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The Real Wonder of Yellowstone

THE WONDER OF YELLOWSTONE is not only geysers, paint pots, and hot springs; it is not just buffalo, elk, wolves, and bears. It is only the way the land is born from lava, shaped by ice, water and fire. It is not only the views, stars and waterfalls. The wonder of Yellowstone is also the way it seeps into the lives of each person who sets foot on the land and becomes part of who they are. Yellowstone sets a line through each visitor's life connecting childhood to adulthood, one generation to another. The wonder of Yellowstone is the way all these interconnected pieces of past and present have created a place that inspires a lifetime of memories.

Recently, I went to Yellowstone two summers in a row. The first trip was with my two sons, Zack and Scott. My wife, Karen was supposed to have come, but broke her jaw in a biking accident a few weeks before we were set to leave. In an act of unselfishness she insisted we go and it was her idea to have my father join us. I had been to Yellowstone once before as a 13 year old and now thirty five years later I was returning to a place that helped shape much of what I am today. We saw wildlife, climbed Mt Washburn, played in lakes and rivers and had fun! Watching Zack and Scott was a window into how I became me. It was an opportunity to relive my childhood through adult eyes. By watching his grandchildren my father was able to relive what he and Yellowstone had given me. For the boys it was not profound, there was no grand meaning maybe that would come later, right now it was simply amazing.

On the plane home we tried to figure out how to come back again next summer and this time with Mom. Karen knew from what they told her over the phone and when she saw the excitement in their eyes that we should go back. Each day had its own stories and adventures. There was the day a buffalo was walking in a parking lot and frightened a woman who had just walked out of the restroom. They fought to tell her about jumping from one raft to another on the Gardiner River. Zack talked about coming face to face with a bighorn sheep and Scott told his story of seeing a beaver. There was much more to tell. Karen wanted the experience for herself.

The year passed and we were back on a plane to Yellowstone. Leading up to our departure I had worries of course. Would the boys get bored the second time around? Would Karen be able to relax? Would I be able to relax? Would we get on each other's nerves? Would I push to do too much? Should we be saving the money for college? Would the travel arrangements work out? The closer we came to leaving the less I worried. The more it felt right to go. I knew we were going to wrap ourselves in Yellowstone. The two days in the Lamar Valley tell the story.

We stayed in the cabins at Roosevelt Lodge, near the Lamar Valley. Zack and Scott knew from last year that the valley was the best place to see wildlife. On our first morning the alarm went off at 4:30, and with surprising little effort they woke up. The boys dressed in the car as we drove with first light. Along the roads in Yellowstone there are pull offs where people gather to watch wildlife. A bunch of cars is a sure sign there is something out there. We parked on a rise looking down into the valley.

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The Lamar River wound through a wide open area that made it easy to spot wildlife. With a few other morning people we began to search for carnivores: bear, coyotes, eagles and wolves. As the light grew a lump by the river came into sharper focus and a grizzly bear appeared. We watched it, hunched over working on a carcass of something big, while magpies and a raven waited patiently. Buffalo were milling about like the beginning of a cocktail party. The pronghorn and elk appeared out of the fading darkness and joined them. We kept watching, waiting. Suddenly, someone called "WOLF!" Heads and optical equipment turned in unison. A black wolf trotted across the valley, swam the river and headed into the trees and out of sight. That was one animal we did not see the year before.

The wolves in Yellowstone were reintroduced from Canada. They are numbered, named and many are radio tagged. Scientists know where the dens are located. They use walkie-talkies and radars to keep track of where the wolves are at any given time. Every morning researchers and volunteers report wolf sightings and help wolf watchers see them. New cell towers were recently installed in the park to make it easier for wolf watchers to communicate with each other. There are those who would argue the Yellowstone wolves are not really wild animals anymore. I was among them. But when I saw that wolf run it was wilderness. Even if it is a cliché I know of no other way to describe what we witnessed. There was a lightness in its run that looked effortless. That wolf stirred my soul, the boys were psyched! We wanted to see more.

A park ranger pulled over and suggested we all look for the Slough Creek Pack. Off we went in a small caravan of RVs and rent a cars at dawn's light. The den was high up on a hillside. There was a bleached white log just in front that served as a landmark for those of us trying to put scope on the opening to the den. Zack and I saw one pup poke his head up out of the grass; much to Scott's frustration he missed it.

Around 8:00 we drove back to pick up Karen. The boys rushed to tell her what they had seen.

"Mom, this is the best day I ever had in Yellowstone."

"Pretty good since it is only 8:15." I said.

Scott added in his competitive spirit, "This year crushing last year, wildlife wise"

After breakfast we organized ourselves with lunches, snacks, extra clothes and headed to Trout Lake for a hike. The 4:30 am wake up had Scott eyes shut, head back and mouth open, fast asleep. We drove up into the Beartooth Mountains, stopping at a pullover to let him recover. Zack and I stood by the Lamar River as he explained how great it would be if we could kayak downstream. I agreed. On the way back to Trout Lake we noticed Pebble Creek. A wide shallow stream flowing over rocks that was perfect for them. I figured it was easier to wake up Scott to play instead of waking up to hike. It took a bit to get him out of the car but at the water Scott was all good. The creek was true to its name and perfect for building a rock dam. They played in the stream for two hours, doing what they do best. I hated to make them leave. But after a lot of "okay five more minutes but then we really have to go," we left for Trout Lake.

