

MYTH BUSTING

Wolf population
at Flying D
Ranch busts
common myths,
thanks to the
research of
Val Asher and
others

Commentary by MIKE PHILLIPS

Photos courtesy of Turner Enterprises

Wolf recovery has been difficult for many reasons. One reason dwarfs all others: the mythical wolf.

The mythical wolf is rooted deeply in the minds of many. They hold the notion that a wolf has almost supernatural abilities to exercise its predatory will on a whim. They hold the notion that a wolf creates a wake of destruction and desolation everywhere it goes.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The real wolf is not even a shadow of its mythical self. For the real wolf, life can be a daily struggle. Hunting is a dangerous and typically unsuccessful endeavor. Most attempts fail. Hunger is frequent. Starvation is known.

Notwithstanding these facts, the myth persists. It is as strong as it

is wrong, and the species remains restricted to less than 20 percent of its historical range in the contiguous United States and, except in national parks and where legally protected, is intensively persecuted.

For decades, biologists have chipped away at the myth. They have diligently conducted reliable studies to reveal the real wolf and a simple truth: coexisting with the species is a straightforward affair that requires only a modicum of accommodation. Valpa (Val) Asher is one such biologist who has done more than her fair share to bust the myth and affirm this truth. More on this in a moment.

In January 1974 the gray wolf was relisted as endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act. This led to restoration of the species to the

The real wolf is
not even a shadow
of its mythical
self. For the real
wolf, life can be a
daily struggle.

Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem through reintroductions to Yellowstone National Park in 1995 and 1996.

Within five years descendants from the Yellowstone founders began using the Flying D Ranch in the northwestern portion of the ecosystem about 50 miles by air northwest of the park. By 2003 they had become a fixed feature of the area and came to be known as the Beartrap Pack, in recognition of the Beartrap Canyon of the Madison River on the ranch's western flank.

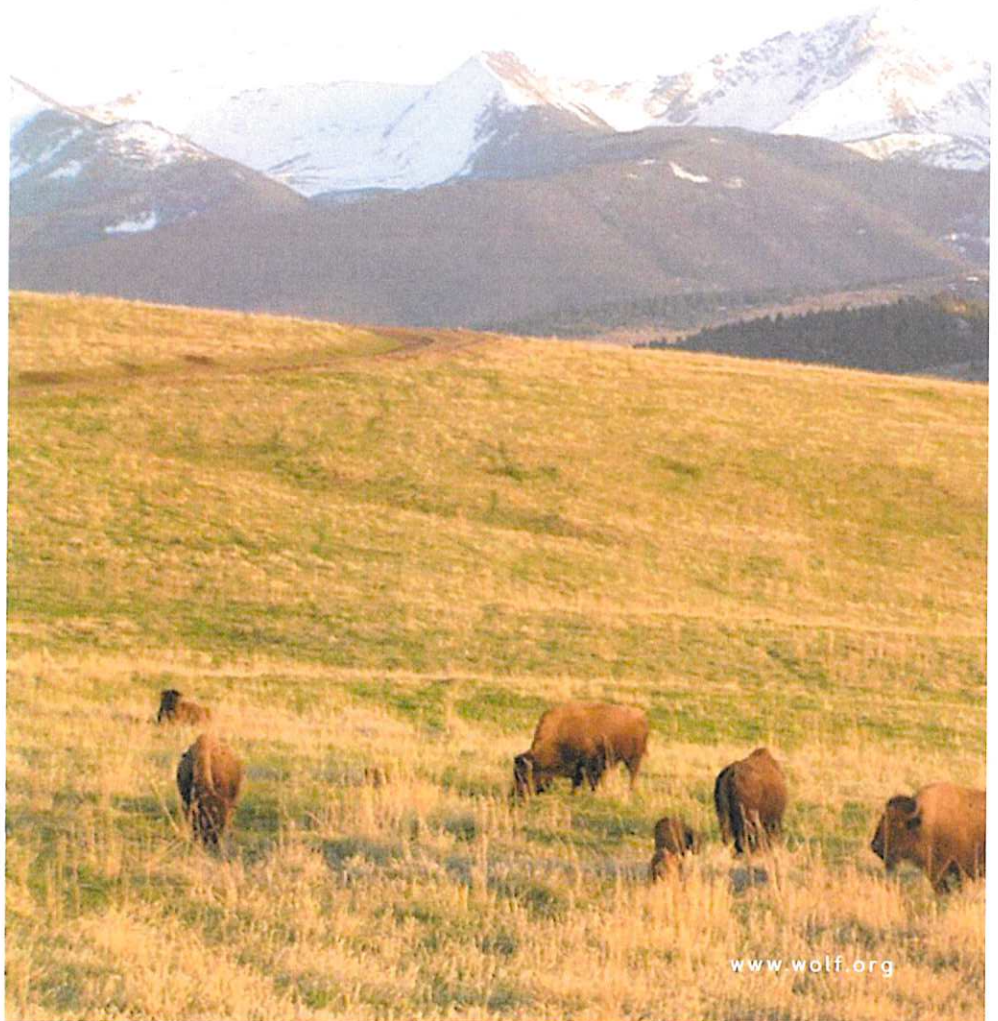
It is unsurprising that wolves settled the ranch, which is managed as a wild, working landscape for economic viability based on ecologically mindful management and restoration and conservation of at-risk species.

