

Kathie Lynch: Yellowstone Wolf Update: June 2016

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Wolf Pups at Slough Creek!

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“Wolf pups at Slough Creek!”—words that warm the heart of wolf watchers everywhere! For the first time since 2010 (when Lamar Canyon alpha “The ’06 Female” denned there), we have a den in view, and we get to watch the pups grow up!

There’s even more good news—the **Junction Butte** pack has two litters of pups! Three-year-old sisters 969F and 907F each had pups and are rearing them in the same den.

Based on observed breeding and denning dates, 969F’s pups were born on April 13, and 907F’s pups are 6 days younger. We have seen 9 pups (5 blacks, 4 grays), but we’re not sure how many each mother had.

Surprisingly, the pups were sired by beta 890M, not alpha 911M! A clue from high school biology/genetics confirms this because gray coat color in wolves is recessive and black coat color is dominant. Therefore, two gray parents cannot produce black pups. Since both gray 969F and gray 907F produced at least one black pup, gray alpha 911M cannot be the father.

While it is possible that pups in the same litter may actually have different fathers, black beta 890M was seen breeding with 907F. Although no tie was observed between 969F and 890M, a lot of flirting went on between them during the February breeding season, so they likely bred too.

With spotting scopes eagerly trained on the den hole in the hillside over a mile away from the Slough Creek campground road, all eyes eagerly await every glimpse of the Junction Butte pack’s pups.

The first day watchers got to see them (when 969F’s pups were 3 weeks old), a round of applause and cheers erupted from the group as what looked like a furry black caterpillar toddled into view on the den porch.

Since then, the pups’ rapid growth and development has been amazing. After 907F’s younger pups began making an appearance, it was easy to tell the two sets of pups apart.

The older pups’ ears went erect sometime between age 3-4 weeks, while the younger pups’ ears were still lying close to their heads. Also, the younger pups were far wobblier on their short legs and had short, straight, stick tails, while the older pups were steadier on their longer legs and had longer, curvy tails.

The mothers nursed the pups communally. When a mother arrived at the den entrance (the “porch”), she often stood with her back legs spread, and the pups gathered underneath her belly, standing up on their little hind legs, to reach the milk—a most charming sight!

All wolves, male and female alike, love puppies, but nobody loves these pups more than the black male

yearling does! Even before they were old enough to come out of the den, he would stick most of his body into the den hole to see them, leaving just his happily wagging tail outside for all to see.

It's easy to see that the black male yearling just relishes his role as favorite uncle. He is in seventh Heaven as he plays with them down in the meadow or lies on the porch, allowing the pups to crawl all over him.

The other five yearlings (one light black female, three uncollared grays, and gray 994M) also visit the pups and share in the baby-sitting duties. They act as watchful shepherds to wayward pups that wander away, and they help return the occasional pup that tumbles off the porch. The pack is so fortunate to have the help of the six yearling survivors of last year's 12 pups.

Although alpha 911M doesn't seem too involved with the pups, their father, beta 890M, does show a lot of interest. However, when 890M visits the den, he does look a little unsure as to how to manage things. He seems more comfortable with a surveillance role, watching for incoming danger from his post by his favorite tree below the den.

Several times that danger has come in the form of grizzlies! When a bear approaches the den area, all of a sudden more adult wolves than you even knew were there pour out of the gully and surround the bear. The wolves run in and nip at the bear's butt and then escort him away. One evening, the wolves even treed a hapless black bear; they surrounded the tree trunk like a bunch of hounds!

It will be interesting to see what develops as far as the alpha positions in this pack. Since the two mother wolves, 969F and 907F, are the daughters of current alpha 911M, he will have no breeding opportunities with them next February.

One possibility is that beta 890M, as the father of the pups, might again become alpha; he was previously the Junction Butte pack's alpha male until he was deposed by current alpha 911M. Another possibility is that 911M may retain his alpha role, with 890M as the breeding male.

The alpha female position is also in question because a mortality signal has been detected from alpha 970F's radio collar. (The collar transmits a "mort mode" signal when a wolf has not moved for four hours.)

While it is possible that the signal came from a dropped collar, 970F has not been seen since the denning season began in early April, so it is likely that she is dead, cause unknown. Which of the two current mothers, 969F and 907F, may become the new alpha is anyone's guess.

The **Lamar Canyon** pack has likewise faced many changes and challenges in 2016. The current pack numbers only four members: alpha 926F, her 2-year-old daughter "Little T," and two big males, 993M ("Dark Black") and gray 965M.

A yearling female, "Big T," disappeared in February. She was severely afflicted with mange and had been trying to survive on her own by scavenging on old carcasses. She was last seen trailing her pack. Perhaps she couldn't keep up or maybe she was not welcomed back by her mother (926F) or her more dominant sister, "Little T."

Since the Lamar Canyon pack's den is likely deep in the trees of the traditional den forest, it is not known whether both 926F and "Little T" produced pups this year. But the two males with whom they were observed breeding, alpha 992M ("Twin") and "Mottled," are both missing and believed to be dead.

In late March, the Lamar Canyon pack was near a bull elk carcass to the north of Slough Creek. All of a sudden, the Junction Butte pack exploded onto the scene. The intruders ran into the adjacent trees where

the Lamar Canyons were probably bedded, and “Mottled” was never seen again.

