Yellowstone National Park is a panorama alive with one of the greatest concentrations of large mammals in the lower 48 states—more than 30,000 elk, 3,000 bison, 2,000 mule deer, and hundreds of grizzlies, moose, bighorn sheep, and pronghorn antelope. But for decades this spectacle was missing a key participant: the wolf. This absence had both aesthetic and ecological significance. It was like an orchestra without a brass section; a library without a mystery shelf.

In March 1995, when 14 wolves from Canada were released in Yellowstone, they became the first wolf packs here since extermination more than 60 years ago. At that time, the wolf was regarded as an extraneous villain in the Yellowstone drama; now the same animal is seen as an essential player in the cast of a complete ecosystem. This change in perspective has not come easily. The restoration program was implemented only after many years of public debate and careful planning, and it remains controversial.

Here you can find out why the decision was made, what issues and concerns surround reintroduction, how wolf restoration has been carried out, how wolf recovery is proceeding, and what wolf recovery means to Yellowstone—and to all who want to see the wilderness remain wild.

Why Were Wolves Restored?:
ECOLOGY OF AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

For many years the only wolves in Yellowstone were two mounted in a display case at the Albright Visitor Center. These wolves were killed by a park ranger in 1922, near the end of an era when wolves, coyotes, and mountain lions were considered a menace to Yellowstone’s other wildlife. Although reports of wolves continued sporadically, most sightings were of lone wolves or large coyotes. The last solid evidence of wolf pack activity in Yellowstone dates back to the 1930s. That’s a long time for a large wilderness area to be without one of its major predators.

Federal agencies like the National Park Service are mandated by the Endangered Species Act to protect species listed as endangered or threatened with becoming endangered in the foreseeable future. As stewards of Yellowstone, the Park Service must safeguard both animals and habitats and, where possible, restore viable populations of listed species like the gray wolf.

The recovery of the gray wolf in Yellowstone promotes ecosystem integrity and enhances the value of the park as one of America’s premier natural areas. With resident wolves, Yellowstone is one of the largest and most intact ecosystems remaining in the earth’s temperate zones.

The conservation of wolves and other large carnivores is truly a global concern. These species do not survive easily in industrial societies; people have to want them to survive. Long-term conservation of the wolf is as much a social issue as it is a species or habitat issue.

There are many reasons for restoring gray wolves to Yellowstone National Park. But, ultimately, wolf restoration shows that we respect the existence of other life forms, even when that may not be easy.

THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT
is a powerful tool for preventing the extinction of species and for preserving the diversity of life. The gray wolf is one of five species listed under Endangered Species Act protection in Yellowstone—along with the bald eagle, the peregrine falcon, the whooping crane, and the grizzly bear.

THE WOLF RECOVERY PLAN
designated three northern Rocky Mountain recovery areas for the gray wolf: northwestern Montana, central Idaho, and the greater Yellowstone area. These places were chosen for their plentiful prey and low potential for conflict with human activities.

Since wolves from Canada had moved into northwestern Montana on their own, human-assisted relocation of wolves from Canada has taken place only in central Idaho and Yellowstone.
The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service eastern British Columbia in 1996.

habitat similar to Yellowstone—to capture wolves with prey and hauled the wolves to acclimation pens where they would typically consume about 10 pounds of carcasses—about 10 pounds of road-killed livestock, including about 13,000 elk, 1,300 moose, and 435 bighorn sheep—support a multi-million dollar industry. It's been demonstrated in Minnesota and Canada that wolves generally prefer game to livestock. Some wolves will kill domestic animals when given the opportunity. But with appropriate livestock and wolf management, livestock losses can be minimized.

The restoration plan estimated that 700 wolves in the Yellowstone area would kill about 19 cattle and 67 sheep annually. During the first 16 months after wolves were released in Yellowstone, no cattle deaths and about 12 dozen sheep deaths had been attributed to wolf predation. As A century ago, bounty hunting for killing wolves prevailed. In 1914, the U.S. Congress authorized the Secretary of the Interior to kill wolves and goat-hunting permit fees were increased 10:1. But because population size and spatial distribution depend on many factors, wolf predation cannot be predicted with precision. When the recovery goal of 100 breeding pairs is met, the wolf population will generate $100,000 fund to compensate landowners and livestock owners may harass a wolf found on their property—up to six packs of territory per year. Some wolf packs may establish territories in the Greater Yellowstone area will become prey. Good wolf husbandry can help reduce wolf predation and it is verified that livestock have been attacked by wolves, at least six packs of territory per year. Some wolf packs may establish territories in the Greater Yellowstone area will become prey.

2012 and 37 in central Idaho. In 1996, the wolf population was estimated at 186,900.
The wolves brought to Yellowstone from Canada are the same species that roamed what is now the United States hundreds of years ago, and the natural history and protection as an endangered species, would eventually arrive in Yellowstone on their own. Their natural history is both fascinating and complex.

