

When Wolves Wandered Our Woods

By Kelly Coffey



During the Revolutionary War, a Loyalist named Anthony Allaire was taken prisoner by the patriots and marched over the Brushy Mountains. He kept a journal, and recorded this statement for November 10, 1780:

Suffered very much with the cold. At six o'clock in the evening set out again. This night saw the moon in an eclipse, and heard several wolves bark.¹

This was intended only as a mundane journal entry, but I find it very poetic, haunting, and evocative of human fear of wolves. The juxtaposition of wolves barking, with an uncommon, eclipsed moon overhead, makes for a chilling scene.

But should one find this passage fearful? Are wolves really dangerous? And what were wolves doing in the Brushy Mountains and the Blue Ridge range a little farther west? Why are they no longer here today?

In this article I examine the lives of wolves in the context of their former presence in western North Carolina. Their existence quickly became intertwined with early white settlers, much to the wolves' detriment. Their story from then until today is a sad natural history, but yet we can imagine a time when they wandered free and unmolested through these hills.

¹ Draper, Lyman, King's Mountain and Its Heroes, 1881, 513.

Coats of Many Colors

The original range of wolves was vast- almost all of North America, Europe, and much of Asia- i.e. the largest range of any land mammal in the world.² The range of two different species overlapped in western North Carolina- the gray or timber wolf, *Canis lupus*, and the red wolf *Canis rufus*.³

A few years ago, I visited a natural history museum in Wyoming. As I entered the exhibit area, I was startled by a stuffed timber wolf on display just inside the door. It was much larger than I had imagined a wolf to be; almost the size of a calf. I kept staring at it, thinking of how distressed our ancestors must have been upon encountering a whole pack of these creatures in the woods. A Yellowstone National Park guidebook notes that people often confuse wolves and coyotes, but wolves are twice as large (three feet at the shoulder). “Once one has seen a wolf, it is hard to make the same mistake again.”⁴

The red wolf, on the other hand, is smaller and could plausibly be confused with a coyote. Its former range covered much of the southeast.

The names gray wolf and red wolf are generalities that describe only the most common colors of their coats. They actually vary quite a bit. Gray wolves can range from pure white to pure black, with every shade of gray in between, or have a mottled coat of various colors including red and brown. White fur is more common in the far north.⁵ Nearly all taxonomists agree that there were two subspecies of gray wolves: those east of the Mississippi (*Canis lupus lycaon*) were larger in size and darker in color than western wolves (*Canis lupus nubilus*).⁶ There is some indication that solid black wolves were fairly common



in the east. A Lenoir newspaper article, for instance, referred to wolves as “black rogues.”⁷ In an example of the exception that proves the rule, Harrison Aldridge, a Watauga County hunter in the late 1800s who killed over 100 wolves in his lifetime, remembers one in particular because it was solid white.⁸ Encountering a totally white wolf in Watauga County would have been an extremely rare occurrence, given the southern location and the fact that the subspecies here tended to be darker.

² Young, Stanley P. & Edward A. Goldman, *The Wolves of North America*, 1944, 1.

³ Linzey, Donald W. *Mammals of Great Smoky Mountains National Park*, 2016, 107.

⁴ Anderson, Roger, *Yellowstone: The Story Behind the Scenery*, 2015, 35.

⁵ Young & Goldman, 59.

⁶ Coleman, Jon T., *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America*, 2004, 198

⁷ Lenoir Topic 01/15/1890

⁸ Lenoir Topic 12/04/1879

Local Wolf Sightings

Wolf encounters in northwestern North Carolina are well-documented. An 1890 newspaper article states,

*Old man Enoch Coffey says that his mother, who lived on Lower Creek, has told him often of hearing packs of wolves come howling down from Hibriten [Mountain] and go prowling through what are now the streets of Lenoir and over the surrounding country.*⁹

The writer of another newspaper article tells of an acquaintance camping “in the woods beneath Blowing Rock” and hearing “the howling of wolves all over the woods at all hours of the night, heard them snarling and fighting with one another around their camp and frequently saw the glare of their eyes in the light of the camp fire which it was perilous to allow to burn down.”¹⁰

An 1880 article reported that “The mail carrier from Morganton to Cranberry [Ashe County] says that the mountains between the two places are full of wolves...Mr. John Thompson, while out deer hunting on Grandmother Mountain last week, came across a large drove of wolves.”¹¹

Wolf Packs & Lone Wolves

Wolves live in packs, which are actually extended families consisting of the male and female parents and their one and two-year-old offspring. Although wolves don’t always mate for life, a pair’s relationship is usually long lasting. Sometimes packs merge, but only for a short time.¹² “Lone wolf” is a term frequently used in other contexts to describe human individuals with few social ties or even anti-social or criminal behavior. There are actual lone wolves in the wolf world, though wildlife biologists prefer the term “dispersers.” However, they don’t willingly choose a solitary existence, and once on their own, work hard



A timber wolf pack. Note the variation in color within this single pack.

to regain admission into a pack.

