

Arlie and Papa in Yellowstone

by Brian A. Connolly
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The most difficult part of the cancer diagnosis in April of 2011 was telling my grandson Arlie that we would have to postpone our Yellowstone trip. For two years this little guy, now five, practiced using the high powered scope I had set up in my living room. Standing on a short step ladder, he honed his skill on chipmunks and chickadees. In the Deschutes National Forest near Bend, Oregon where we live, he learned to read tracks and identify scat.

He has his own room at my house which is not far from where he lives with his mom and dad. He called me into his room and pointed at June 15th on his calendar. “We better cross this off, Papa,” he said. We moved the date to July 15th. Because of the twenty-five radiation treatments that I needed for ‘Papa’s bump’, as Arlie called it, we crossed that date off, too. But then a window opened up in August. My surgeon in Portland said that the sarcoma tumor just above my right knee needed to settle down for three weeks after radiation ended on August first, my birthday. Arlie and I loaded up the truck and headed for Yellowstone on August fourth.

Even though radiation treatments sap energy, I knew that this might be the only chance to share my favorite place on the planet with Arlie. The results of surgery were uncertain. Would they get all the cancer cells? Would the cells enter the blood stream and lodge in the lungs? Would I be able to walk or hike afterward? Would I lose the leg? Arlie had already lost his other grandfather. Best to make memories now, just in case.

Yellowstone is a two day drive from Bend. Driving eight hundred miles across the high desert of Oregon and southern Idaho with a five year old in the back seat was a challenge. I removed the headrest from the front passenger seat so that Arlie could have an unrestricted view. Also, I set up my computer with headphones on the truck console and powered it with a little inverter so that he could watch Scooby-Doo. We had a few dozen episodes. What a life saver. What Arlie didn’t know was ahead was the electronic ban in Yellowstone imposed by Papa.

At the end of the first day of our trip, we pulled into a motel near Mountain Home, Idaho. The temperature broke a hundred degrees Fahrenheit. The clerk gave me the price for the night which was twice what I could afford. I told her we had just stopped because they had a pool. She looked down into Arlie’s angelic face and said, “If you go next door, you can get a double

for cheap. Then bring him back here, and I'll give you a guest pass for the pool." Arlie swam for three hours. Later that night he had trouble falling asleep because he was worried that the sprinkler system in the room might go off. When I fell asleep, he was still staring wide-eyed at the ceiling shower heads above his bed.

One of the few advantages to getting older is that, at age sixty-two, we can buy a ten dollar, permanent Senior Pass which gets us into any national park and gives us free parking and half price camping there and in all national forests. I flashed my pass at the west entrance to Yellowstone and in we went.

The road follows the Madison River. We had turned north toward the Norris Geyser Basin when Arlie, with binoculars hanging around his neck, asked, "Are we in Yellowstone?"

"Of course we are," I said.

"Where are all the animals?"

I had forgotten about the films we had watched and the books we had read in preparation for the trip. They lead him to believe that animals are everywhere and always visible. I explained to him that because it was so hot, all of the animals were in the forest resting in the shade. Hopefully, they would come out near sundown when things cooled off. "Remember, I said the time was called the crepuscular time of day, a word you'll be able to pronounce when you're ten." He repeated the word perfectly, and I acted shocked that he could already say it. We play that game a lot.

August is a difficult month in the park to see wildlife, but it was the only time we had. I had a slight panic. We hadn't seen an elk, a bison, a blacktail deer or even a ground squirrel. Hopefully the elk hadn't gone up to the high country and taken the wolves with them. But the landscape was still green. So I had a little hope. Arlie contented himself with the dramatic landscape. He loved Gibbon Falls, our first stop. Cool mist rushed up the canyon walls pushed by the thunder of falling water. Also, there was a low rock wall he could climb on. What I didn't tell Arlie was that I was feeling nauseous and a little dizzy. Altitude can mess with you. I was sure it would pass as long as I kept hydrated.

A good friend of mine, Kathie, had recently bought a log cabin near Silver Gate close to the NE entrance of the park. So that I wouldn't have to haul my camper on this short trip, she gave us her cabin for the week. We had to drive straight through the park to meet up with her and get a key.

