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## A Wolf Called Romeo: He Was Supposed to Have Gone

Nick Jans

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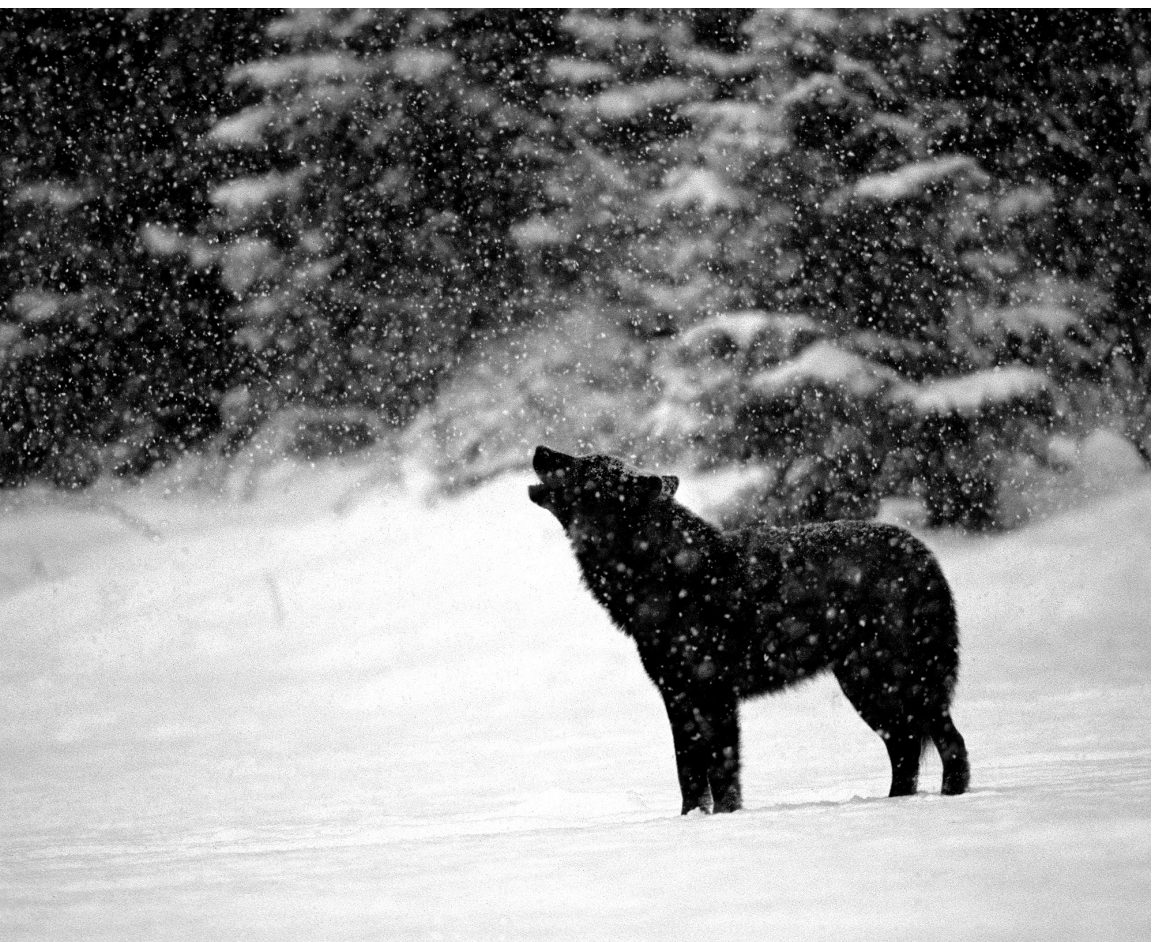
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# A Wolf Called Romeo

*He was supposed to have gone*

**Nick Jans**



OF COURSE, THE WOLF HAD COME TO US, AND HAD INITIATED contact with our dogs. But that fact didn't eliminate responsibility. He was supposed to have gone weeks before—felt some distant urge, lost interest, drifted back to his world. Did he stay on because of us, or would he have chosen to stay, regardless of what we did or didn't do? Could we, and should we, do what we could to send him away? Staying could well be a death sentence. We ran at him, yelled, waved, and threw chunks of hard snow, which he dodged with easy grace. The next day, there he'd be again, as if nothing had ever changed. Perhaps if every person who had contact with the wolf had done the same, it might have driven him off; but I doubted it then, and even more now, and more again whether his leaving would have prolonged or bettered his life. For reasons we could only surmise, he was determined. He had chosen his place to live or perhaps die, and the rest was up to us.

I found some small comfort in this reflection: As far as practical matters went (and wild creatures tend toward the intensely practical, as a matter of survival), he wouldn't likely starve himself to socialize, especially with animals not his species; he must have found country to suit his needs and enough prey nearby to not just sustain himself, but make a good living. Hungry wolves, like all living things, can't afford the luxury of play, and, like humans in that same situation, do desperate things—eat dogs, for example; maybe even attack people. Instead, this animal appeared well fed, glossy-coated, sociable, and relaxed as a wolf could be. But neither his ability to survive nor his desire to interact with dogs (and by default, people as well) was less an issue than where he'd chosen to do it.

