

ZOOLOGY

American Wolf: A True Story of Survival and Obsession in the West

By Nate Blakeslee. 2017. Random House Canada and Crown Publishing Group. 28.00 USD, 32.00 CAD, 320 pages, Cloth.

American Wolf (published as *The Wolf* in Canada) was a great read about Yellowstone wolves and the political and sociological aspects of wolf recovery in the west. It focussed on a particularly famous female wolf (dubbed “O-Six” for the year she was born) who ruled the Lamar Valley region of the park until her untimely death on 6 December 2012. I related easily to this book because I regularly visit the Yellowstone region and call Rick McIntyre and Laurie Lyman friends. They are the two main human characters in the book in addition to Steven Turnbull (pseudonym), the man who shot and killed O-Six. O-Six was a striking 97-

pound grey-coloured wolf, captured by accident and given a research radio-collar and scientific ID #832.

I had numerous sightings of O-Six on my many trips to the park and regard watching her with my son as one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. Those were mighty special experiences for me, and Nate Blakeslee brings these moments back to life by recounting the enthralling story of the rise and reign of O-Six, a most celebrated Yellowstone wolf. The author goes into depth describing the people who loved her and those who feared her, and focusses on Yellowstone’s wolf watchers, led by Rick McIntyre, a park biologist who,

according to Wolf Project leader Doug Smith, is the glue that holds everyone in that community together (p. 265). “Wolf Watchers” is an unofficial group of people who regularly visit (one or twice a year or more) or live near the park, focussing their time looking for and watching wolves interact with other members of Yellowstone’s wild community including Elk (*Cervus canadensis*), bison, bears, Coyotes (*Canis latrans*), foxes, Pronghorns (*Antilocapra americana*), and many other creatures. I try to visit Yellowstone once or twice a year and spend a lot of quality time with Rick and Laurie and other people while watching wolves in a pristine and beautiful environment.

The book is unique in that it focusses on a particular female wolf from Yellowstone but tries to also tie back to some of the larger reasons why people have had such a troubled relationship with wolves. Once abundant in North America, wolves were hunted to near extinction in the lower 48 states by the 1920s (p. 14). In recent decades, Blakeslee notes, conservationists have brought wolves back to the Rockies, igniting a battle over the very soul of the west. Blakeslee uses the O-Six female as a sort of frontline battle between the old guard (people who exterminated wolves and still hate them, both for their ability to kill ungulates like Elk as well as the political interventions that they represent) and the new guard, like the wolf watchers, who appreciate having wolves around.

O-Six was beloved by many, particularly Rick McIntyre. Over the course of her 6.75-year life (2006–2012), she became something of a social media star, with followers around the world. Part of her allure was that thousands of people were privileged to see her and her pack in the wild and watched her raise three litters of pups (2010–2012), protect her pack from Grizzly Bears (*Ursus arctos*) that came near her den, compete with rival wolf packs (sometimes fatally), hunt Elk, and survive in an often-hostile world with cold temperatures, lots of snow, and human hunters waiting at the park’s borders. As noted on the book’s cover-leaf, *American Wolf* is a riveting multigenerational saga of hardship and triumph that tells a larger story about the ongoing cultural clash in the west: between those fighting for a vanishing way of life and those committed to restoring one of the country’s most iconic landscapes. It is fascinating as the book frequently toggles between describing these larger, generational shifts in attitudes towards preserving iconic carnivores like Grey Wolves (*Canis lupus*) to focussing on O-Six and Rick and their personal trials and tribulations. Given that Rick has made over 85 000 wolf sightings (p. 268), aided by radio-telemetry, spotting scopes, and a cadre of wildlife watchers assisting him, it is safe to assume that he has observed more wild wolves than any human in history. His iron man 15-year streak of going into the park every day, including a stint where he saw wolves on 891 straight days (p. 147), is unlikely to be topped.

Many of Blakeslee’s digressions from O-Six and Rick describe the history of wolf recovery, using a thorough literature review as well as film-maker Bob Landis’s four nature documentaries on Yellowstone’s

wolves. This historical information provides perfect background material to make this book a great stand-alone read for novices to Yellowstone wolves.

Interestingly, Blakeslee was also able to track down and meet with the person who shot O-Six east of Yellowstone National Park. They agreed to use the pseudonym Steven Turnbull. I felt that a fair and non-biased description was given of Turnbull. While he leans anti-wolf, he does not claim to particularly hate them like others do in the area; he seemed to have more of a resentment for wolves changing his way of life including part of the reason why there are fewer Elk around Yellowstone. But Turnbull was fascinated with Bob Landis’s videos, watching the one on O-Six (titled *She-Wolf*) multiple times, and showed Blakeslee O-Six’s pelt with admiration. While many in Turnbull’s position have a bitterness for what they perceive as out-of-staters dictating how they need to live (i.e., with wolves), many people (including myself) feel a bit of distain for locals around Yellowstone who feel they have more rights than the average American over our collective vast federal lands. This has brought land disputes and even rebellions all over the west, many of which are described in the book. And wolves are just the latest struggle between insiders and outsiders over control of the vast western United States. Blakeslee does a great job of highlighting these struggles without going too much in depth.

I highly recommend *American Wolf*. Easy-to-read and absorbing, it does a unique job of focussing on individuals—both wolves and humans—yet entertains the bigger, political picture of wolf recovery. Given the number of dedicated wolf watchers discussed at length, many of whom take images of their experiences, I was very surprised there were no pictures of O-Six in the book, even black and white ones. And the main title is pretty generic; it could have better reflected O-Six and the Yellowstone region.

I’d like to conclude with Blakeslee’s thoughts on seeing O-Six’s pelt in Turnbull’s cabin in Crandall, Wyoming: “It was impossible not to think of the countless stories I’d heard about what she’d done with those tireless legs and those formidable teeth, the elk she’d taken down single-handedly, the territorial battles she’d won, the pups she’d reared, the loyalty and love and fear she’d inspired and the enormous and magnificent stage upon which she’d done it all, in front of her thousands of fans” (p. 261). I am proud to call myself one of O-Six’s fans and hope this book helps bring about the recognition of the importance of individual animals, as well as the knowledge of the key ecological role that wild canines play throughout North America. They all have unique stories to tell. Wolves (and other wild canids) are intelligent, sentient, family-oriented animals who deserve much more respect than is currently given by our governments, both state and federal. Don’t believe me? Then read this book and I’m sure you’ll change your mind.

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