Wolf packs grow every year with the addition of newborn pups. Eventually, there is not enough food to go around, fights break out, and a wolf or two is forced to leave the pack. These lone wolves must travel through the

⁹ Lenoir Topic 01/15/1890; if Enoch Coffey was an old man in 1890 and his mother saw the wolves before he was born, these incidents can be dated to the early 1800s.

¹⁰ Lenoir Topic 01/08/1890

¹¹ Lenoir Topic 04/01/1880

¹² Young & Goldman, 120.

territories of other packs, which can be dangerous because wolves are extremely defensive of their pack. A disperser searches for a group that will take him in, but approaching a pack can be risky. "Socialization among adult wolves is a long and tortuous process involving months of cautious advances and retreats."¹³

A wolf pack is very cohesive and loyal. They will bring food to an injured member, to a mother after giving birth, and to the pups when they are old enough to eat solid food. If far away, they will gorge themselves with whatever they have killed, travel back, and regurgitate the food for the other pack member(s). A wolf biologist says, "Their social bonding and care-giving behavior are second only to those of human and other social primates."¹⁴

Wolves are often associated with ravens. Ravens have learned to follow wolves to get leftover food, and wolves have learned to watch for ravens circling over a carcass (wolves will scavenge an animal that has died of disease or old age). The Norse god Odin was said to keep two wolves and two ravens with him as pets. To see a wolf and a raven together on the way to battle was good luck, according to the Norse.¹⁵

A Local Wolf Territory Delineated

A wolf pack occupies a well-defined territory that they delineate and defend with much effort. They mark it with urine and feces, communicate its boundary with howls, and patrol the edges frequently. The size of a pack's territory varies according to the amount of prey available and competition from other packs. They strike a balance between being large enough to have plenty of food, and small enough to defend easily without expending excess energy. Consequently, a territory might be as small as seven square miles, to over 1,000 square miles in the arctic where prey is scarce.¹⁶

An 1885 article in the *Lenoir Topic* has a remarkable description of a wolf pack on the move, which therefore hints at the size of its territory.

*About the year 1826 the last drove of wolves came through this section. They came in by the way of the Green Mountain, crossing the Yadkin, it is supposed about Elkhville, came up to King's Creek, passed down Zack's Fork, crossed the Lincoln Road, now Choat's bridge, taking to the right, crossed the Mulberry road where Freedman now is, then went in the way of John's river or Mulberry. There was said to be a dozen or over. They did no damage on this side of the mountain. All the dogs and men in the neighborhood went after them but without effect.*¹⁷

Tracing the route of this pack on a modern map is a bit of a challenge, in part because there is a Green Mountain near Lenoir, and also one on the Wilkes/Alleghany County line. With that in mind, following are two maps where I have delineated as best I could the route described in the article, and then closed the loop back to where the wolves were first seen.