We passed Canyon and drove over Dunraven Pass, so dramatic. Arlie held out his arms and pretended he was flying over the distant Yellowstone Grand Canyon. We slipped past Tower Falls and Roosevelt Lodge. Every place had memories for me, but I tried not to overwhelm Arlie with my stories in order to make room for the creation of his own. We turned east toward Lamar Valley. I slowed down on the high bridge that crosses the Yellowstone River. Arlie could see the rushing green water turn white as it crashed over boulders far below. He could hear the river's voice, a rush of wind. Then he scrunched up his nose and said, "Papa, did you toot?" I explained that the water contained sulphur which smells like poop and comes from geysers, hot springs and mud pots further upstream. Arlie loves volcanoes so he was excited to hear about all the hot lava under the park.



I have spent two to four months of each of the past fifteen years in the Lamar Valley of Yellowstone as a wolf watcher. I have followed packs through the many years of their existence. I have known individual wolves through their whole lives. Wild wolves have walked within feet of me, dispelling all the myths that have so cruelly haunted them. With the help of friends, I created a YouTube video essay *The Delisting of Wolf 253M*. (Collared wolves have numbers for names.) Add to that the fact that since retiring from teaching creative writing in high schools back in New York State, I have become a writer.

At Pebble Creek Campground, I wrote two YA wolf novels, one in a tent, one in a camper. Even now I am working on the final book in a series for young readers that follows the life of a wolf pup through its first year. Much of the series was written at Pebble. The books are a way to share with young people the science of the wolf and its critical importance to wilderness. What a privilege now to share all of this with my grandson.

Arlie loved the Lamar, a broad, open valley framed by pine forests draped over high ridges and mountain slopes with the silver Lamar River snaking through it. There were the bison! There were the elk, the blacktail deer, and the pronghorn antelope! We cheered! Arlie admitted that he was most nervous about bison because his father had played angry bison with him and chased him around the house. Watching the huge beasts graze, calmed his fears.



Kathie was in the Hitching Post pullout east of the confluence of Soda Butte Creek and the Lamar River. This large lot is where many back country outfitters begin their trail rides. When we arrived, there was a buzz in the air. Laurie and Dan, good friends of mine, introduced themselves to Arlie and told us that a wolf had been spotted just up the road at Round Prairie. Kathie gave me the cabin key and jumped into her car to follow the line of vehicles heading east.

There were a dozen scopes set up in the tiny pullout when we arrived. Kathie leaned in the window and told Arlie, still in his booster seat in the back, that the wolf could not be found. Arlie pointed out the windshield across several hundred yards of grass and sage flats to the first line of trees of the forest. “How about that one walking by the tree trunks?” he said. Kathie put her binoculars on the distant forest. There was the illusive black. She turned to Arlie. “You are amazing!” Arlie beamed. She and I had forgotten how quickly kids can spot wildlife with their young eyes. I remembered being next to Kathie once when, after hours of searching a hillside,

she located a wolf. The lady next to us quoted Pasteur, "Chance favors the prepared mind." Today chance was favoring Arlie.

Moments later, standing in a line of wolf watchers, a man asked Arlie if he could find the grizzly that was thought to be nearby. Arlie pointed at the thick willows on the far side of Soda Butte Creek. "There's something brown in there," he said. Of course, it was the bear. Everyone was patting Arlie on the head. I was beaming! Arlie's heart was racing. I knew he was hooked on nature. I wish every kid in America could have been in that pullout with us to experience real reality, nature, and be able to leave for a moment the virtual world so many of them inhabit. How do you explain to a child about the strength one gets and the calm one feels from nature? How nature can be the source of creative thinking? About nature's ability to cleanse the mind? The answer is to give them time in a piece of woods. I think it is the obligation of every grandparent, parent, aunt or uncle to give that gift to children. Our trip was already a success, and we hadn't even gotten to the cabin yet.



Photo by Larry & Jan Wright



Kathie's cabin, which is above seven thousand feet, was perfect. I spent early mornings with coffee next to the gas woodstove watching the valley fill with light. It gave me some alone time, before Arlie got up, to gather my thoughts and even make a few notes for my next chapter book. I hadn't been able to focus enough to write since the spring, and it would be late December before the words began to flow freely. When Arlie awoke, he had room to play with his matchbox cars and draw and color at the table. Before the week was out, he wrote a story and illustrated it to

give to Kathie as a thank you gift. From the deck we could see billions of stars at night and the steep, dramatic mountains by day.