Pack Hierarchy
Wolves are social, hierarchical, competitive, territorial, and predatory. They evolved as effective predators in part through pack formation. Packs average eight members or fewer, and consist of the "alpha," or dominant pair, their most recent litter of pups, the pups’ older siblings, and occasionally other unrelated wolves. Usually only the alpha pair mate, beginning at about two years of age.

Raising Pups
Wolf litters, averaging six pups, are born in the spring. Pack ranking begins at birth, when the strongest pups push for position at their mother’s teats. Since only about half may make it through the first year, the pups’ survival is a top priority for each pack member. Adults feed young pups with meat regurgitated from kills.

For More Information
Yellowstone visitor center bookstores sell numerous books and other items that will help you learn more about wolves.

How Can You Help?
WOLF RECOVERY NEEDS SUPPORT

The fate of the wolf has always been in your hands. Early in this century, the public feared and hated predators, so state and federal agencies dutifully exterminated wolves in and around Yellowstone. More recently, the public has shown an overwhelming enthusiasm for restoring wolves to a few western/wilderness regions, so the National Park Service and other agencies have begun to bring this spectacular animal back.

Because of its tremendous ecological, scientific, and public benefits, and because of its far-reaching symbolic power, Yellowstone wolf recovery is one of the greatest wildlife conservation initiatives in modern American history. It is also one of the most controversial, partly because it is too easily portrayed as somehow unnecessary. Those familiar with the values of Yellowstone National Park will agree that wolves are anything but unnecessary: thousands of visitors who have seen wolves ranging free, or have heard their howls on bitter winter nights, would argue that Yellowstone simply is not complete without the wolf.

More About Packs
Depending on how much territory is needed to find prey, a pack may range over an area 40-1,500 square miles in size (average size in the Rockies is 30-300 square miles), defending its territory from "strange canids," including coyotes and dogs. During territorial disputes, wolves may fight or even kill each other. In most cases, they simply avoid one another.

A pack announces its presence by scent marking and bowing. These behaviors are used to warn away strange wolves, to help pack members locate each other, and to express the relationships of dominance and dependence in the pack.

Wolves disperse from packs for many reasons. For example, young adults may leave to seek their own mates. These lone animals often seek out a living between pack territories. Wolves which leave the pack have been known to travel up to 500 miles looking for a mate and a territory, but more often they settle close to their original territory. A dispersing wolf that does not find a mate may remain alone for life.

How to Hunt Is to Survive
Unlike some species, which are endangered because they require specific habitat being eliminated by human activity, wolves can live anywhere they find adequate supplies of prey and human tolerance. Their principal foods include elk, deer, and moose. Small mammals, such as beaver and hares, may be seasonally important when ungulates are unavailable, or for pups learning to hunt.

Wolves typically rest during midday and hunt early in the morning and in the evening when their keen eyesight gives them an advantage and prey animals are active. Wolves generally seek out the most vulnerable animals: the young, the old, the lame, or those caught in crested snow which a wolf can walk across.

Wolves risk getting injured or killed in the effort to bring down a strong animal, and may make many unsuccessful attempts before obtaining a meal. Only by skillfully working the herd can a wolf pack bring down an elk or bison. As with the human species, the wolf’s predatory success depends on skill and cooperation as much as on cunning. Many successful wolf attacks depend on the presence of wolves.

Prey animals brought down by wolves help fill many other stomachs: Ravens, magpies, and eagles have been seen on wolf kills in Yellowstone. Other scavengers, such as red foxes, wolves, weasels, martens, hawks, western tanagers, bluebirds, and magpies such as carrion beater—may also benefit. In this respect, wolf restoration will likely support park biodiversity well beyond the addition of a single species.

There is much to be learned about how wolves will change Yellowstone. Through long-term research, the effects of wolf restoration on the ecosystem will be evaluated. You are invited to share the excitement of learning about Yellowstone after the return of the wolf.

Expenditure of funds needed for wolf recovery. If you have seen or heard the wolves of Yellowstone, if you dream of some day doing so, or if you feel enrichment simply in knowing that Yellowstone's wildlife community is a robust expression of the American wilderness, please consider a donation to the Yellowstone Wolf Restoration Fund. Send your gift to: The Yellowstone Wolf Restoration Fund, Dept. M., P.O. Box 566, Yellowstone NP, WY 82190, (307) 344-2203.  

• 100% of your gift will be spent on wolf restoration.  
• Gifts over $35 receive an exclusive "WOLFSKING '96" ball cap.  
• Gifts over $100 receive an additional one-of-a-kind paw print from one of Yellowstone's first native-born pups (ready for framing).