

# DISCOVERY

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## MISUNDERSTOOD AND MISREPRESENTED: THE STORY OF THE ELUSIVE WOLVERINE

Photo: Boyd Norton

By APRIL CHRISTOFFERSON  
Yellowstone Association

**H**ang around the ranger desk at the Albright Visitor Center in Mammoth Hot Springs on a busy summer day and it should only be a few minutes before you hear someone ask, “Where can we see the wolves?” A close second would be, “We want to see a grizzly. Where should we go?”

Yellowstone is famous for its top predators. Hundreds of thousands of visitors to the park each summer come specifically for the thrill of sighting a lone wolf, or a grizzly mom with her young cubs.

### What’s Inside...

- YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK PIANIST RANDY INGERSOLL IS “IN THE SPOTLIGHT”
- PREMIERE OF TWO NEW NATIONAL PARK SERVICE ONLINE VIDEO SERIES
- ADVENTUROUS SUMMER PROGRAMS AVAILABLE THROUGH THE YELLOWSTONE ASSOCIATION INSTITUTE
- EXCITING NEW CLOTHING ITEMS OFFERED FROM THE YELLOWSTONE ASSOCIATION PARK STORE

And these two creatures merit the attention. In their wildness and beauty, they inspire and incite passion. They remind us that in today’s world we still have something pretty amazing—wilderness—and that in Yellowstone, it’s available for all to enjoy. That is why efforts have been undertaken over the past decades to protect and restore the populations of these magnificent creatures—efforts that have been largely successful.

But there are other carnivores, animals less well known than the wolf and the

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## WOLVERINES CONTINUED

grizzly—and in some cases, animals that are greatly misunderstood—that represent that same wildness that Yellowstone personifies. If we take a closer look, these creatures, too, stand to inspire our imaginations and uplift our spirits. In fact, the thrill at crossing paths with one of these smaller, less heralded animals can be every bit as exhilarating and heartfelt as that experienced by a visitor who sees a predator from the top of the food chain.

That rings especially true when it comes to sightings of another carnivore that calls Yellowstone home—the elusive wolverine. This species is so rarely seen by visitors and Yellowstone’s human inhabitants of the park—including the biologists who study them—that each sighting warrants documentation and great excitement.

## THE WOLVERINE

Those who have studied the wolverine will tell you that size alone does not dictate the

Due to its tremendous movement, the wolverine’s spatial requirements rival that of our largest carnivores.

magnificence, or mystery, of an animal. Especially in the case of *Gulo gulo*, a scientific name meaning “glutton”—testament to the wolverine’s appetite.

The largest terrestrial member of the family Mustelidea, the wolverine is compact yet powerfully built, with adult males weighing roughly 32 pounds at maturity and adult females approximately 20 pounds. As anyone who has seen one

in the wild can tell you, however, the wolverine has an aura considerably larger than its physical size.

Nicknamed “skunk bear,” the wolverine’s appearance is, indeed, somewhat bear-like. The rump is lower than the back. The head is broad and flat with short, rounded ears. Its fur is long, dense and glossy, generally dark brown to

black, with a gold or reddish brown stripe running laterally from each shoulder to the base of the tail, much like the markings of a skunk. Some individuals sport light colored patches on their neck and chest.

## MISCONCEPTIONS

This animal has earned quite a reputation. In 1953, Ernest Thompson Seton wrote: “Picture a weasel—and most of us can do that, for we have met that little demon of destruction, that small atom of insensate courage, that symbol of slaughter, sleeplessness, and tireless, incredible activity—picture that scrap of demoniac fury, multiply that mite some fifty times, and you have the likeness of a wolverine.” Often labeled “fearsome” or “ferocious,” story has it that wolverines fearlessly attack bears and even mountain lions. But how much of this is myth, and how much is fact? And perhaps a more important question—if the public perception of the wolverine is this ferocious, demonic animal, does that image impact our willingness and motivation to protect them?

Jeff Copeland, Rocky Mountain Research Station biologist and a leading wolverine expert, sees the wolverine a little differently. According to Copeland, in a face-off with a wolf or bear, the wolverine is more likely to use its formidable appearance to bluff its way out than it is to actually attack. Copeland attributes the wolverine’s reputation to the fact that until 20 or so years ago, almost all the accounts of wolverines were based on encounters with an animal caught in a leg-hold trap. Bared teeth and a growl that will surely send shivers up one’s spine thus became the indelible image these animals earned

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# YELLOWSTONE ASSOCIATION

### THE MISSION OF THE YELLOWSTONE ASSOCIATION

The Yellowstone Association, in partnership with the National Park Service, fosters the public’s understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of Yellowstone National Park and its surrounding ecosystem

P.O. Box 117 • Yellowstone National Park, WY 82190  
www.YellowstoneAssociation.org • ya@yellowstoneassociation.org  
Office: 307-344-2293 • Institute: 307-344-2294 • Membership: 307-344-2289  
Monday - Friday • 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. Mountain Time



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