The first morning in the park we stopped at Barronette Peak to look for mountain goats. The peak is over 10,400 feet high with three thousand feet of cliff face where goats forage for food. My scope has a 20 by 60 zoom with an 80 mm front lens which brings in lots of light. We found a half dozen goats including kids which looked like pieces of snow among the rock. Adjacent to the pullout was a large meadow. Before I knew it, Arlie had slipped away from me

and was twirling in circles in the middle of the meadow singing some made up song. When I got to him, his face was alive and smiling. He said, “Papa, this field is so flowerful!” I looked around. It was full of wildflowers, unusual for August. For a moment we inhaled the perfumed air. It must be the altitude, seven thousand feet, that causes asters, yampah and wild onion to be the last to bloom and the first to catch the snow

Unfortunately, I had to scold him a little about straying away from me. We sat down among the flowers and talked about the carnivores of Yellowstone. I began with wolves. We don’t have to worry about them. They avoid humans. However, Lesson #1: We are animals. Animals are made of meat. Bears and mountain lions eat meat. When we hike in Yellowstone, we are on the menu! (His eyes widened.) Never leave Papa! I showed him my bear spray. We talked about having a 360 degree awareness of our surroundings when in a wild place like Yellowstone. Bear attacks are rare, I told him, but they can happen if you don’t stay close to Papa. Arlie looked me straight in the eyes and said, “We’re animals?”

As a wolf watcher, it would not be uncommon for me to stand for hours in one place waiting for a Lamar Canyon pack wolf, or a member of the Blacktail Plateau pack, or for one of the Agates to show up. Or maybe a Mollie. I had to remind myself that this was mostly Arlie’s trip. We had to move to his rhythms. I was just a guide. After an hour of looking, listening and being still in the Lamar Valley, we headed for a hike at Trout Lake.

The first quarter mile of the trail is steep. Arlie wore shorts, a teeshirt, his Junior Ranger vest with sheriff’s badge, a camel pack with compass, light, and whistle attached with carabiners. In his straw Junior Ranger hat, he looked like a three foot tall mounty. His pockets were full of granola bars and cheese sticks. Before we got to the lake, I showed Arlie my favorite tree. He ran his hand over the thick, dark bark of the ancient Douglas Fir which towered above us.

“How old?” he asked.

“Hundreds of years; it was probably a hundred years old when this park was made a park over a hundred years ago.”

“I can count to a hundred.” He turned up the trail counting aloud on his fingers.

The trail levels out as it wraps around this pristine mountain lake with its backdrop of basalt cliffs to the north. Had we been able to be here in June, Arlie could have seen the cutthroat trout spawning up the inlet, so astonishing. It’s an event that attracts osprey, eagles, river otters, and a fishing coyote. There are large rainbow trout in the lake, as well. The worry is that these non-native fish might mate with the



native trout creating a hybrid cutbow trout. While there is a limit, fisherman may keep the rainbows they catch.

Following Arlie along a trail is like following a bear. There isn't a rock that isn't overturned. He's looking for worms, centipedes, spiders, ant colonies, beetles, and snakes. The garter snake he did find wasn't under a rock; it just slithered across the trail in front of him. He was delighted and did a little snake dance. As we continued circling the lake, we could see trout cruising in the cool, dark water.

Along the trail were Everett's thistles. I told Arlie the story of how it got its name from Everett who, in the late 1800s, got lost in Yellowstone for many months, but was able to survive by eating thistle roots. Later I heard Arlie repeat the story to a tourist. Pointing at a thistle he said, "This prickly plant is named after Everett, a friend of Papa's who got lost in Yellowstone and nearly died. He was skinny as a squirrel and ate thistle roots to survive, but it made him so he couldn't poop until he ate bear grease! That loosened him up good."



As we continued down the trail, I began to feel dizzy. We sat on a log for a long while and watched a few goldeneyes paddle out into the lake where a breath of wind wrinkled the surface. I explained to him that I had been experiencing some nausea and dizziness. If it persists, I told him, we might have to go home. His eyes teared up.

"But you said I could earn my Junior Ranger badge, Papa," he whispered.

"That's true," I said. "Just in case we have to head home, let's go get started on that badge right now."

He cheered up, and off we went to the ranger station near Roosevelt lodge.

