



Wolverines: Tasmanian devils on crack cocaine

CATHY ELLIS BANFF

Wolverines are an enduring symbol of wilderness – and to Douglas Chadwick these bad-ass creatures are the poster child of a growing campaign to protect the Flathead River Valley in southeastern B.C.

The renowned explorer, biologist and author was in Canmore on Wednesday (Feb. 22) to share stories about the feisty, fierce and at-risk wolverine, and to highlight a campaign for a new national park to protect its habitat.

With shrinking wilderness and global warming, Chadwick said the plight of wolverines adds to the call for wildlife corridors, including protection of the Flathead as a missing piece in the Yellowstone to Yukon link.

“We’ve got to stop acting like the world is all ours and pay attention to wolverines,” he said during a jam-packed presentation hosted by Bow Valley Naturalists and the Yellowstone to Yukon (Y2Y) Conservation Initiative.

“The Flathead is as alive as any place I know. It’s got all the plants and animals, including wolverines. This is the best chance in the whole world to complete a whole wildlife community over time. This is the best shot anywhere.”

Chadwick has worked with snow leopards in central Asia, right whales in the sub-Antarctic, weaver ants in Australia, elephants in Thailand and rhinos and tigers in Assam.

But his love affair with wolverines first began in his home state of Montana when he volunteered for untold hours as part of a pioneering radio-tracking research project between 2002 and 2008 in Glacier National Park.

This five-year study resulted in extensive data on the habitat use, movements, denning and other characteristics of the park’s wolverine population. There’s an estimated 45 wolverines in that U.S. park.

Chadwick, who went on to pen *The Wolverine Way*, referred to these tough hunter-scavengers as “Tasmanian devils on crack cocaine... and who eat anything dead or alive, including bones.”

And while he never quite got used to being



Above: Research shows that wolverines, like these two need, large and connected protected areas to survive into the future.

DALE PEDERSEN PHOTO

Left: Douglas Chadwick holds a wolverine that was captured as part of an ambitious radio-tracking study in Glacier National Park, Montana.

RICK YATES PHOTO

kilometers in just a couple of weeks in some of the planet’s least hospitable terrain.

Chadwick likes to tell the story of one of his favourite wolverines. A fearless male summited Mount Cleveland – Glacier National Park’s highest peak at 10,466 feet – and he did the last 4,900 feet in just 90 minutes.

“Nobody moves like that,” said Chadwick. “It was incredible.”

While they are notoriously tough animals, wolverines are also vulnerable.

Destruction of habitat and trapping have taken a serious toll on wolverines in the Lower 48, but Chadwick said these animals now also have to contend with a changing climate.

“They need year-round cold and deep lingering snow. Treeline is marching uphill, and winter comes later and leaves sooner,” he said. “Projections are that by the end of this century, two-thirds of the wolverine habitat will have disappeared in the Lower 48.”

Wendy Francis, conservation director with the Canmore-based Y2Y, said ongoing research demonstrates just how important it is to give wildlife protected, connected corridors for travel.

“It’s all about connectivity. We know that many of the large mammals like wolverines need very large areas to survive, to find mates, to find food,” she said at the presentation.

“They struggle when they come into contact with people, developments and roads.”

One of Y2Y’s missions is a push for a new Canadian national park in the southeastern one-third of Flathead River Valley adjacent to Waterton Lakes National Park and a protected wildlife management area

in the rest of the valley.

The Flathead is a key link for animals moving north and south through the Rocky Mountains from Montana’s Glacier National Park to Canada’s Rocky Mountain parks like Banff and Jasper.

The area is said to have the highest concentration of grizzly bears in the interior of North America, the greatest variety of plants and wildlife species in Canada and exceptional river water quality.

The B.C. government has passed legislation to ban mining and energy development there, but there is no protection from logging, trophy hunting, new road construction and quarrying.

“Even though the biggest obstacle is the province of B.C., we still need to let the federal government know Canadians want to see a national park in the Flathead,” said Francis.

Local scientist and wolverine researcher Tony Clevenger said the four protected areas of Banff, Yoho, Kootenay and Jasper are critical to wildlife populations locally and on a much larger geographic scale, even trans-boundary.

He said conservation science is now recognizing wolverines, given their need to travel over large areas and their sensitivity to disturbance and degraded habitats, are bona-fide indicators of healthy, well-connected landscapes.

“Maintaining this web of safe pathways and habitat linkages amidst current policies of land use and development outside our protected areas has been, and continues to be, challenging at best,” said Clevenger.

Best guesses put the wolverine population in the Lower 48 of the United States somewhere between 300 and 500 individuals.

Chadwick said the low numbers speak to the importance of safe travel corridors and connected areas, adding he hopes the push for a new national park in the Flathead truly happens.

“To keep a vibrant community, these areas must be tied up together, with habitat bridges and travel corridors. Wildlife needs freedom to roam,” he said. “It’s not a collection of creatures we’re trying to protect. We’re trying to protect a process. That’s what wilderness is about.”

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