How to Kill a Wolf: An Undercover Report from the Idaho Coyote and Wolf Derby

[Note: I chose to start this piece part way into it in order to spare the reader the gory detail of its title question.]

...After digging into the wolf-hate literature featured on Idaho for Wildlife’s website, I wondered whether the residents of Salmon were looking to kill wolves out of spite. They hated these creatures, and I wanted to understand why.

Besides killing wolves, one of the group’s core missions, according to its website, is to “fight against all legal and legislative attempts by the animal rights and anti-gun organizations who are attempting to take away our rights and freedoms under the Constitution of the United States of America.” The website also suggested that media coverage of the event was not welcome. The only way I’d be able to properly report on the derby, I figured, was to go undercover as a competing hunter. So I showed up in Salmon a few days before the event, paid the $20 sign-up fee, and officially became part of the slaughter.

The derby called for hunters to work in two-person teams. In the weeks leading up to the competition I recruited pro-wolf activists Brian Ertz and his sister Natalie Ertz, native Idahoans who have worked for local conservation groups. Rounding out our teams was Brian’s friend Bryan Walker, a gnarled former Marine and an Idaho lawyer who has studied shamanism and claims to have an ability to speak with animals.

The nice old man in the bar, whose name was Cal Black, bought the four of us a round of drinks when we told him we were in town for the derby. Cal had grown up on a ranch near town, and his thoughts on wolves reflected those of most other locals we met. Salmon is livestock country—the landscape is riddled with cows and sheep—and ranchers blame wolves for huge numbers of livestock deaths. Therefore wolves needed to be dispatched with extreme prejudice. The derby was a natural extension of this sentiment.

“Gut-shoot every goddamn last one of them wolves,” Cal told us. He wished a similar fate on “tree huggers,” who, in Cal’s view, mostly live in New York City. “You know what I’d like to see? Take the wolves and plant’em in Central Park, ‘cause they impose it on us to have these goddamn wolves! Bullshit! It’s said a wolf won’t attack you. Well, goddamn, these tree huggers don’t know what. I want wolves to eat them goddamn tree huggers. Maybe they’ll learn something!”

We all raised a glass to the tree huggers’ getting their due. I fought the urge to tell Cal that I live in New York part-time, and that in college Natalie trained as an arborist and had actually hugged trees for a living. Her brother, who is 31 and studying to be a lawyer in Boise, Idaho, had warned me about the risks of going undercover when I broached the idea over the phone. As a representative for the nonprofit Western Watersheds Project, which has lobbied for wolf protections, he’d attended numerous public meetings about “wolf management” in communities like Salmon. “Salmon is the belly of the beast,” he told me. “There is not a more hostile place. It’s Mordor.”

Brian’s former boss at the Western Watersheds Project, executive director Jon Marvel, has received
death threats for speaking out in favor of wolves and against the powerful livestock industry. Larry Zuckerman, a conservation biologist for the pro-wolf environmental nonprofit Wild Love Preserve, suspects that it was pro-wolf-hunting residents from Salmon who fatally poisoned his three dogs. Many pro-wolf activists across the American West, especially those who have publicly opposed the ranching industry, have reported similar threats and acts of aggression—tires slashed, homes vandalized, windows busted out with bricks in the night. Idaho for Wildlife’s opinion on the situation is made clear on its website: “Excess predator’s [sic] and environmentalists should go first!”

Prepping for the derby, we disguised ourselves according to the local style: camo pants and jackets, wool caps, balaclavas, binoculars, and heavy boots. When he wasn’t mystically communicating with elk, Walker enjoyed hunting them. He didn’t look out of place in Salmon, carrying his M4 rifle with a 30-round magazine and a Beretta .45 on his hip. He loaned me his bolt-action .300 Win Mag with a folding bipod, while Brian carried a .30-06 with a Leupold scope. Natalie, who is tall and good-looking, was armed only with a camera and played the part of a domesticated wife “here for the party,” as she put it.

At the derby registration the night before the killing was to commence, we were so convincing that the organizers didn’t even bother to ask for our hunting licenses or wolf permits. Instead they suggested spots in the surrounding mountains where we could find wolves to shoot illegally.

In Wolves and the Wolf Myth in American Literature, S. K. Robisch presents the wolf as a “mystical force in the human mind,” one that for thousands of years has been associated with the purity of bloodlust, the unhinged cruelty of nature. The wolf as mythological super-predator brings terror and chaos, devouring our young, our old, the weak, the innocent, and the foolish, operating through trickery and deceit.

