**Showcasing the DNR: The Isle Royale experience – wolf translocation**

*On the scene as the first wolves are relocated recently to the national park*

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Though this was indeed the place, it didn’t look now like anywhere that would gather the attention of so many eyes and ears, hearts and minds.

The afternoon was gray, with silvery clouds passing over the face of the sun, blocking her warming brilliance. Sharp winds off the bay at Lake Superior hinted a snowfall could be around the bend just anytime now.

This was the top of a gradual slope where a trail ran down through the low brush – with wild yellow daisies, purple cloverlike flowers, young oaks, maples and scrub brush that looked like thorn apple, but wasn’t.

There was plenty of balsam fir here too, or what was left of it. There are hundreds of moose on this majestic archipelago. The firs, whose needles and sap hold the crisp aromatic smell of Christmastime trees, are a favored food.

It was these moose that were indirectly drawing all the attention to this relatively indistinct place in the forest. Their increase in numbers coinciding with a decline to just two animals in Isle Royale’s long-studied wolf population has left the moose without a significant predator presence. Without predation, the negative impact to the island ecosystem from the proliferation of moose is enhanced, posing concerns of significant long-term damage.

So, on this day, team members of many stripes were working together to release two wolves on the island. The wolves had been trapped in Minnesota and were flown to this grand island in a fiery orange float plane, which I heard well before I saw it banking in the blue skies over the treetops.

On this slope, which sat above a swampy area populated with thick green cedars, the first wolf – a 4-year-old female – would be set loose. The release would mark the beginning of an effort to move 20-30 wolves to the island over the next three to five years, including some wolves from Michigan.

There were playful red foxes on the island – no bears and no deer – numerous eagles, a chattier form of island squirrel, several colorful types of garter snakes and, on this particular day, dozens of yellow-rumped warblers – one of the first warblers to arrive in spring and among the last to leave in fall.

They seemed to be everywhere I went. I could hear their simple, but distinctive, “chip” notes from the bushes and trees. They would fly past me at a very short distance. One bird allowed itself to be held in the hand of a red-bearded colleague after it was discovered flapping around inside the hull of a boat.

As I sat waiting, I noticed one of these small birds that didn’t appear to have any fear of the animal inside the carrier.

The door had been opened and the wolf inside lay curled, with her head up, watching and waiting. At any moment she chose, she could run from the crate and be free to roam the island’s 132,000 acres.

From where I sat, which was several feet above the scene, I quietly watched this warbler land on the top of the crate that contained the wolf. The bird fluttered several times along the sides of the box.

Then it landed in front of the open door.

It hopped around in the grass, undoubtedly in view of the watching wolf.

Within a moment or two, it fluttered back up to the top of the box.

“Chip, chip,” the bird announced.

Then, back onto the ground in front of the open door.

I thought certainly this time, the bird would be snatched up by the wolf and promptly eaten. But the wolf – colored tan, gray, white and black – stayed inside the now relatively familiar confines of the box, even though the door was open.

There were others here with me that day, watching and waiting for the wolf to make its dash. Among them, a storied ecologist and his wife who have known the wolves and moose of this island for decades on end.

There were also National Park Service folks here who had a great deal invested too – gracious and kind island dwellers – hoping to restore an essential dynamic to the island’s ecosystem.

The shutters, lenses and clicking of cameras were hidden among the short brush and in the trees down the path.

I could see the scene particularly well. In an old scraggly tree not far from me the warbler from the box landed several times, continuing to make its “chipping” sounds.

While the watch continued, the second wolf was being moved into position along another trail. In this place, the autumn had touched the trees with the birch leaves yellow and fluttering among more spruces and firs.

The door to this second wolf’s box would soon be opened too.

Like the female wolf, this 5-year-old male, similarly colored, would remain in its crate though the door was held wide open. Ravens flew overhead through the trees, squawking loudly.

The male wolf didn’t leave until the shadows of night had fallen and the sounds of grunting moose were heard from the woods.

In the days ahead, this wolf’s face – [and that of the female wolf](https://www.nps.gov/media/video/view.htm?id=ED86E337-ACB2-3D70-5547ADC1AE9F177F) – would appear on images collected from a trail camera, positioned where parts of moose had been provided for the wolves by the translocation team.