The ranch, owned by conservationist Ted Turner, is in southwestern Montana and includes 113,593 acres of montane (on the slopes of mountains) rangelands, spruce-fir forests and willow-aspen stands. The ranch supports an active bison livestock operation that includes about 4,800 adults and about 1,300

calves. The ranch also hosts an estimated 2,500 elk, 450 white-tailed deer, 150 mule deer, 20 moose and several species of large carnivores, including cougars, bobcats, coyotes, black bears and grizzly bears. It is ideal for wolves because of its size, abundant prey and the owner's determination to conserve native species.

Asher began her career with the Turner Endangered Species Fund (TESF) on May 15, 2000. Ted Turner and I co-founded TESF and Turner Biodiversity Divisions (TBD) in 1997. Since inception, they have collectively stood as the most significant private effort in the world to redress the extinction crisis through reintroduction efforts to restore secure populations of at-risk species. From a policy perspective, TESF and TBD aim to illustrate that the Endangered Species Act and similar state laws do not undermine private ownership of working lands.

One of TESF's early efforts was a study of the Beartrap Pack and its influence on



the operations of the Flying D. During 2000 and 2001, Asher was stationed at the ranch and led novel studies of the potential for aversive conditioning and short-term confinement of wild wolves to promote their long-term survival upon release. Several of the wolves involved were successfully re-released and contributed to the species' recovery in the Northern Rocky Mountains.

From 2002 until 2009, Asher operated under the direction of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and later Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks as a senior wolf specialist advancing conservation of the species throughout southwestern Montana. During these eight years, she focused on the daily grind of coexistence: assisting with wolf captures and radio tracking, responding to wolf-livestock conflicts, deploying non-lethal methods, educating landowners on wolf behavior and laws relating to killing wolves, training landowners in less-than-lethal

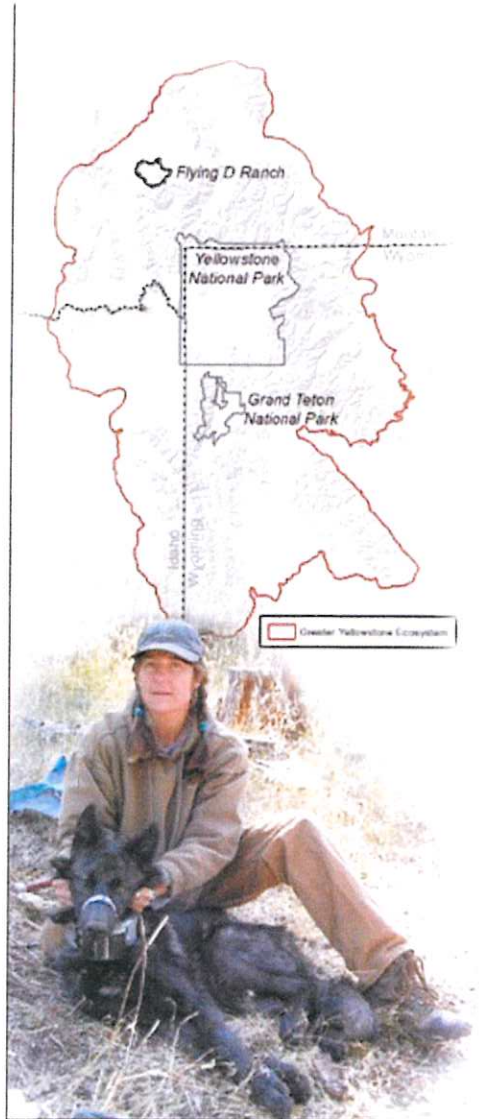
munitions and contributing to annual reports and technical publications.