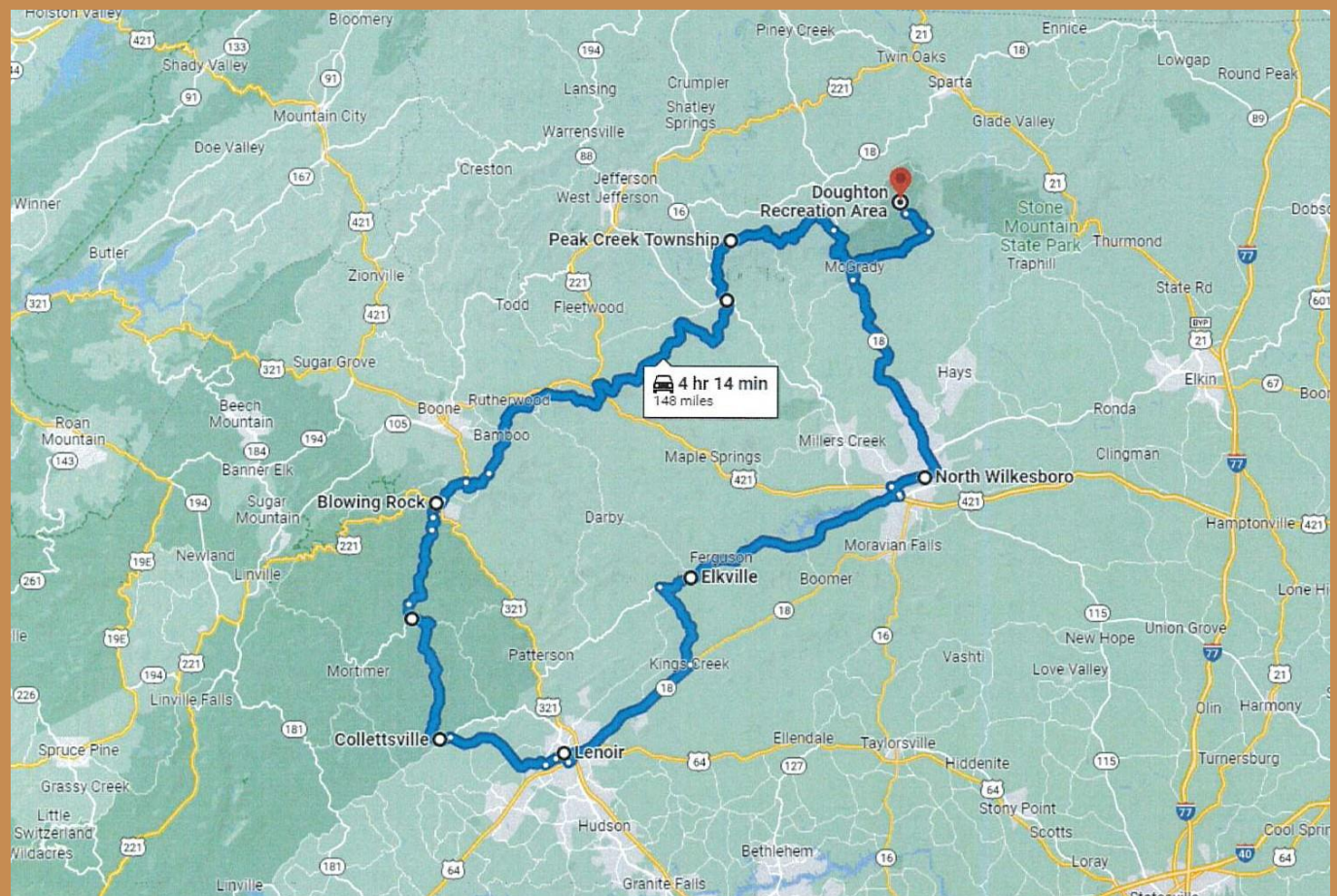
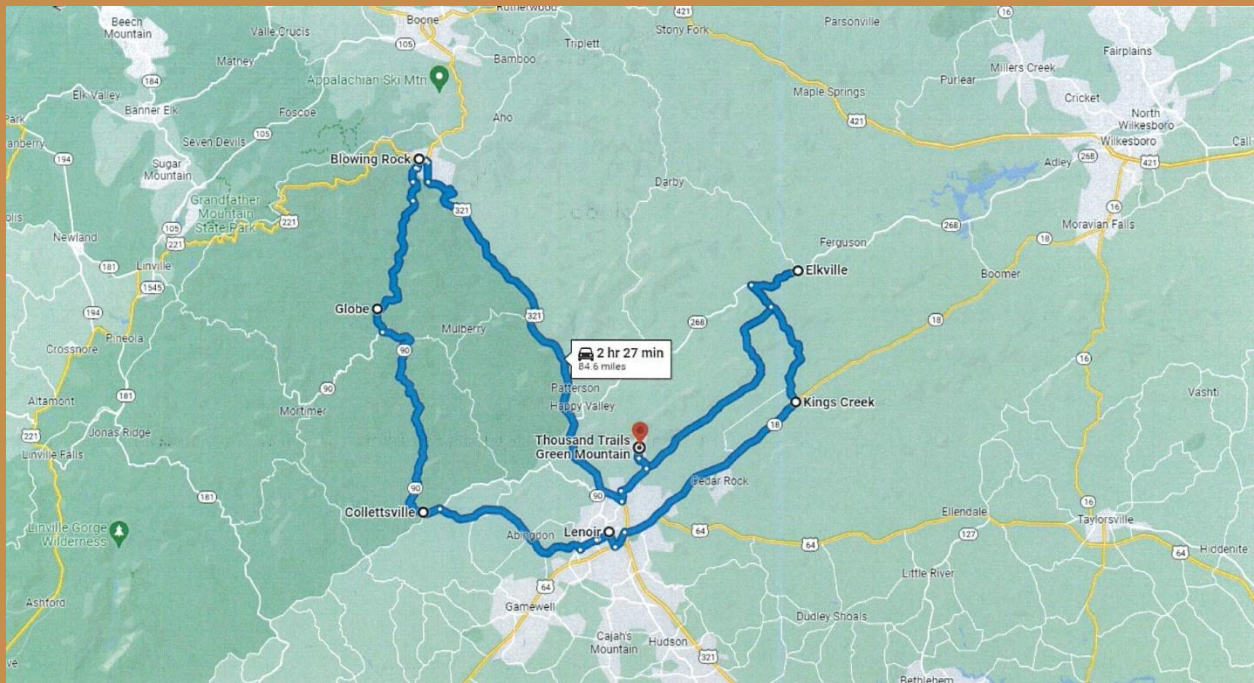
¹³ Coleman, 23-27.