The nice girl behind the counter spent twenty minutes warning new backcountry permittees about the dangers of camping in bear country. The phone rang. There had been a wolf incident, and the family involved was on their way to meet with a law enforcement officer at the station. Finally Arlie got the ten page newspaper filled with activities for him to complete to earn his badge. Outside, a lady law enforcement officer was listening to the family of five tell about their wolf encounter. I was curious, but Arlie was already focused on earning his badge. Next to my truck, he and I perused the activities. I didn't read to him the part that said if you were five, you only needed to do four of the ten activities.

As it happened, John, a ranger friend of mine who was in charge of many bear jams, arrived. He suggested that the wolf incident family talk to me. The mother said that near Slough

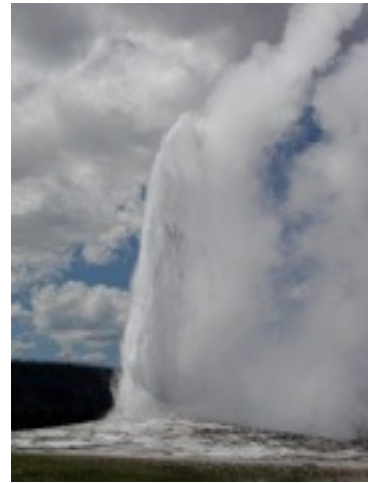
Creek a wolf had walked up the trail toward them and had gotten quite close before it veered off. By now, the officer and the backcountry ranger were listening to what I had to say. The family wondered if they were in danger. I went on for half an hour about individual animals having different flight distances, about how lucky they were to have such a dramatic story to tell the rest of their lives, about my own close encounters with wolves (with the precaution that, when possible, a watcher should get in a vehicle to avoid habituating a wolf or any animal), and that when I visit schools, I tell students that I would rather meet a wolf in the woods than a human because you know that a wolf will do you no harm. The daughter had moved over by Arlie and kept him occupied during my impromptu talk. I finished by telling them that the wolf's presence in the wild has an important, positive effect on trout, streams, willows, cottonwoods, aspen, eagles, ravens, bears, coyotes, foxes, pronghorn, moose and even elk with which they have coexisted for hundreds of thousands of years. I ended the talk with the fact that about a dozen wolves in the park had been killed by elk. Little did I know that within a few months, the mother, a teacher in Bismark, North Dakota, would have her students reading my stories.

"Lets go, Papa!" Arlie cried. "We have stuff to do!"

And stuff we did. We visited Old Faithful, hot springs, mud pots, canyons and waterfalls. We spotted coyotes, blacktail deer, bison, sandhill cranes, bighorn sheep, eagles and osprey. Arlie printed the animals' names on a map to show where he had seen each one. He drew pictures of a geyser erupting. He drew a picture of himself as his favorite animal.



His pages were filled with lists of plants, reptiles and small mammals. Arlie's imagination was on fire! In his mind a ranger was equal to Superman, Batman or Ironman. He was about to become one of them, a superhero who would protect the animals in the park and bring bad guys to justice!



One morning, driving through Lamar Valley, we came upon a tow truck trying to hook up to a dead bison not far off the road. A ranger explained to Arlie that the bison had been gored to death by another bison in a fight over a female bison. It was still mating season. The two thousand pound animal with its legs up in the air had to be removed because it would be dangerous for predators to feed on a carcass so close to the road. We had already been in several bison jams unable to move forward because of the hundred animals in the road bellowing, head butting and mounting each other. In one jam I pointed out a bison that had his tail straight up in the air and explained to Arlie that the raised tail meant he was going to charge or discharge. Discharge means poop, I said. The bison discharged. The point is that Arlie had an understanding of and a respect for the primitive power of these magnificent beasts. I could tell he was moved deeply by

the death of this animal. He looked at me with wet eyes and said, "I think he was just trying to defend his habitory." I agreed.

By late Tuesday, our fourth day in the park, my dizzy spells and nausea disappeared. I discovered later in the reams of paper from doctors that make up the manual on how to understand and cope with cancer that those symptoms are common after radiation treatments cease. The radiation burn and the ugly red bump growing on my leg was something Arlie asked to see over the summer. His parents agreed that if we kept it hidden from him, his imagination would conjure up something far worse. He asked to see it often and would watch as I put ointment on it each day. His curiosity continued even after the bump was gone. He wanted to see the three and a half by four and a half inch incision as well as the curious red rectangles higher on the leg where skin was removed for grafting onto the incision. Most days now he would ask, "How's your bump doing, Papa?" When we would read, or color, or sit on a rock in the woods, he'd say, "Is this your good leg, Papa? May I sit there?"