In 2009 Asher returned to the Flying D and focused her considerable talent and work ethic on the wolves there until retiring in August 2024. In her characteristically quiet and unassuming style, she singlehandedly conducted the most significant study of wolves ever on private land.

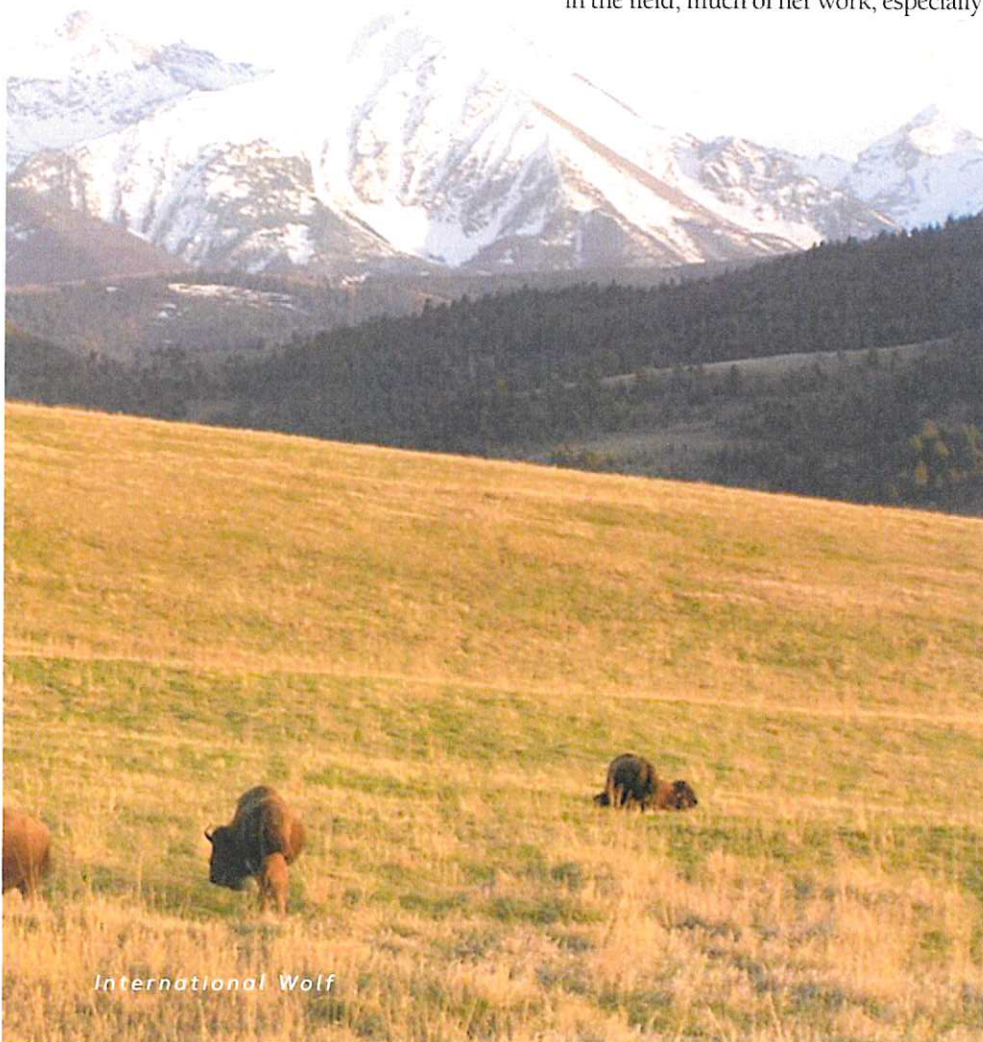
Over the course of these 14 years, she spent more than 3,500 days in the field and logged 75,695 miles (on foot and in vehicles) monitoring wolves telemetrically, observing them and ungulates directly, collecting and analyzing scats and examining ungulate carcasses to assess cause of death, general health of the prey animal, extenuating circumstances and scavenger use.