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It was a half-mile to the small lake perched on the edge of a mountain-top. At the lake the cutthroat had attracted an otter, which attracted photographers. There was one young man with a lens at least 2 feet long. Zack whispered, "That is what I am going to be when I grow up."

Last year after our first day in the Lamar Valley, Zack said, "You know Dad, I know I am not going to live in a big house and have a lot of money, because I am going to be a wildlife photographer. I will have an RV and a dog."

"Sounds like a good plan," I replied

Zack once called me a dream killer because whenever he told me about one his plans I would point out the problems and all the things he would have to do to make it happen. This time I simply listened and smiled to myself.

His interest diminished over the year, distracted by the life of a middle school student. This trip rekindled the fire with more passion. On the way down the trail, despite his pleas not to embarrass him I struck up a conversation with Dan, the photographer with the two foot lens and got some tips for Zack.

1. Learn everything you can about the animals and plants you will be photographing.

2. Learn to use your camera and all its features.

Dan and I talked discussed becoming a wildlife photographer is like becoming an elite athlete. I can just hear myself yelling at Zack "Okay give me 25 photos of cattails and 25 photos of muskrats, now hit it!"

We drove back for dinner and returned to the Lamar Valley for another night of wildlife watching. We saw grizzlies, pronghorn, elk and buffalo. Buffalo viewing can be graphed as a V on the excitement scale. The first one no matter how far off registers a 10, but then as you see more and more you do get a little jaded, the numbers drop on the scale but then something happens. Instead of simply seeing a buffalo herd you begin to notice the subtle differences and behaviors. Karen loved the way calves run around with a bounce in their steps. I like when the buffalo roll in the dust their legs wagging in the air. To the boys the best is when the buffalo "stiff tail" just before they piss or poop. The level on the excitement scale rises. When the buffalo cross the road and hold up traffic they are reminding us it is clearly their park and we just happen to be trying to drive through.

The next day it was another 4:30 wake up. It took a little more effort to get going, but there we were looking over the Lamar Valley at first light. The interest level had waned a little which meant more goofing around in the back seat while I looked for wildlife.

There were no wolves to be seen so we drove back to Slough Creek. As we parked, Rick McIntyre, one of the biologists who has been instrumental in the re-introduction of the wolves, drove up in his yellow jeep with the wolf tracking antennae on top. He pointed out the den site and led us up a hill for a better view of the action. The wolves were jumping over, under and in the grasses. They would appear and disappear,

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wrestling with each other. The wolves weren't the only ones fighting. The boys argued over who had more time with the scope. They were being wolves. Eventually there was so much wolf action to watch Zack and Scott stopped fighting over who had more time with the scope. The wolves were still there when we left. It was time to get back to Karen, go on to the next part of the trip.

Just as we left Roosevelt Lodge there was a jam of cars. Yellowstone is the only place a traffic jam can be a welcome sight. Right by the road standing in Floating Island Pond was a huge bull moose. The Triple Crown! wolf, moose and otter in a 24 hour period. The boys had never seen a moose, they were truly impressed. This bull moose, antlers and all stood in the pond like a king. Except for the flies that buzzed around his head. Every once in a while it would blow bubbles. Scott thought that was to flick away the flies. We watched for a long time hoping it would walk out of the water so we could see a full size moose.

The moose kept eating and we had to move on.

To soak in all of Yellowstone is to remember Yellowstone. As our trip went from present to past and became a memory we kept the experiences in our mind's eye with the stories we told. As I write this we know that grizzlies still stalk the Lamar Valley. We know that in the meadows of Slough Creek wolf pups romp and that buffalo are creating traffic jams. It all happens with or without our being witness. Our memories mean we can close our eyes and feel the comfort of knowing Yellowstone is out there. There is magic when land is protected. Yellowstone also has the power to teach us what is happening in other wild places. It is a window into the life there. It is this knowledge that gives us and all visitors a better understanding of how the natural world works.

The trip brought us much we will not know until Zack and Scott are grown up and much we will never know. Altogether our trip cost about \$6000. Was it worth it? Maybe it would have been better spent putting \$3,000 in each of their New York State 529 College Saving Program accounts. Say it earns just 3% a year in today's market for 10 years. That would be at even more for tuition. It did not take much thought to figure out the answer. They will go to college and the bills will be paid. What did the trip buy us? For Scott, Yellowstone is a place of family, fun and lots of cute animals. For Zack it is a place of inspiration and dreams. For Karen, it is a place to become part of the adventure and to see the wonder. For me it was a chance to bear witness. The answer easy, it was worth it.