From Matthew 7:15: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” Little Red Riding Hood loses her grandmother to a cross-dressing wolf, and the Three Little Pigs pay the price as well. In the late Middle Ages the Roman Catholic Church declared the wolf an agent of the Devil, or possibly the shape-shifting manifestation of Satan himself. And of course the werewolf, a human turned beast by the contagion of a bite, also lived in the imagination as a demonic figure, killing for sport under the light of the full moon, indiscriminate and lunatic.

In Anglo-Saxon and the Germanic languages, certain words for wolf—warg, warc, verag—were also used to describe bandits, outlaws, and evil spirits. In Swedish, the word varg simply meant “everything that is wrong.” Even Teddy Roosevelt, the conservationist president and lover of the wilderness, referred to wolves as “the archetype of ravin [sic], the beast of waste and desolation.”

In reality, Homo sapiens shares a long and intimate relationship with Canis lupus. The gray wolf was the first animal to be domesticated out of the wild, long before the cow, horse, or goat. Its direct descendant is classified as Canis lupus familiaris, better known as the common dog, which, despite its wide subset of breeds, is almost genetically identical to the wolf. The bear, the tiger, the lion—feared predators of the human race, even today far more dangerous to man than wolves—never came out of the dark to join the fire circles of early hominids. The wolf did, though the humans in its midst became food on some occasions.
the job by systematically razing the wolf’s habitat. By 1900, wolves had disappeared east of the Mississippi. By the 1950s, they could only be found in isolated regions of the American West, with perhaps a dozen wolves remaining in the contiguous 48 states, compared with a pre-Columbian population estimated at several hundred thousand.

The point of this slaughter was not to protect human beings, although this remains the enduring perception. Only two fatal wolf attacks on Homo sapiens in North America have been reported during the past 100 years, with perhaps a few more over the course of the 19th century (the records prior to 1900 are uncertain and the stories undocumented, often embellished and tending toward the folkloric). A 2002 study conducted by the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research reviewed the history of wolf predation on humans in Europe, Asia, and the US from 1500 to the present and found that wolf attacks were “extremely rare,” that “most attacks have been by rabid wolves,” and that “humans are not part of their normal prey.”

Wolves in the United States died at our hands for the most part because of the ancient grievance: They ate our cattle and sheep, representing viscerally that which could not be tamed.

Then, in 1974, wolves in the United States got a reprieve. The passage of the Endangered Species Act the previous year had cleared the path for Congress to declare the animals endangered, making it illegal to hunt them. Wolves had survived by the thousands in the forests, mountains, and prairies of western Canada, and now, protected from widespread slaughter in the US, portions of the population began a slow march of recolonization, dispersing south from Alberta and British Columbia and into Montana. In 1995, Congress expedited this process by mandating the reintroduction of captured Canadian wolves to the mountains of Idaho and Wyoming.

Thereafter, wolves thrived as never before in our recorded history, and ecologists noted with astonishment the beneficial effects on ecosystems in the West. In Yellowstone National Park, a centerpiece of this reintroduction, wolves pared the overabundant populations of elk, which had stripped the park’s trees and grasses. With fewer elk, the flora returned, and the rejuvenated landscape created habitats for dozens of other creatures: beaver in the streams, songbirds in the understory, butterflies among the flowers.

Such was the perception of success that by 2009 the US wolf population was declared fully recovered. In 2011, when Congress rescinded the wolves’ protected status, scores of biologists, ecologists, and wildlife scientists protested the decision. Critics observed that the removal of Canis lupus from the endangered species list had been accomplished mostly due to the lobbying efforts of the livestock industry. For the first time since 1974, wolves across the Northern Rocky Mountains—in Idaho, Wyoming, Montana—were legally hunted, trapped, and shot with vengeance. The winter hunting seasons decimated whole packs. At the behest of ranchers, the US government joined in the slaughter, dispatching predator-control agents from the federal Wildlife Services.

The view of wolves as vermin bent on stealing ranchers’ livelihood has carried through to the present, though little evidence supports this stigma. The number of cattle and sheep lost to wolves and other predators each year is negligible. In 2010, just 0.23 percent of cattle in the US died from “carnivore depredations” (as wolf attacks on livestock are officially categorized).

And it didn’t matter that aggressive “predator management” has no basis in ecological science. “The myth we’ve been fed is that predators like wolves need to be hunted because otherwise they’ll grow out of control, exponentially,” said Brooks Fahy, director of the nonprofit Predator Defense, in Oregon. “But no scientific study backs this up. Wolves self-regulate if left alone.” Wolf management, Fahy said, “is a form of rationalized madness.”