In late April, alpha 992M (“Twin”) was spotted to the north of the Buffalo Ranch in Lamar Valley chasing bison calves—and then he was never seen again. As alpha male, he would never have left his pack—especially with his pups about to be born. We’ll never know what happened to him, but the most likely causes include wolf-on-wolf conflict with a rival pack, injury by prey, and illness.

Due to the loss of 992M (“Twin”) and “Mottled,” the Lamar Canyon alpha position fell by default to the last remaining big male at the time, 993M (“Dark Black”). He had previously been the lowest ranking of the four adult males who joined the Lamar Canyon pack in the spring of 2015.

Recently, another big male, 965M, has returned. He had been away from the pack most of the time since late fall. He may challenge 992M (“Dark Black”) for the alpha position. Although still ravaged by mange, 965M’s condition seems to be improving, as mange often does in the summer.

Alpha 926F also has some mange. This is a worry because the mite can be transferred by bodily contact to the pack’s pups. Last summer, the pups were all infected. This certainly contributed to their weakened condition in the fall and winter and likely to their ultimate demise.

On top of everything else, the Lamar Canyons now have to deal with a new challenge. Sixteen **Mollies** (11 blacks, 5 grays) spent a lot of the winter in the Northern Range. It’s even possible that part of the pack may have decided to settle in Lamar Valley.

Mollies alpha male 980M was killed by a bull elk last August. It is not known whether alpha female 779F ever found a new alpha male, but she is believed to have had pups. She likely denned to the south in her traditional Pelican Valley territory.

The pack is interesting because there is a good chance that black 6-year-old 779F is the mother of at least some of the four 3-year-olds (including gray 978F and black 1014M). She is also the mother of the five 2-year-olds (including black 979F and black 1015M) and the six yearlings (including gray 1013M).

A small group of Mollies, mostly yearlings, led by big, black 2-year-old 1015M, has been busy making kills in the Northern Range. As a pack known for its ability to hunt adult bison, the Mollies have recently been taking advantage of the relatively easy pickings of bison calves born in May.

One Mollie even dragged an entire bison calf carcass uphill on Jasper Bench. This raises some questions: where was it taking the carcass and could there even be a den somewhere there?

Given the large size of the Mollies pack last winter, it does seem possible that an offshoot group may have settled in Lamar Valley. On the other hand, the Mollies in Lamar may just be a bunch of yearlings on holiday from the boredom of den duty down south.

It is disconcerting to see the Mollies bedded right in front of the Middle Foothill in the old Druid rendezvous in Lamar. The Mollies’ proximity to the Lamar Canyon pack’s traditional den forest at the east end of Lamar Valley can only spell even more trouble for the long-suffering Lamar Canyons.

The Lamar Canyons’ former alpha, 8-year-old 755M (now **Wapiti Lake** pack alpha) is being seen to the south in his new family’s home, Hayden Valley. Now that he has faded with age to the lightest flannel gray, it is hard to believe that he once was black.

He is still with his very light gray (almost white) alpha female. Watchers devoted to this pack will be waiting

eagerly to see 755M's second litter of pups in his new home. Hopefully the pack's summer rendezvous site will be in the same great place for viewing in Hayden Valley.

Oddly, the very tiny dark gray female pup was the only one of 755M's four pups from last year who survived; she is now a light biscuit color. The other three pups (2 blacks, one gray) all disappeared, causes unknown.

The Wapiti Lake alpha female's parents are the **Canyon** pack alphas, 712M and his white female. At age 11, they are the quintessential old couple.

If they produced pups this year, it would be their ninth litter together—they have had pups every year (except 2014) beginning in 2007! The Canyon pack also includes their 3-year-old daughter and both of last year's pups, one black and one gray.

The **Prospect Peak** pack is elusive this time of year. They usually den far away and/or out of sight in their vast Blacktail Plateau territory.

The pack underwent a big change in leadership during the February breeding season. A new gray male with a high waving tail challenged 8-year-old alpha 763M for the top position. Although this new gray male is uncollared, he is thought to be 2-year-old 966M, who has dropped his collar.

Happily, former alpha 763M is still with the pack, although he often trails along behind the main group. He even bred with alpha 821F, so some of this year's pups may be his. However, she also bred with an uncollared gray male (likely new alpha 966M).

Other Prospect Peak pack members include three 2-year-olds (gray 964M, a black female, and a black male, "Spotlight," who has a big round white blaze on his chest), three yearlings (black 996M and 2 uncollared blacks), and a gray adult female. Gray yearling 1012M died in March when he was attacked by Junction Butte alpha 970F and fell off a cliff at Hellroaring.

For everyone devoted to caring about and protecting wolves, it is hard to watch and hear of the hard times they must endure just to survive and prosper, even in a protected place like Yellowstone National Park.

It's no surprise that the words "Wolf pups at Slough Creek!" ring out with joy. As the pups take their first steps out of the dark den and into the bright spring sunshine, they bring with them new life and new hope for the future of wolves in the wild!

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 About The Author

 &
 **Kathie Lynch**

Kathie Lynch's passion is watching wolves in Yellowstone National Park. She enjoys helping park visitors learn about the wolves, especially their behavior and individual life stories. Kathie is on the Board of the Wolf Recovery Foundation.

Quote

"At some point we must draw a line across the ground of our home and our being, drive a spear into the land and say to the bulldozers, earthmovers, government and corporations, "thus far and no further." If we do not, we shall later feel, instead of pride, the regret of Thoreau, that good but overly-bookish man, who wrote, near the end of his life, "If I repent of anything it is likely to be my good behaviour."

More

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