private property; the management strategy in the areas just beyond the park's northern border, according to Jon, "is basically a free-for-all. You can run them down with a car, use night-vision goggles, shoot them from a helicopter." In response, the Sierra Club, Wilderness Watch, and numerous other organizations have announced plans to sue the state of Montana under the Endangered Species Act.

In the Lamar Valley, Rick McIntyre talked to us about wolves, his voice punctuated by their eerie calls. With his ruddy complexion, twinkly eyes, and lank white locks poking out from under a wool beanie, he looked like a Kris Kringle of the American West. For one 15-year stretch of his career, he went out every day to watch Yellowstone's packs. When he was still a ranger, Rick told us, he spoke to a local elementary school class that was visiting the park. A few days earlier, O-Six, a revered alpha female, had been killed, legally, by a hunter, prompting a national outcry and eventually the best-selling book *American Wolf*.

Before he could begin talking, a five-year-old boy piped up: "I know the man who shot that famous wolf." As Rick considered how to respond diplomatically, the boy added, "My daddy just bought a license to shoot a wolf." Again, the park ranger pondered the most politic response. The boy, however, had one more thing to say: "But I hope he doesn't."

Rick paused as a cold wind rustled through the Lamar Valley. "That's what gives me hope," he said quietly. "The younger generation."

Travel Montana hosts five-day Yellowstone wolf tours of no more than 12 participants in February, May, and October. From $2,950 per person; travelmontana.com

WHERE TO STAY

IN THE PARK
Nine lodges are scattered across Yellowstone, but it's the **Old Faithful Inn,** built at the turn of the 20th century, that continues to draw thousands of guests yearly. Its central location, rustic but comfy rooms, and views into Geyser Basin (including Old Faithful itself) make it a winner for wilderness seekers and history buffs alike. *Doubles from $209, yellowstonenationalparklodges.com; open early May through mid-October*

OUTSIDE THE GATES
Only 10 minutes from Yellowstone's west entrance, the amenity-rich **Under Canvas Yellowstone** nails convenient glamping. Its canvas tents have private decks with views of Montana's rolling hills, as well as wood-burning stoves with complimentary firewood. Upgrade to a Stargazer tent for night-sky viewing, right from your king-size bed. *From $439, undercanvas.com; open mid-May through early September*

FOR A SPLURGE
Set in the shadow of the Spanish Peaks, the new **Montage Big Sky** is the ultimate in mountain luxe. There's a full-service spa with products by Lola's Apothecary, plus views of Montana's Spanish Peaks, all just 45 minutes from Yellowstone. In winter, hit the slopes (the resort is ski-in, ski-out); a raclette cart and glasses of Grand Cru make for the perfect après. *From $1,395; montagehotels.com*

EMILY PENNINGTON

On a woodline near the Wyoming-Montana border, a bald eagle flies through snowflakes

Opposite: A prime wolf-spotting location in the Lamar Valley, off the Beartooth Highway

A PARK FOR ALL SEASONS

Yellowstone is great year-round—but the timing of your trip can have a big impact on your experience. Here's what to keep in mind as you start planning your visit

WINTER

From mid-December through early March, most of the park can be accessed only via oversnow vehicle. The exception is a plowed highway, open year-round, that starts at the north entrance in Gardiner, Montana, and runs parallel to the park's northern boundary. Luckily, this scenic highway is also one of the best places for wildlife-spotting; glimpse everything from snowshoe hares and foxes to bison and wolves in the Lamar Valley. For expert commentary, book a tour.

SPRING

Shoulder season, which is still relatively quiet, offers the chance to experience two sides of the park. While snow remains at higher elevations, even into early May, the valley floor is usually clear. That means you can lay fresh tracks in the backcountry in the morning, then swap your cross-country skis for two wheels in the afternoon. The 28-mile route from the community of West Yellowstone to Norris Geyser Basin is a great place to bike in April—when it's closed to cars.

SUMMER

This is busy season, so book early and don't limit yourself to one place or type of lodging; you can see different features of the park by moving around. Wherever you wind up, plan to rise early; the most popular attractions, like the Grand Prismatic Spring and Old Faithful, are generally crowd-free before 9 a.m. Then, while everyone else is fighting for parking, spend the afternoon fishing or hiking. Don't leave without trying huckleberry ice cream—the berries are just at their peak.

FALL

Many locals will tell you this is their favorite time of year to visit the park. By October, most tourists have already gone home, but there's still plenty to enjoy before the first frost. Peep golden aspens and other fall foliage along the Blacktail Plateau Drive and Lewis River, or listen closely to hear elk bugling in the distance. Stop beside the road to watch the bison roam or gaze at bighorn sheep without being honked at. After all, no one is in a rush.

TOMMIE ETHINGTON

PHOTOGRAPHS: FRANK CARINO, L'OEIL D'EOS