

LIVING WITH WOLVES

By Jim and Jamie Dutcher

When filmmaker Jim Dutcher made his first steps toward a project about the North American gray wolf, he had imagined that this charismatic animal would be just another subject in a lifetime of wildlife filmmaking. Even as the project unfolded, Jim and his wife, Jamie, looked forward to future work documenting other creatures and ecosystems of North America and beyond.

The original two-year project grew to four years, then six. One film became two. A fascination with wolves became an obsession and, finally, a life calling. It has drawn the Dutchers far from their familiar role of filmmakers into the center of the fierce controversy over wolf management and land use in the American West.

Most importantly, their ongoing relationship with the wolves who became known as the Sawtooth Pack, brought forth two Emmy-winning films.



Jim's first project, *Wolf: Return of a Legend*, aired on ABC's *World of Discovery* in 1993. That same year, Jamie joined him to make *Wolves at Our Door* for the *Discovery Channel*, airing in 1997, for which she won an Emmy for her sound recordings of the wolves. In 2007, their book and film *Living with Wolves*, recounted the full story of the Dutchers' lives with the wolves. Their work shed much-needed light on the most mythologized, misunderstood, and persecuted predator on the North American continent.

NATURAL HABITAT

Wolves by nature are wary and elusive creatures. They are extremely difficult to see in the wild, let alone film. People - even those with good intentions - can pose a threat to the animal's welfare if the wolf loses its natural fear of humans. Jim wanted to film wolves up close in a relaxed and untroubled state, and the only way to do that was to form a pack of wolves that would be completely comfortable in the presence of humans. In preparation for realizing this vision, in 1990, Jim and his team designed an enclosure, with acres of alpine meadows, streams, and forest on the edge of wilderness in Idaho's Sawtooth Mountains, a home where the wolves could have a natural habitat with abundant space to roam.

Next, Jim acquired two adult wolves from wolf rescue centers. After establishing the adults, he introduced four pups, born to other captive wolves, and in later years he added two more small litters. He and his crew gave American Indian names to identify each wolf but made no attempt to teach the wolves their names or to initiate behavior or interaction. Everything was conducted on the wolves' terms.

NATURAL HIERARCHY AND SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP

Over the course of the following years, the wolves matured, established a hierarchy, and even mated and produced offspring. The Dutchers lived in a tented camp within the wolves' territory - a constant but unobtrusive presence-- documenting, recording, and photographing life inside the pack.

The Dutchers' approach - one of social partnership with the animals - has garnered discussion, debate, criticism, and, most often, appreciation and encouragement. Jim's camerawork and Jamie's sound recording have created a more intimate portrayal of wolves than ever could have been achieved through impassive observation. As a result, audiences have become acquainted with an animal that, in addition to being a successful predator, is curious, playful, individualistic, and resolutely devoted to family.

RELEASE INTO WILDERNESS

The offspring of the *Sawtooth Pack* were the first wolves born in the area in 60 years. They weren't completely wild, of course, but they were born in nature, without human intervention, in a den dug by their mother. For all who had eagerly awaited the return of wolves, the event was monumental, a harbinger of things to come. One year earlier, in 1995, the *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service* released more than a dozen wolves into the *Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness*. Over the next few years, their ranks grew. Wolves dispersed and formed other packs. Some moved south into the *White Cloud Mountains* and, eventually, the *Sawtooths*. After the Dutchers' wolf camp was dismantled and the *Sawtooth Pack* had taken up new residence on the *Nez Perce Reservation*, wild wolves finally arrived to reclaim the land.



All photos courtesy of Jim and Jamie Dutcher

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A wild wolf seldom lives beyond ten years; a captive wolf can sometimes live a few years longer. Born between 1991 and 1996, most of the *Sawtooth Pack* now exists only in memory. "The area that was home to the *Sawtooth Pack* belongs to the wild wolves now," says Jim. "We've even found tracks and scat where *Wolf Camp* stood. These recently arrived wild wolves probably investigated the old den and other traces that only they could detect."