On those trail camera stills, the wolf appeared in the frame warily, long enough to grab and drag away something to eat. Ravens and bald eagles were in the camera shots too, along with two red foxes.

Back on the slope, the female wolf remained in the crate.

As I continued waiting and watching, I thought about those who have come to hate wolves and those who love them, as though they were their own pets – opposite ends of a wide human spectrum.

For me, I have always seen wolves as integral parts of nature’s living world – wild animals, revered by American Indians and many more.

When I was a kid, I never had the opportunity to see a wolf. I had heard about a small handful brought to our little corner of the world in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, which all soon died, one way or another, at the hands of humans.

I remember being saddened by that.

Like the bald eagles and peregrine falcons, which I also never saw as a kid, wolves have been returned to us. To me, this is a wrong being righted, putting nature back in place.

When I finally did see a wolf in the wild, it wasn’t until my own kids were almost grown up. I was traveling fast along a highway. A black wolf and a gray wolf stood at the side of the road, waiting to cross.

Everything slowed down – like slow motion, as I passed – looking. The wolves embodied wild nature, beautiful and raw. I am hopeful my grown sons will see wolves one day and my young granddaughter will have wolves among her experiences too.

The little warbler never left while the first wolf remained in the crate. It continued to hop around on the ground, on top and alongside the box.

With the sound of the float plane cranking its engine, the wolf popped her head up. She looked around and peeked to each side outside the door of the crate.

Her feet made a scuffing sound as they scraped along the bottom of the box. [The wolf shot out of the box.](https://www.nps.gov/media/video/view.htm?id=12FE96E5-B50E-E20E-C4E512B0A5BA0317) As the cameras clicked, she ran a few steps down the trail before turning to run through the low shrubs.

She then cut toward the base of some spruce trees and thick undergrowth. Just before she ducked underneath and disappeared, she turned her head and looked straight up, right at me.

Later, as I walked along the cold lakeshore, a merlin dipped after some warblers hopping carelessly in the open along the planks of an old dock. I wondered if the bird I’d seen back at the wolf crate was among them.

With nighttime falling, I turned up the trail and headed toward the top of the ridge, already certain I would never forget this day.

[Learn more about the National Park Service’s Isle Royale Wolf Translocation Project](https://www.nps.gov/isro/learn/news/presskit.htm).

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**/Note to editors:** Contact: [John Pepin](mailto:pepinj@michigan.gov), Showcasing the DNR series editor, at 906-226-1352. Accompanying photos are available below for download and media use. Suggested captions follow. Credit: National Park Service/John Pepin

**Carrier:** Wolf translocation team members bring the first wolf ashore Wednesday, Sept. 26, 2018 at Isle Royale National Park.

**Door**: Isle Royale National Park Superintendent Phyllis Green and ecologist Lynette Potvin open the door to release the first wolf at the island Wednesday, Sept. 26, 2018.

**Glimpse:** The last glimpse of the first wolf translocated to Isle Royale National Park Wednesday, Sept. 26, 2018 as she slips into the forests on the island.

**Interview**: National Park Service videographer Jacob Frank interviews Isle Royale National Park Superintendent Phyllis Green, after the first wolf translocated to the island was released, Wednesday, Sept. 26, 2018.

**Male**: The second gray wolf brought to Isle Royale National Park Wednesday, Sept. 26, 2018 rests in his carrier Wednesday, Sept. 26, 2018 late in the day.

**Move**: Wolf translocation team members move a carrier holding the first wolf moved to Isle Royale National Park, Wednesday, Sept. 26, 2018.

**Open**: Isle Royale National Park Superintendent Phyllis Green, left, and ecologist Lynette Potvin open latches on a carrier holding the first wolf moved to the park, Wednesday, Sept. 26, 2018.

**Plane:** A plane carrying the first two wolves to be translocated to Isle Royale National Park arrives Wednesday, Sept. 26, 2018.

**Run:** An artistic photo shows the first gray wolf translocated to Isle Royale National Park on the move away from her carrier, Wednesday, Sept. 26, 2018.

**Warbler:** A yellow-rumped warbler along a wooden dock at Isle Royale National Park.**/**