

# SOLO BUT NOT ALONE

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Three Novembers ago I was backpacking alone around Sandy Lake and Fish Lake in Prince Albert National Park. Leaves were thick and crunchy underfoot; ice, growing along the shore, tinkled like chimes. Small ponds were already frozen up, but at my Fish Lake camp, a Beaver head desperately broke through the ice every few minutes to keep the hole open just one more night. I spotted another beaver swimming under the clear ice beneath my feet. As I read and wrote by candlelight, the rapidly freezing lake moaned painfully. It grunted as it shivered, then with violent cracking exploded from its nightmare, only to repeat the cycle.

The next morning the beaver lodge was solidly frozen in. There was an electricity in the air as I crossed elk grounds and muskeg. Coyotes began a flurry of vocalizations and I howled back at them. One must have been very near despite the fact that the coyote is a ventriloquist, and it is hard to judge how far away it is. At dusk a lone wolf cried amid a clatter of waterfowl. During the night I awoke to the rhythmic breathing of two canids on the hunt, noisily passing my open shelter.

Far ahead of me on the beach the next morning, I briefly spied a wolf. Much later in the bushy highlands I felt something looking at me. There among the tall aspen and lightly falling snow was the same wolf staring at me 12-15 m away. I stared back in stillness, noting that it was an adult with a healthy coat. I spoke to it in my mind. It seemed confused, slowly taking a step to the side, then back, then forward, cocking its head

with its autumn-gold eyes never leaving me. After a time, the wolf out-stared me. I continued my journey and the wolf slowly trotted away. Throughout the day I would look and listen, but there was nothing. Later, as I sat down for a snack on the east side of Sandy Lake, I could sense the wolf's presence. Suddenly a large cow elk thundered through the trees 10 m in front of me onto a ridge where it stopped. Next came the wolf, but the elk was too fast for the wolf as it ran down the hill and crashed away along the icebound shore. The wolf sat down on the ridge panting for several minutes, then headed to the lake. I could hear it lapping up water as I climbed an overhanging spruce tree with the excuse of wanting to get a better view. Now another grown cow elk roared along the same trail after the wolf. I crawled farther along the tree as they circled and charged each other. The enraged elk eventually left, still snorting and screaming, to join the other elk farther down the lake. After a rest the wolf trotted away in the other direction. The forest fell quiet once again, but I clung to my tree for a long time.

This incident left me with several questions: was the wolf aware of my presence all day? What was the relationship between the two elk? When all this action occurred so close to me, why did all the actors seem to be totally oblivious to me the whole time? Was the wolf a true loner, and how long would it remain a relatively successful hunter?

This trip left me filled with wonder at the wildlife dramas we so seldom get to experience.



*Prince Albert National Park*

*Chris Adam*