Asher established contact with wolves (observed wolves, detected radio signals, or detected fresh tracks and scats) during 75 percent of the more than 3,500 days that she was in the field.

While Asher was almost always alone in the field, much of her work, especially



By hiring Val Asher, TESF gave her an inch to do good. She took a mile.



capturing wolves and outfitting them with radio-collars, required close collaboration with Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks. She oversaw the capture of 23 wolves on 24 occasions and deployment of 20 radio-collars without incident. This allowed her to maintain telemetry contact (via traditional and global positioning transmitters) with wolves nearly continuously from 2008 through June of 2024, and that resulted in the collection of more than 7,000 locations. These data revealed that the pack's territory mostly aligned with the ranch's boundaries.

The Beartrap Pack probably denned on the Gallatin National Forest south of the ranch from 2002 through 2005. While Asher believed that pups were whelped on the ranch from 2006 through 2008, she did not confirm the first den until 2009. After that, she documented at least one litter of pups on the ranch every year through 2024. She counted 119 pups from 22 litters from 2009-2024. Litter size ranged from two to 16. The Beartrap Pack produced two litters during four of 16 years from 2009-2024 (25 percent of the time).

Asher located nine den sites on the ranch, including three that were used during several years. She located 18

rendezvous sites that were distributed across the ranch and typically used year after year.

Documenting wolf predation and food habits was central to her work, given the importance of predation on influencing the ranch's livestock and big game hunting programs. Beyond directly observing wolves, she analyzed 938 wolf scats and examined 1,568 carcasses, including 380 animals killed by wolves.

Elk were the primary prey for wolves although they did prey on deer and infrequently on bison. Most use of bison was in the form of carrion. Notably, nearly 75 percent of the ungulates killed by wolves were malnourished or starving.

During Asher's study, the Beartrap Pack included an average of 16 wolves at year's end. Notably, during fall 2019 the pack included 26 wolves.

Members of the Beartrap Pack mostly restricted movements to the Flying D Ranch. The entire ranch was used by wolves. When wolves traveled beyond the ranch's borders, the distances typically were modest (about two to three miles). Wolves traveling off the ranch have good opportunities to interact with wolves from other packs.

Given the relatively high mortality rate for other wolves in Montana (due to social intolerance for the species and very liberal opportunities for legally killing wolves), the Beartrap Pack probably is a source of wolves that promotes the persistence of the regional population.

As Asher noted repeatedly, the size, productivity, persistence of the pack and its fidelity to the ranch is owed to the ranch's large size, the presence of robust ungulate populations and lack of human persecution.

Asher's most important findings?

- Wolf predation had a negligible impact on the ranch's big game hunting program. Indeed, since wolves have occupied the Flying D, the number of bull elk has remained steady or increased slightly.
- Wolf predation had a negligible impact on the ranch's bison livestock operation. For a 13-year period (2010 through 2022)

confirmed wolf-killed bison were worth \$7,263 annually as calculated per Montana's livestock loss compensation program.

This number is reduced to about \$5,000 by excluding data from two years when the bison herd experienced significant disease.

- Beyond contributing to the Flying D's ecological integrity, wolves added to the ranch's wilderness character and provided lasting memories for people who observed them or heard them howl. The wolves did not represent a threat to human safety, either through direct encounter or disease transmission.

The persistent presence of wolves on the Flying D is irrefutable evidence that at least some private land can contribute to the sustained well-being of even the most contentious at-risk species. Collecting such evidence through efforts to restore imperiled species was the inceptive aim of the Turner Endangered Species Fund. Studying and celebrating wolves was a central component of Ted Turner's intent to manage his properties as wild, working landscapes with a focus on improving the prospects for select at-risk species.

The overall success of the Beartrap Pack makes it clear to me that the Flying D Ranch is the most consequential private land for wolves in the world and serves as a model for recovering wolves to other tracts of working wildlands.

By hiring Val Asher, TESF gave her an inch to do good. She took a mile. By doing so, she did more than her fair share to slay the mythical wolf and reveal an important truth: coexisting with wolves is a straightforward affair that requires only a modicum of accommodation. ■

Mike Phillips is the director of the Turner Endangered Species Fund. He's a former wildlife biologist with the National Park Service, serving as the project leader for the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park from 1994 until 1997.



Coexisting
with wolves is a
straightforward
affair that requires
only a modicum of
accommodation.