

PREDATOR, PREY

In case you've forgotten, Alaska is still quite wild

by Jacob Thompson

The headline of the Alaskan newspaper read, “Woman recovering after wolf attack.” My riding partners and I read the article and laughed nervously as it mentioned the attack occurred on the Dalton Highway — the very road we intended to ride — and then continued on with more frightening and morbid details of previous wolf encounters. This spun around in our minds as we began our journey from the Deadhorse Airport. Our ultimate goal was Tierra del Fuego, but first:

hundreds of miles of Alaskan wilderness. We couldn't help but laugh in apprehensive excitement when we pedaled past a sign that said, “Next Services 240 miles.”

Life under the endless sun provided ample challenges. From the one-hundred pounds of gear loaded on our Xtracycles, to the giant mosquitoes, to the robust quantity of large dangerous animals, the challenges of the Alaskan road were many.

On our third day, we stopped on the roadside to talk to some graduate students with a telescope.

Through the lens we watched a wolf tearing the flesh from a moose carcass. “You know,” one student said. “Their jaws are twice as powerful as a German Shepherd's. They crush bones and eat the soft marrow, leaving little waste.”

Seemingly delighted by the nerve-wracking effect of his words on us, the unprotected cyclists, he added, “They weigh up to 175 pounds and can maintain speeds of twenty-five miles per hour for several miles, with bursts up to forty-five miles per hour.”

For the next few days, I was haunted by scenes from that round glass ocular. I scanned the roadside with extra caution, thinking about my own soft marrow and those powerful jaws.

After a particularly arduous day of riding under an endless sunset towards that point on the horizon that equals exhaustion, a white pickup truck crowded with oil workers stopped to warn



us that they had just seen a wolf about one hundred yards south of the Arctic Circle Campground (where the woman was attacked). They added that it reportedly chased a motorcycle and even approached a crowd of eighteen tourists.

My life-force was drained and my legs were begging me to set-up camp, wolf or no wolf. But then I remembered a story about a college student camping in British Columbia who was awakened by something tugging on his sleeping bag. Opening his eyes, he was face to face with

a wolf that began chomping its inch-long incisors into his head, opening wounds that requiring over fifty stitches to mend.

Paranoia overcame fatigue and we decided to keep going ... only to round a corner and see that we would have to ascend “Beaver's Slide,” a four-mile hill with a crushing nine-percent grade. I was sure it touched the sky. For the next hour, we painfully zig-zagged our depleted selves up the hill, cursing the wolf for taking our well-earned camping spot at the bottom.

Miraculously, my legs still seemed to function the next day and my spirits were high as I pedaled rhythmically through the Alaskan wilderness. Elated to have escaped the dangers of the wolf, I immersed myself in the landscape. A caribou relaxed on a hillside of fireweed that covered the earth in crimson red, as if to extend the reflection of the fire that had preceded it.

Then I heard the sound of a distant trucker. Looking back

to gauge the distance of the vehicle, I thought I saw an animal. Wondering if my mind was playing tricks on me, I turned again to see that the animal was a wolf — and it appeared to be chasing me.

After muttering some frightful profanities, I stood and picked up the pace. Adrenaline coursed through my veins, transforming me into a frightened animal running for survival. Since arriving in Alaska, we'd repeatedly heard that the worst thing to do is run from a predator, which sounds easy enough — unless you are running from it before you know you are being chased!

My mind filled with images of the wolf in full stride, as if I were watching a wildlife film of the slow-motion chase of a predator on the plains of Africa. Only, here, I was the prey. I pedaled even harder.

Looking over my shoulder, I could see its fangs and cold eyes and I began fumbling for my bear repellent deep in my cavernous handlebar bag. I always imagined myself being able to act with a little more precision in times of dire need, but, now that my need was in fact quite dire, I found myself struggling to operate the bike at speed while also handling the spray. I could hear the wolf's paws pounding against the gravel, closing in. It was going to catch me.

Throughout the chase, the distant truck had continued approaching. At the

last moment, I looked back to see the trucker suddenly smash the wolf, then skillfully swerve to avoid hitting me. I waved a thankful wave, but he never even slowed down. I had never pictured my

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guardian angel wearing a trucker's hat, but I was now a believer.

I walked back to see the wolf lying on the ground, but it was hardly lifeless. Breathing hard and whimpering, it had clearly suffered mortal wounds. To end its suffering, I first tried to kill it with a rock but, amazed by its resilience, turned to my camping knife. My friends arrived to see me holding a bloody knife and standing over the dying wolf.

Throughout our trip, we had eased the tension of our fear of wolves by joking about having to slit their throats, as if their presence represented only a minor nuisance. Now, my friends looked down at the wolf and up at me expectantly, everyone too stunned to speak. We'd never imagined it would actually happen.

Sean spoke first, "Are you kidding me?"

Our collective shock now broken, I took the opportunity to embellish the story a bit, "It was chasing me, so I grabbed my knife, put the blade between

my teeth, and got ready to jump on it."

"Riiiiight," Goat, my uniquely named riding companion, said doubtfully, used to my sarcasm.

"But a semi-truck hit it before I

could," I added dryly.

I looked down at the obviously starved animal and realized it wasn't exactly the 150-pound, blood-stained, man-eating beast that had haunted my dreams. But that did nothing to lessen the terror I had felt minutes before.

After it released its last painful breath, we dragged it to the side of the highway, got back on our bikes, and continued on our journey. Within 400 miles of our tour, I'd already been chased by a wolf and we still had at least 16,000 miles to go.

I can only imagine what's in store for us in South America. 🐺

Jacob Thompson is currently on a two-year mountain bike journey from Alaska to Tierra Del Fiego with his two best friends. After his wolf encounter, he's really hoping to avoid any run-ins with grizzly bears along the way. You can follow along on their journey at www.ridingthespine.com.



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