¹⁴ Busch, Robert H., *The Wolf Almanac*, 2007, 47, 53, 79

¹⁵ Busch, 68, 103

¹⁶ Young & Goldman, 81

¹⁷ Lenoir Topic, 01/21/1885.



The Green Mountain-in-Wilkes County route would result in a territory of 1,369 square miles. A territory this big is unlikely but not totally out of the question because the article states that this is the last pack seen in the vicinity, meaning that the wolves don't have to defend their territory from competing packs and are not held in check by other packs defending *their* territory. The pack in question is free to roam as they please. In addition, prey was likely scarce. Deer, their most common prey, were hunted almost to extinction in the 18th century by both Indians and whites. Other game were hunted extensively by settlers. So, the pack had to travel far to find food.

The Green Mountain-near-Lenoir origination point would create a 441 square mile territory. This, too, is a large territory, but again, they had no competition and scarce prey.

“Perhaps the most dismal sound ever heard by human ear.”

A wolf's howl is its most defining characteristic. Described by a wolf expert as “entirely unlike that made by any other living creature...perhaps the most dismal sound ever heard by human ear.”¹⁸ Howling wolves have inspired fear in humans for thousands of years. Halloween illustrations usually include- along with spiders, black cats, and bats- howling wolves. Rev. Francis Asbury, the circuit-riding Methodist preacher, was in present-day Watauga County in 1790 when he wrote in his journal, “We slept at the Beaver-Dam in a cabin without a cover, except what a few boards supplied; we had very heavy thunder and lightning, and most hideous yelling of wolves around.” The storm, like the eclipsed moon previously mentioned, accentuated the howling so as to be most frightful.¹⁹ In 1818, a group of Ohio settlers in a cabin heard the howling of wolves, and it scared an elderly woman so much “as to cause a hemorrhage of the nose, which nearly cost her life, and from effects of which she never fully recovered.”²⁰ Wolves can modulate their howl to create an aural illusion whereby the listener assumes, for example, that they are hearing 20 wolves when only two are howling.²¹

Interesting physiological facts about wolves:

- their sense of smell is 100 times more sensitive than humans
- can hear up to 80 kHz, compared to 20 kHz for humans (i.e. higher pitch)
- sight is about equal to that of humans
- their jaws have a crushing pressure of 1,500 lbs. per square inch, compared to 750 for a German Shepherd
- most wild wolves don't live past five years old; captive wolves can live as long as 14 years or even older (i.e. comparable to dogs)
- A wolf doesn't run particularly fast; its advantage over prey comes in its endurance. “It can keep up its loping gait mile after mile, the whole night through if necessary.” In other words, a wolf runs its prey to the point of exhaustion.

¹⁸ Ibid, 76

¹⁹ The Journal of the Rev. Francis Asbury, 1821, 69.

²⁰ Coleman, 98.

²¹ Busch, 59.