THE LEGACY OF THE SAWTOOTH WOLF PACK

"We now think of the *Sawtooth Pack* as ambassadors for their wild cousins," Jim continues. "They didn't ask for that role, but they accepted it with more grace and beauty than I could ever have hoped for. Now it is up to us. If Jamie and I have achieved anything, people will be able to make the connection between the wolves they see in our films and books and the wild wolves they now hear about from politicians and the mainstream media. Even if all they hear are stories of 'dangerous beasts' and threats to livestock, hopefully now they know the other side."



INDIVIDUAL PERSONALITIES

Most of us will never see these new wild wolves. We may hear of them from time to time, identified with scientific detachment by the wildlife biologists who monitor them - "Yellowstone wolf #40" or "Idaho B24." They are elusive creatures, appearing, if at all, only as fleeting shadows. But from the stories, the images, and the sounds collected by Jim and Jamie Dutcher, we have an understanding now and a mental image. Through the lens of the Dutchers' work, forms take shape in the forest and individual personalities emerge: a confident alpha leading the pack in the hunt; a determined female striving for the right to breed; a concerned uncle giving up his own food so that the pack's young pups will have plenty; a resilient omega inciting the pack into a game of tag. We may never witness them chasing down an elk, hear their howls pierce the night air, or see their countless acts of care and devotion they display to one another, but we know them all the same.

They are the legacy of the *Sawtooth Pack*.

NON-PROFIT

In order to continue to share their unique knowledge about wolves, the Dutchers formed a non-profit, *Living with Wolves*, in 2006. The organization has initiated a national education campaign to raise public awareness about the social nature of wolves and their importance to restoring and maintaining healthy eco-systems. The overarching threat to wolves comes from inaccurate information and misperceptions - both of which *Living with Wolves* is well positioned to address as the Dutchers' unique approach has been shown, time and time again, to open hearts and change minds. For further information or to make a contribution please visit

www.livingwithwolves.org

THE SPECIES IS STILL ENDANGERED

The gray wolf, *canis lupus*, originally inhabited most of North America, but was almost completely exterminated by the mid-1930s in the lower 48 States by hunters, trappers and the federal government. Following the passage of the *Endangered Species Act* in 1973, wolves in the lower 48 States were listed as an endangered species. "Listing" means wolves were considered in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of their range. The *Endangered Species Act* requires the federal government to identify species at risk for extinction, identify habitat they need to survive, and help to protect both. In doing so, the *Endangered Species Act* works to ensure the basic health of our natural ecosystems and to protect the legacy of conservation we leave to our children and grandchildren.

Since being re-introduced to *Yellowstone National Park* in and central Idaho in 1995 and 1996, wolves have re-inhabited places their ancestors roamed long ago. Today, however, as the federal government looks to remove (or "de-list") them from the *Endangered Species* list, wolves are once again being persecuted. For example, the State of Idaho proposes to kill as many as 600 of the state's 700 wolves as early as this summer - by trapping, poisoning, baiting, hunting, and aerial gunning. The State of Wyoming plans to kill up to two-thirds of the wolves, including any who steps foot outside *Yellowstone*. These plans are not justifiable from a scientific basis, but rather cater to special small interest groups.

The re-introduction of wolves is believed by many to be the most successful re-introduction program of an endangered species in the United States, and one of the most important environmental successes in this country. The pace and magnitude of the wolves contribution to improving degraded areas of *Yellowstone's* ecosystem have stunned even biologists. For the most part, wolves live on federal lands. It was a national effort to bring them back. They belong to all of us. Everyone's involvement is needed now to ensure wolves survive in healthy numbers for the future.

By writing Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne or your State officials if you live in the northern Rockies, and by supporting *Living with Wolves*, you will directly help wild wolves survive - thereby continuing the legacy of the *Sawtooth Pack*.



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www.mountaineersbooks.org