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When the Wolf Returns

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The wolves will return. Without passports, they will slip across the Canadian-U.S. border, and much will change in our Northern Forest.

Within the past century, natural recolonization of wolves from nearby source populations in Canada into vacant habitats in the northern Midwest and the Glacier Park Ecoregion have demonstrated that wolves are highly adaptable animals, capable of quickly reassuming their appropriate role as "apex predators" They need sufficient prey and security within their newly chosen habitats. Conserved core and connective habitats, buffered within a rural landscape and a culture of supportive people, are essential for the lobos' well-being.

In recent decades, ecologists have discovered that wolves and other predators play essential roles in "regulating" herbivores. As a consequence, a "top-down trophic cascade" of positive effects and interactions sustains and enriches the health and biodiversity of whole ecosystems, from soil microbes to moose. I've seen this happen in Yellowstone National Park: before the wolves returned, elk were abundant, but the woods were disastrously over-browsed. Today, there are fewer, more widely dispersed elk, and plant and animal species have recovered to a remarkable extent.

At home here in the North Woods, I venture afield each winter with keen anticipation. Will this be the year we find evidence of resident wolves? It's just a matter of time.

Join us, and be on the lookout for wolf tracks and sign. Here are some things to look for: depending on the species - gray wolf or the smaller eastern Canadian timber wolf (*Canis lycaon*)- wolf tracks, and especially their stride, are larger than cousin coyote's. "Stride" is the measured distance between where a foot impresses a track on the ground and where the same foot makes the next track. Average walking and trotting stride lengths I've measured for gray wolves in Minnesota range between 30 and 42 inches and 54 and 60 inches, respectively. The largest track I've measured for a male gray wolf was not quite 4 inches wide and 5¹/₄ inches long, not including toenail impressions.