No doubt, the wolf had become more visible. He soon adopted the early morning habit of curling up out on the ice, a few hundred yards out from the Big Rock, less than a half-mile from our door—a perfect, central vantage point for watching all comings and goings. Dogs and skiers came and went from parking lots and trails radiating out from that end of the lake, a steady trickle or flow of people depending on the day, doing what they'd always done in the Recreation Area: play hockey in front of Skaters Cabin with the kids, train for a cross-country ski race, hook up for a dog walk with a friend. But now things had changed. There was a wolf—sometimes unseen, or a distant

*A black wolf oddly started hanging around people, taking up residence near the home of Nick Jans in Juneau, Alaska.* NICK JANS

shape against the trees, but at other times, a huge, wild presence folks couldn't ignore, trotting out to exchange pleasantries with the family pooch. Though so far there hadn't been a whisper of trouble, it could change in the blink of a raven's eye.

When a picture of the black wolf splashed across the front page of the *Juneau Empire*, the jig was officially up. With the flick of a camera shutter and the thunk of a printing press, whispered secret and rumor morphed into a howling, breathing, flesh-and-blood reality. The glacier wolf, as some called him, swirled as a citywide topic of conversation in checkout lines at SuperBear Market, the Alaskan Bar, and Thunder Mountain Cafe. Now that people were talking, we discovered we'd scarcely been so singularly sneaky; others had been biting their tongues just as we had, imagining themselves as guardians of their own secret wolf. He'd actually been around on and off for at least six months, a fleeting vision to some, and an increasingly regular sight to a few. A patient of my wife Sherrie said he'd seen a black wolf in the Dredge Lake trails that previous late spring, trailing him and his dog. A wolf had been spotted that fall crossing the nearby shooting range, of all places (just how smart *was* he?) and along Montana Creek Road, a mile or two as the wolf trots from our house. Fellow Juneau writer Lynn Schooler had seen him along the lake shore in mid-November, a couple of weeks before our first sighting. A guy I met skiing told me the wolf often had shadowed him and his two Labs in their early morning walks. Then there was that woman down the street who had watched a dark, large husky-shepherd mix of some sort cross her yard—now she realized, not a dog at all. The stories continued to pile up, and for every one we heard or heard of, there must have been dozens more.

At first, public knowledge of a wolf in our midst scarcely seemed to affect the lake scene. Most Juneauites took his presence right in stride. This was Alaska, after all. If they saw a wolf, fine, and it became part of the outing, not a reason for coming or staying away, but an added bonus. Some people didn't bother to look, and didn't care much if there were a wolf or not, as long as it didn't affect them. Others, thrilled by the rare chance they saw, took it, and became black wolf junkies—a steadily growing, ad hoc club whose members came in all ages, shapes, and sizes. A few of those qualified as outright worshippers, holding a crown of perfection above the wolf's unsuspecting head; others—including biologists, naturalists, pro and amateur photographers, and a wide net of citizens ranging from state legislators to store clerks and

mechanics—came with their own hopes to see or hear their first wolf up close and maybe collect a few pictures. Yet another crowd perceived quite another wolf, and the first grumbles emerged. Nothing distilled yet, but you could sense what some were thinking. *A wolf, so close to houses, children, and pets?* Something should be done. And what that something might be was a topic of ongoing discussion, both in public and private.

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NICK JANS is the author of nine books and many articles on the outdoors, politics, and natural history. He also writes poetry and fiction and is a nature photographer. He and his wife, Sherrie, live in Juneau. He returns often to his home of 20 years, the Inupiaq Eskimo village of Ambler. This essay is an excerpt from his forthcoming book, *A Wolf Called Romeo* (Houghton Mifflin, date to be decided). Romeo did not meet a happy end. For more about the book, see [www.nickjans.com](http://www.nickjans.com).

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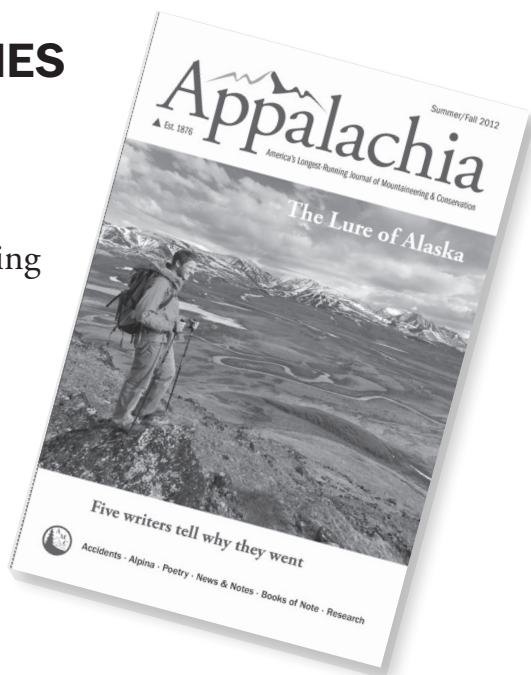
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