

A WOLF KILLS A CARIBOU CALF

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The wolf (*Canis lupis*) is a major predator of the barren-ground caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*), but published descriptions of the act of predation are few. On July 10, 1967, I watched a wolf kill a caribou calf near the Thelon River, ten miles west of Aberdeen Lake (64°41'N, 100°5'W, District of Keewatin, Northwest Territories).

This portion of the Thelon Valley is a sandy, till-covered plain, with winding eskers and low hills (Bird, 1951). The tundra vegetation, composed mainly of lichens, grasses and sedges, forms a thin cover on the well-drained uplands and a denser growth on the poorly drained lowlands.

At 3:00 p.m., while canoeing on the river, I sighted a wolf running parallel to the river 200 yards inland. It stopped briefly to watch me, then turned away and ran over a hill. I went ashore, climbed the hill, and with 7x35 binoculars, watched the wolf lope up a gradual slope 300 yards away. The animal had white pelage and appeared to be an adult male. Suddenly a caribou calf jumped up 30 yards in front of the wolf and ran in a direction perpendicular to the wolf's course. Reacting instantly, the wolf swerved and bounded to get ahead of and intercept the calf. The calf ran strongly but made no attempt to dodge, even when the wolf drew near. The wolf overtook the calf after a chase of approximately 40 yards and knocked it down, apparently by striking with its shoulder.

The wolf immediately seized the prostrate calf by the back of the head and shook it violently for about five seconds. Then the wolf dropped the calf and continued running up the slope, disappearing over a hill 500 yards away. I observed the wolf for a total of approximately three minutes, and the calf, approximately 10 seconds.

I examined the calf and found that the wolf's teeth had lacerated its scalp and punctured and fractured

the parietal, occipital, and frontal bones of its cranium. There was no other evidence of injury or weakness. I estimated from its body measurement that the calf, a 27.5-pound female, was 15 to 20 days of age. It appeared to be separated from its mother, as no adult female caribou was observed in the vicinity during the incident or within one hour afterwards.

Caribou calves, except for the very young, can outrun wolves under most circumstances (Kelsall, 1968). My observation indicated that this calf was vulnerable when attacked at close quarters; the wolf caught and killed the calf with apparent ease. Kelsall (1951) and Banfield (1954) report instances of wolves gaining the advantage of proximity by stalking or ambushing calves in small groups of caribou. Wolves also catch calves from large herds by using the confusion created by the milling caribou to screen their approach (Crisler, 1956) and from small groups by chasing them long distances to expose weak individuals (Murie, 1944, p. 165).

If I had not disturbed the wolf, it probably would not have encountered the calf, or abandoned its kill so abruptly. But I believe that the behaviour of both animals during their mutual stimulation and reaction was not significantly altered by my presence.

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