So, what is all this howling about? Are they saying, “I’m coming to get you!”? Should one be so frightened as to burst blood vessels? Wolves are communicating with each other, not with people, so no, one shouldn’t interpret a howl as a threat. Howls have multiple meanings for other wolves. They might be howling to call the pack together. They might be howling to a neighboring pack, “This is our territory, stay away.” They might be howling as a bonding exercise.²²

Another myth is that wolves howl at the moon. They don’t. If the moon happens to be visible while they are howling, it’s just a coincidence.²³

Wilburn Waters, a famous 19th century wolf hunter in the North Carolina mountains, who I will introduce later, learned to identify the different types of howls (i.e. the wolves’ intent) and could imitate the various types perfectly, depending on the situation and how he wanted the wolves to respond.²⁴ I find no record of anyone else doing such a thing or even speculating that it might be possible. That includes years of scientific research into wolf biology, especially in the early 20th century.

Moravian Church Bishop Augustus Spangenburg reported hearing wolves in 1752 about five miles from Table Rock near Quaker Meadows.²⁵ Surprisingly, he expressed no fear and even seemed to enjoy the sound, “The wolves here give us music every morning, from six corners at once, such music as I have never heard.”

Spangenburg made another curious comment about the wolves. He said, “They are not like the wolves of Germany, Poland, and Livonia, but are afraid of men, and do not usually approach near them.”²⁶ Similarly,

The red wolf, once common throughout the southeast, made its last stand in a small territory along the Texas/Louisiana border. There, the few remaining individuals were caught in the 1970s and enrolled in captive breeding programs, where their numbers increased. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service attempted a reintroduction of red wolves to the wild in 1986 when they released a few of the animals in the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in coastal North Carolina. Similarly, the agency tried reestablishing the species in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 1991, but declared the attempt a failure in 1998 because pups never survived. While not an unqualified success, the effort in eastern North Carolina is still viable, with 16 red wolves hanging on. Approximately 240 live as captives in various locations around the United States.



²² Coleman, 28.

²³ Busch, 59.

²⁴ Coale, Charles B. *The Life and Adventures of Wilburn Waters*, 1878, 49.

²⁵ Records of the Moravians in North Carolina, 1922, 51.

²⁶ Ibid.



Augustus Spangenburg reported hearing wolves in Burke County.

Meriwether Lewis said the wolves he encountered in the west were “extremely gentle.”²⁷ A famous wolf hunter in Pennsylvania put it another way when he said that wolves are bold at night around humans, but cowards by day.²⁸ Wolf tales from western North Carolina seem to confirm this observation. One researcher emphatically states, “No credible record exists of a healthy (nonrabid) wolf killing a human being in North America from the onset of European colonization to the present day.”²⁹ Another writer documents a few nonrabid wolf attacks on people, but most had extenuating circumstances, like the wolf had been previously fed by a person.³⁰

Woman Fights Wolves and Wins

Nevertheless, perception was reality, and the perception of wolves in the past was that they were dangerous. That alone would be the

motivation for exterminating them, but what really got settlers riled was wolf depredations on livestock.

A dramatic local account of attempted wolf depredation was told by a woman named Francis Davis in the early 1800s. Francis was alone in a sugar camp near the head of the Linville River in what is now Avery County. Maple sugar was a common sweetener in the early days, with settlers establishing “sugar camps” near maple tree groves, often in remote locations. There they would tap the sap and spend many days and nights boiling it down to crystals. While Francis was tending the fire in camp, one of her cows nearby gave birth one evening. Soon a pack of wolves appeared, ready to pounce on the helpless calf. Francis spent the rest of the night bravely holding off the wolves with firebrands until they finally left before daylight.³¹

I have found conflicting claims about wolves attacking livestock. Accounts similar to the one above are common in the past. Why wouldn’t they bring down a calf or a hog, especially since domesticated animals are slower and easier to catch than wild game? Yet a writer with a bias favorable toward wolves makes the following claim about predation in modern times, “Many studies have shown that 99% of all farmers and ranchers in wolf territory will not be bothered by wolves. Of over 7,000 farmers in northern Minnesota, where over 1,700 wolves inhabit the area, only an average of 25 ranchers per year suffered verified predation from wolves between 1975 and 1989.”³²

²⁷ Busch, 125.

²⁸ Shoemaker, Henry W. Extinct Pennsylvania Animals, 1917, 33.