Tuesday night we were back wolf watching at Hitching Post. Arlie found another garter snake on a rock. He showed the snake to Bob, a filmmaker who has made exquisite wolf films for Nature and National Geographic. Bob and Arlie studied the snake carefully. I photographed the snake. I realized then that most of my trip photos were of Arlie seeing things and not the things he was seeing. Also, I try to take a minimum number of pictures in order to experience nature and my grandson more deeply. A good story is worth a thousand photos I always say. Besides, wolves and bears are usually out

of range of my camera, but not my pen.

We didn't see any wolves that night, but a large grizzly made his way slowly up Soda Butte Creek. Arlie stood on the ladder and, using the scope, followed the bear for three quarters of an hour. He even called some kids over to look through the scope and taught them how to use it. When the bear came into focus for them, their startled responses made Arlie look at me and smile. 'This is why you keep coming here, Papa,' he was thinking.

Wednesday morning we finished the last of the Junior Ranger activities and decided to drive over to Canyon to the new visitor center where Arlie could see the displays, turn in his activity papers and take the oath. On our way we stopped to visit Dan and Cindy at their log cabin and photo gallery in Silver Gate. Dan had done the cover photos for both of my novels and my short story collection. Visiting him is like talking with John Muir. Dan is a naturalist first, a photographer second. He is full of



amazing stories, something both Arlie and I are partial to. While he photographs wolves, bears, mountain lions and other charismatic megafauna, his real passions lie with pine martens and great gray owls, or any owl for that matter. He lectures, teaches, guides and photographs, but it's Cindy who keeps him organized and the business moving forward. Arlie was star struck. The stories, the photos in the gallery, the woodsmoke and the log cabin made him swoon. We even got a chance, on a different day, to attend one of Dan's owl talks at the historic Range Rider Hotel in Silver Gate.

Reluctantly, we moved on. The road from Tower Falls to Dunraven Pass follows Antelope Creek. We pulled over to walk in the fields and look for whatever might be moving. There are beautiful vistas across the creek where the Agate pack traditionally dens in April, over the Yellowstone River above which the osprey soar, along the south slope of Specimen Ridge where Wolf 42F met her end back in '04, and up to the ten thousand foot top of Mount Washburn where so often I have hiked with friends. The previous fall, this whole area burned. I saw the valley shrouded in smoke in October. Now much of it was once again green.

Our wilderness reverie was interrupted when my phone rang. I had forgotten that there was cell service there. Also I had forgotten that I had agreed to meet the girl who was on the phone. She had read my novels a few years ago and was now in college in Texas. She was here with her parents and just wanted to talk about being a writer. When they arrived, she and I talked shop while Arlie gave her parents a tour of the hillside. Good people. The girl had that unmistakable glow on her face of someone who knows her own dream. All she wanted from me was the map that shows the way. I think she already had the map.

"Let's go, Papa!" cried Arlie. "We have to get the badge!"

The first thing the ranger at the visitor center noticed about Arlie's activity packet was that he had completed nine of the ten activities rather than just the four required for little kids. She went over every page asking him detailed questions about each activity. Then she said, "Raise your right hand and repeat after me:

As a Junior Ranger, I promise
to learn all I can
about Yellowstone
and to teach others
to love and respect
its beauty, its plants, and its animals.

Of course, my eyes teared up. The same was true for the dozen tourists who had gathered near the information desk. Arlie's voice was steady through the whole ceremony; he knew this was an important moment. After the pledge, the ranger leaned over and pinned the badge on Arlie's vest. She said, "Arlie Connolly, you are now the newest Junior Ranger in Yellowstone National Park." And she saluted.



Everyone applauded. Arlie beamed. I cried.

As soon as we were outside, Arlie went on duty looking for bad guys to subdue and animals to protect. We looked at Artist's Point, along Otter Creek, near the Nez Perce Ford, formerly Buffalo Ford, on the boardwalk of the steamy Mud Volcano, and by the thundering LeHardy Rapids. While we were both pretending to be characters in his fantasy, I did notice he kept trying to get glimpses of his new badge in the rear view mirror. Nothing make-believe about a real badge!

