

Yellowstone in winter

By Suzanne Morphet | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 11, 2014



SUZANNE MORPHET FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The bison herds at Yellowstone National Park are accustomed to the fields of geysers.

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK — My toes are tingling. I'm wearing snow boots and I'm standing on a square of blue Styrofoam to keep my feet off the frozen ground, but it's still not enough on this bitterly cold day in Yellowstone National Park.

Fortunately, the wolf at the end of my telescope is providing an interesting diversion. He's lying in the snow, and occasionally lifts his black head and looks west down the Lamar Valley. His thick coat insulates him from the frigid temperatures, but he's got another problem, one that has nothing to do with the weather.

Wolf 755 — the wolves here are all numbered — lost both his mate and his brother to

hunters a couple months earlier when they strayed outside the park boundaries. Now he's looking for a new mate from another pack, but it's a life and death gamble.

"He's negotiating traveling through territories with rival packs that may well try to kill him," says wildlife biologist Rick McIntyre. "But on the other hand, if he's successful in what he's trying to do — to draw off one or more females — he'll be back in business with a new family and a new litter of pups within a few months."

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I didn't expect to be immersed in some animal soap opera at Yellowstone, the first US national park, but this is part of the upside of traveling here in winter. Wildlife is everywhere and people are few and far between. It feels like we've got the park, the animals — and the specialists — all to ourselves.

McIntyre has spent more than a thousand consecutive days watching the wolves of Yellowstone. He's here in summer too, of course, but so are hundreds of thousands of visitors. More than 3 million people will visit the park this year with about 98 percent of them coming between June and September, clogging the roads and filling every one of the 2,200 hotel rooms and cabins, 11 campgrounds, and sole RV park.

Even though Yellowstone has been welcoming winter enthusiasts since 1949, it's definitely the slow season with only two hotels open. Traveling by snow coach is the most popular way to get around here in winter, but you can also join a snowmobile tour or explore on skis or snowshoes.

That evening we warm ourselves in the Boiling River, an aptly named ribbon of rushing water near Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel, where scalding hot water from an underground stream merges with the icy flow.

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A coyote paused on a boardwalk near the Old Faithful geyser.

The next morning, we climb aboard a heated snow coach for a seven-hour journey to Old Faithful. Along the way, Victor Sawyer, our guide and driver, entertains us with stories about the park and how fantastical the place once seemed. For instance, when an early explorer tried to have a story published about the hundreds of thousands of bison he witnessed, an editor turned him down, saying, “We don’t publish fiction.”

To my eyes, it’s still fantastical. Wild animals roam everywhere. Elk graze on the banks of the Firehole River, while trumpeter swans float by in water that’s warmed from the thermal activity deep underground. “Hundreds of them are here in winter,” Sawyer says. “They come for the open water.”

We also spot coyotes and a river otter. Are those tracks in the snow from weasel or mink? It feels like we’ve gone back in time, back to the prelapsarian world that once was.

There may not be as many bison as before — the huge herds were almost completely wiped out by poachers — but we see them both up close, walking on the road to avoid deep snow, and from a distance, most spectacularly against a backdrop of exploding geysers.

“We’re traveling along the most geyser-rich area on the planet,” Sawyer says as we marvel at the billowing clouds of condensed steam against the blue sky.

“Yellowstone National Park is an immense, active volcano — one of the largest and most violent on Earth,” according to a sign in Yellowstone’s Grand Canyon warming hut, where we stop for a boxed lunch. So when Sawyer says we’ll be spending the night in the crater, it’s a little disconcerting until he adds, “it’s very well studied — we would have lots of advance warning.”

Late that afternoon I rent cross-country skis and set off on a well-groomed trail that bisects a group of geysers. I’m hoping to catch the anticipated eruption of Daisy Geyser at 4 p.m. and be back in time for Old Faithful’s at 4:26, about a mile round trip.

But even when they’re not exploding, geysers and their relatives — hot springs, mud pots, and fumaroles — are fascinating; hissing steam, burping bubbles, and turning the surrounding muck vivid shades of orange and yellow. I’m so distracted that I don’t get

back in time to see Old Faithful blow her stack, but I get something better: a private encounter with a coyote.

I'm on my knees photographing a bubbling "pot" when I sense something moving. I look up and see the tawny creature no more than a dozen yards away. It's just the two of us in the fading light. I pick up my ski pole, but she's harmless. She stops to urinate, then nonchalantly walks off into the quiet of a Yellowstone winter.

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