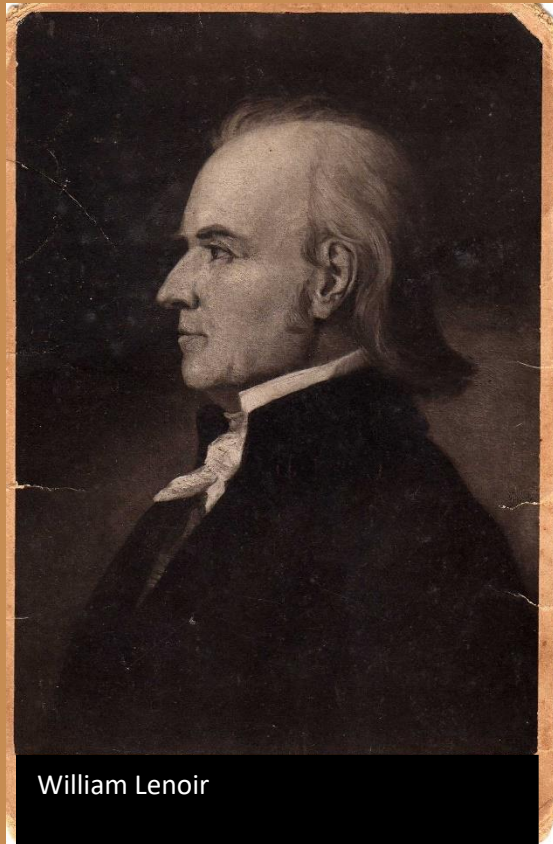
²⁹ Coleman, 117.

³⁰ Busch, 127.

³¹ Arthur, John Preston, A History of Watauga County North Carolina, 1915, 68.

³² Busch, 137

However, one should not draw a conclusion from this modern study that wolves were not a real threat to livestock in the past. Wolf behavior in the late 20th century would be different from that in the 1700s-1800s. Deer, wolves' primary food source, were almost wiped out by the late 1700s, along with other wild game. Wolves had to turn to domestic animals to survive. Conversely, deer populations have recovered in modern times, so the environment inhabited by modern wolves has much more wild game than in the past; consequently, one would expect livestock predation to be less.



William Lenoir

Senator Thomas B. Kendrick of Wyoming, who was also a cattleman, said in the early 20th century when wolves were still common in the West,

According to my judgment there is nothing so vicious in its cruelty as the method employed by the gray wolf in destroying his prey. His prey is literally eaten alive, its bowels torn out while it is still on its feet in many cases.

He further stated that it was not unusual to find cattle

*where a gray wolf had eaten his fill of an animal's hind quarter, the animal would survive, and in after years recover entirely, except for the enormous scar in the place where the flesh had been but was no more.*³³

One can understand the strong emotions a cattleman would feel upon finding livestock in such condition, but it's worth pointing out that such cruelty was not reserved for livestock; i.e. the same predatory patterns were common when wolves (or any other predator) attacked wild game. While such viciousness- wild or domestic- is regrettable, one has to accept that we live in a fallen world and don't yet occupy the paradise prophesied by Isaiah where "the wolf will live with the lamb."³⁴

A Price on Their Head

Predation on livestock led settlers to strike back at wolves with much ferocity. Their goal was complete extermination. States passed legislation allowing counties to offer bounties for wolves killed, the proof being the scalps. The North Carolina State Archives contains a bounty certificate stating the following:

*North Carolina} I certify that William B. Lenoir this day produced two wolf
Wilkes County} scalps and made oath that he killed the same in December last
-----[illegible] for which he is to be allowed -----[illegible] forty shillings to be
paid according to law. -----[illegible] under my hand this 21st of March AD 1804
which scalps I have destroyed.*

Wm Lenoir J.P. [Justice of the Peace]

³³ Young & Goldman, 266.

³⁴ Isaiah 11:6

The person who killed the wolves was William Lenoir's oldest son, William Ballard Lenoir. William Lenoir was certifying his son's kill in his role as Justice of the Peace.

A *Lenoir Topic* article in 1890 describes a ledger kept by a storekeeper on Gunpowder Creek from 1795 to 1815. It contained "frequent credits to their customers for scalps of various kinds," and concludes, "Scalps were legal tender and were good against the county just as much as paper and other claims are today."³⁵ In other words, the storekeeper would turn in the scalps to the county for cash.

The Lewis family was the first to hunt wolves in what is now Watauga County. They took the scalps of wolf pups (which were worth the same as an adult) but refused to kill mature wolves so that they would keep reproducing.³⁶ Such a strategy was lucrative for the Lewises, but somewhat defeated the purpose of the county offering a bounty. Apparently, people were always looking for ways to overexploit or cheat the bounty system. William Lenoir notes on his certificate that he destroyed the scalps, probably because of the likelihood that they could be stolen and turned in a second time to collect the bounty.