Evening found us back in Lamar Valley. Ray and Darlene, campground hosts at Pebble Creek Campground, had arranged for a fireside cookout for us and some friends. I had brought along Arlie's bike and helmet so he could race around the campground. Back home he has a high end bike for off road and is already riding moguls. Good food, great company, well told stories, a crackling fire...there's hardly a better recipe than that.

At one point, a law enforcement ranger pulled in with a set of antlers strapped to the top of his cruiser. He told Ray that he needed a place to store them until they could send a truck to pick them up. They were evidence in a case of antler poaching. Nothing can be removed from Yellowstone: plant, animal or rock or any part thereof. Arlie came skidding to a halt next to the ranger. His eyes were at pistol level on the ranger. I am sure that it passed through his mind that it was just an oversight on the part of the ranger who had given him his badge, not to have given him a gun. Arlie said, "I'm a Junior Ranger sworn to protect animals in the park! Is there anything I can help you with, sir?"



The ranger never hesitated. "I just got a call that a couple of bears might be near the campground. Could you ride around and let me know if they get too close?"

"Yes, sir," Arlie saluted. Dust flew up from his tires as he headed off on his mission.

As the fire died down and the gathering ended, I told Arlie he could do another lap on his bike before we headed for the cabin. Moments later he returned wheeling his bike and crying. Blood was streaming down from his knee. He had crashed. He sat on the tailgate of the truck while I cleaned and bandaged the wound. I comforted him in a calm voice saying, "Did you know that a bear can smell blood up to five miles?" He was able to smile. Later he told me that we were twins because we both had bad legs.

Just before we fell asleep Arlie asked me why everyone we met knew his name.

I said, "I've been friends with these people for a long time and have told them about our escapades back in Oregon."

"What are escapades?" he asked.

"Adventures."

"Like what?"

"Like early one cold morning when you fell into the icy water of Fall River. You had to walk a mile soaking wet back to camp. And that time you found an elk carcass and checked out all its parts. And the time we were watching a marmot and you said, 'I really love marmots because they can breathe under ground.'"

“Didn’t your friends know that about marmots?” he said.

“No, I don’t think they did.”

Our last day in Yellowstone was more than memorable. We headed for the Blacktail Plateau for one last hike. On the way, we visited the Petrified tree. Right off Arlie declared that it was fake. How could a tree be a rock? I explained about the volcano erupting and the forest being covered by ash and lava. He agreed that lava could probably turn a tree to stone.

Just east of the Blacktail Trail trailhead is the Self Guided Tour, formerly known as the Children’s Fire Walk. The hike is on a quarter mile circular boardwalk. In the center, hundreds of young, fifteen foot high lodgepole pines had grown up since the 1988 fires. I told Arlie that the trail was a circle so no matter which way we went, we would return to this spot. Right or left? He chose left.

We had only walked a short distance when I put my hand out in front of Arlie and whispered, “Stop.” Some movement in the new trees had caught my eye. There it was again at the base of tree trunks fifty feet away. I looked through the binoculars.

“What is it, Papa,” Arlie said way too loud. He wasn’t sure where I was looking.

“Shhhhh,” I cautioned.

As I focused in on the location, the grizzly bear came into view. He was laying down, chewing on something. He hadn’t seen us yet. I reached down and undid the safety of my bear spray which was in a holster on my belt.

“It’s a bear. Let’s back away quietly,” I whispered. And we did.

Back in the parking lot Arlie asked if we couldn’t go right on the trail. I reminded him that it was a circle. He understood. I told him that most likely the bear would have run off if he had seen us. However, if she had cubs or he had a carcass to guard, the bear might be very aggressive. Just then two families pulled into the lot with the intent of hiking this trail. I warned them about the bear. They ignored me, and, with their small children, headed toward the bear. It gave me a chance to teach Arlie a little bit about ignorance.

On our way back toward Lamar Valley, we came to a halt at a bear jam. It was a handsome black bear causing all the fuss. Arlie had his window down when the bear walked by the truck. “It’s right here, Papa,” he whispered. “I could pet it.”

“Don’t,” I said.