Cherokees & Wolves

Cherokee folklore contains many stories where a wolf is involved. One of the Cherokee clans is named after the wolf. Wolf depredations affected the Indians the same as white people, especially after the natives adopted European livestock. But even before white contact, Indians were victimized by wolves. For example, wolves would raid a person's fish trap. The Cherokee's response, however, was more measured and careful, without the aim of eradicating the entire population.

Individual Cherokees avoided killing a wolf for fear that its kin would avenge its death. There existed, however, professional wolf killers who knew a ritual to atone for a wolf's death. Therefore, they could kill with impunity. If a wolf was causing problems, the affected person would hire a wolf killer, who would resolve the issue without negative repercussions for the Indian victim.³⁷



A mask carved by a Cherokee to represent the Wolf clan.

³⁵ Lenoir Topic, 01/15/1890

³⁶ Arthur

³⁷ Mooney, James, *Myths of the Cherokee*, 1900, 265

Vicious

In his book *Vicious: Wolves & Men In America*, Jon T. Coleman documents how people have reacted to wolves throughout America's history. In summary, "vicious" in the book's title refers to the men, not the wolves. He notes that people had a "conviction that wolves not only deserved death but deserved to be punished for living." Many different kinds of predators have been killed throughout history out of fear for personal safety and to protect livestock; the panther, for example, comes immediately to mind. "But the persecution of wolves was fundamentally different because the history of killing wolves shows far less restraint and far more perversity." They were poisoned, dragged to death behind horses, and set on fire. Wolves were torn apart by dogs, people hid hooks in balls of tallow that wolves would find and eat, and they were caught alive and released with their mouths wired shut. Such acts were not done only by criminal types or people with a reputation for cruelty. They were done by ordinary citizens who were kind and loving in other aspects of their lives.³⁸ Coleman's book is a case study in the depravity of humankind and the fundamental wickedness of human nature. "Of all the wild creatures of North America, none are more despicable than wolves" reflected most people's attitude and might be a statement one would expect from a livestock owner, but it was actually said by William Hornaday, the director of the New York Zoological Society (1896-1926), a position where one would think sympathy for wildlife should have been paramount.³⁹

The irony of this wolf hatred is that "man's best friend" – the dog – is closely related to the wolf and some breeds are even similar in appearance. So close that some taxonomists have reclassified the domestic dog as *Canis lupus familiaris*, a subspecies of wolf rather than a separate dog species.⁴⁰ One might expect cruelty against an aggressive-looking bear or wild boar, but such contempt toward an animal so similar to the family pet is somewhat baffling.

Legendary Wolf Hunter Wilburn Waters



Most regions had a hunter or two with a talent for killing wolves. The most famous in western North Carolina was Wilburn Waters, who lived from 1812 to 1875. He was born in Wilkes County and one of his grandmothers was a Catawba Indian. Both parents died while he was still a boy and eventually he came to live with Morgan Bryant in Ashe County, who was described as an old and experienced wolf hunter. Despite his reputation, there was one that constantly eluded him. Wilburn, though just a teenager, set out to trap the creature and was successful. After catching another renegade wolf in a nearby community, his fame spread. "This gave him the reputation of being the most daring and successful trapper in all that mountain region, and made him an envied as well as honored character among hunters and trappers," said his biographer Charles Coale.⁴¹

³⁸ Coleman, 2-3

³⁹ Busch, 163.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 3

⁴¹ Coale, 28.

Waters ultimately made his home on White Top Mountain in Virginia, just across the state line from Ashe County. But he soon received an offer that enticed him to leave home for several months. Wolves were especially numerous in the vicinity of the Black, Yellow, and Roan Mountains farther south. Sixty livestock



Black wolves, more common in the East, do look menacing, but they were no more dangerous than wolves of any other color.

farmers in the area, desperate to save their herds, got together and offered Wilburn one sheep for every wolf he killed, in addition to the \$5 county bounty he would receive for every scalp.

Wilburn spent months in that isolated area tracking a pack, but never getting close enough to shoot or trap them. That's when he got the idea to get them to come to him by howling. It was a risky proposition because his howl had to send the right message, otherwise the wolves would suspect he was a rival pack and that would drive them away. "He gave a long tremulous howl, as is the custom of the wolf when separated from his companions," said Coale. The pack responded with a chorus of howls that "made his blood run cold, so fearful was it in the deep, dark gorges of the mountain, miles away from the nearest human habitation." Then the

wolves came running to Wilburn, and he was able to shoot a few before the others got away.

Now with a winning strategy, Wilburn returned to the settlements, replenished his supplies, and went back out to successfully rid the area of wolves.

Grudging Respect

In well-populated areas east of the Blue Ridge, wolf sightings became rarer by the mid-1800s. Not only were they slaughtered without remorse, but their habitat was replaced by farms and they were also losing the wild game they depended upon. Wolf encounters in more remote areas (mostly west of the Blue Ridge) continued throughout the rest of the century, however. Sporadic undocumented reports of wolves in North Carolina lasted into the 1930s. I find many newspaper reports of them in the 1880s and 1890s, but very few after the turn of the century. Other eastern states saw a similar decline in wolves to the point of extirpation, though wolves survived (barely) in the West to the present.

As wolves moved closer to extinction, attitudes toward them evolved into a sort of grudging respect. The last surviving wolves were canny animals who eluded capture or killing, and gained a type of heroic



Famous 19th century Watauga hunter Harrison Aldridge testified in a newspaper article to the high intelligence of wolves.

criminal status like Jesse James. “The last wolves embodied intelligence, ferocity, and wildness,” says Jon Coleman.⁴² They were often named. Three Toes, a famous wolf in South Dakota, killed \$50,000 worth of livestock (about \$1.5 million in today’s dollars) and required 150 hunters and trappers 13 years to catch him.⁴³

Closer to home, the last wolf in the Caldwell County area made the news,

“He was a gigantic fellow...For several years he made regular, annual trips to this section from across the Blue Ridge and was regularly trailed and hunted all over Hibriten and Hen Mountains and their neighbors, but for several years he easily eluded capture. At last he was brought to bay on Cox’s Knob.”⁴⁴

Watauga hunter Harrison Aldridge’s observation about wolves rang true, “They are the smartest of all the varmints, and it is an accident if you ever get one in a trap.”⁴⁵

Back from the Brink of Extinction

The federal government got involved in wolf extermination in 1906. Coleman notes, “In order to destroy more wolves, government biologists began collecting information about the animals. The curiosity scientists showed in the actual behavior of wolves paved the way for a sympathetic view of the animals,”⁴⁶ which culminated in the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) listing the gray wolf as endangered in 1973, a complete flip of federal policy from early in the century. However, wolf numbers rebounded, and it was recently delisted. Licensed hunts have even been authorized. Nevertheless, the gray wolf is found in only 5% of its original range in the United States and by far, most of that is in Alaska.⁴⁷ The FWS has attempted to reestablish the red wolf in eastern North Carolina, but the population remains extremely low. Conversely, a gray wolf reintroduction program in Yellowstone National Park has been judged a resounding success. Yet, the wolf remains controversial in

⁴² Coleman, 13.

⁴³ Busch, 119.

⁴⁴ Lenoir Topic 01/15/1890

⁴⁵ Lenoir Topic 12/04/1879

⁴⁶ Coleman, 12

⁴⁷ Busch, 19

many locations, with ranchers concerned about predation. No attempts have been made to reintroduce gray wolves in the East.

The Yellowstone reintroduction is a case study in how removing or reintroducing an animal in the food chain reverberates throughout an ecosystem. With wolves back in the park, elk began avoiding grazing streamside areas that provided vegetative cover for wolves to hide and ambush the animals. As a result, willows and cottonwood regrew. Beavers moved in and used the regrown trees to create ponds that support fish and waterfowl. Who would have guessed that wolves would increase the duck population?⁴⁸

There's no indication that we will ever see wolves in the wild again in western North Carolina, which is a regrettable loss. Henry David Thoreau best described the situation when he wrote, "When I consider that the nobler animals have been exterminated here- the panther...wolf...etc.- I cannot but feel as I lived in a tamed, and, as it were, emasculated country."⁴⁹ Perhaps one reason Americans have found the West so alluring is because it still holds emblems of the wildness we have wiped out in the East- wolves, elk, buffalo, and panthers. A faint vestige of the wolves remains, however, in the names of geographic features- Wolf Ridge (Watauga County), Wolf Knob & Wolf Branch (Wilkes County), and several others elsewhere in these mountains and foothills.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 200

⁴⁹ Coleman, 192