Before we headed back to the cabin to clean and pack, we drove up to the Tower Falls store. I had promised Arlie that he could pick out a toy. He examined all the toys carefully, then turned to me a little disappointed. “Papa, you’ve already bought me all this stuff.” It was true. I had given in to a common weakness of grandparents. I’d return from each of my trips to the park with a whistle/compass/light or a leather bag full of smooth, colorful stones or a mountain lion floor jigsaw puzzle or a wolf glow-in-the-dark teeshirt or a walking stick with an antler handle or a



view-master slide viewer of major Yellowstone predators or a toy jeep and camper trailer. Or maybe that was just one trip.

Late in the afternoon, after we had cleaned the cabin and packed the truck for the trip home the next morning, we headed into the park again for a little play time and a final night of wolf watching. Arlie put on his swim suit, and I turned him loose on Pebble Creek. For three hours he waded in the fast, shallow water, threw rocks, built dams, slung mud, jumped channels of water, and walked driftwood logs as if on a tightrope. He laughed, shouted, played a dozen different characters in a dozen short plays, pretended that he was fishing, and searched among the smooth rocks for gold. He found a yellow stone he wanted to take home to his mom, but it weighed ten pounds.



One of the things that surprised me was the fact that Arlie never got homesick. We kept in touch with his mom and dad with text photos and phone calls. Each day he'd say he missed them, but when I offered to head home, he said no. We were having too much fun. He didn't even mind that he had not seen a television or computer screen in over a week. He was filled up with natural sights and sounds.

Later we set up the scope and short ladder about a hundred yards south of the Hitching Post lot. Arlie started scanning for wolves. Kathie was there. Rick was there. He's a ranger who works with the Wolf Project observing wolves on a daily basis and has done so 365 days a year for more than a decade. Carl was there, too. He's a guide in the park who knows the geologic history, the natural history, the Native American history, the origin of Yellowstone as a park, the expeditions in the 1800s, and the wildlife news of the day. As a nature writer, I wish I knew what he knows. There were a handful of other wolf watchers there as well. We all had great conversations as Arlie scanned the hills to the north and Soda Butte Creek to the south for wolves.

It was Kathie who called out, "There they are!" And all scopes swung north to the low meadows near the den forest on Druid Peak. Kathie put Arlie's scope on the wolves. The five in view were the Lamar Canyon pack pups. They were three months old. Arlie was thrilled! He called out the action like an announcer: "Oh, did you see that! The gray one had the black one by the tail and then both got tackled by the other black one! Now they're running in circles! The one in front has a stick! Oh no! the others caught him and they are all tangled up in a pile! Papa! Papa! Come see this!" It was wonderful! Everyone there not only enjoyed the antics of the pups, but also enjoyed Arlie's joy and wonder over the wild scene he was witnessing. He said to Kathie, "I think I have turned into a wolf watcher."

This and so many of our experiences that week eclipsed troubles that existed out in the rest of the world, and even troubles of our own that we would have to face soon enough. Right now the wolves were teaching us to live in the moment, experience this wolf play deeply, without any distraction. I am convinced that as Arlie watched the pups play, the effects of nature

were growing in him. Joy was being reinforced, and out of that joy, a strength would emerge that the world could not damage. Those pups are now a part of him, and he knows that he is a part of their wild world. I think that in years ahead, if any bad guys mess with wolves, they'll have to answer to this Junior Ranger.

That last night in the cabin, long after I thought he had fallen asleep, Arlie said, "I love you, Papa. Thanks for bringing me here."

"You're welcome. I love you, too"

On the way back home we found a motel with a pool the first night and a campground with a sprinkler the second night. We were taking our time getting home because we didn't want this adventure to end. Not far from Bend we visited the John Day Fossil Beds and looked at all the bones.

Once back on the final stretch of road, the sign read: Bend 37 miles. As I drove, I was lost in worried thought about my 'bump'. We were driving back to reality. I didn't know then that after the surgery, the doctor would tell me that years of hiking in Yellowstone saved my life. She said that my leg muscles were in such good shape that the tumor never had a chance to penetrate the muscle. I would find out after waking up from the anesthesia that I had an ugly scar, but I had my leg. All the news would be good news.

Arlie, for some reason, had gotten very quiet in the back seat. He had talked almost nonstop from Oregon to Yellowstone, while we were in the park, and for the last two days of travel. So this silence was odd.

"You okay, buddy?" I asked.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Are you sure?" I said.

Very quietly he said, "I just hope the dead bison is okay."

"I'm sure he is," I said.



Brian Connolly is the author of two wolf novels:
Wolf Journal and *Hawk*.