



The Wolf Comes Home

Romeo is reunited with Juneau

BY NICK JANS



Mendenhall Lake

A genuine lone wolf, Romeo was a wolf without a pack but befriended canines, including Nick's dog Dakotah, and humans in the Juneau area for more than six years.

I DROVE NORTHEAST ON THE GLACIER Spur Road in my old minivan, feeling like a limo driver on the ride of his life. Behind me lay the curled form of a black wolf, head raised. Seven years after his death, Romeo was headed home, to the mountain shores of the lake where he once roamed, on the fringe of Juneau. Ahead, the Mendenhall Glacier caught a burst of winter light. I watched with misty eyes and nodded.

Some of you know the story of Romeo, the friendly, wild, black wolf. He first appeared as a gangly young adult in 2003, perhaps the lone survivor of the Nugget Basin pack. Three had been trapped; then a pregnant black female had been killed by a taxicab. That summer, dog walkers and hikers began to glimpse a black wolf—a young male who sometimes approached to within a few feet of dogs. There wasn't a hint of aggression or food-seeking; in fact, the wolf struck play postures and whined. Even if a terrier mutt took exception, he would side-step the

assault and cock his head. If a dog accepted his invitation, something social would ensue, from sniff-arounds to whirling play sessions that sometimes verged on ballet.

In time, the wolf found not one but dozens of like canines and their people and built bonds that could only be called friendships. One of these was with our cream-colored 9-year-old Labrador, Dakotah, and with time, us as well. As dwellers along Mendenhall Lake's western shore, we found ourselves living within the core territory of an affable wild wolf, who had a crush on our dog. They were nuts for each other from the first encounter; in fact, it was Sherrie who gave the wolf his name as he waited one winter dawn for Dakotah to appear, and she murmured in a protective mom tone, "Well, there's that Romeo wolf again." In those not-so-long-ago days before Facebook, Romeo went Juneau viral, and the name stuck. He seemed a tragic figure, marooned between worlds.

[RIGHT] In the vicinity of Mendenhall Lake, Romeo charmed Juneauites for six years before being killed by poachers.

[BELOW] After years of interagency red tape and fundraising, an exhibit devoted to Romeo opened this past January at the Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center and will be viewed by more than half a million people a year.



Even in Alaska, this sort of stuff doesn't happen—but it did. The steadily growing number of Juneau dogs and owners who had forged relationships with the black wolf grew. Folks who had little experience with wildlife sometimes used bad judgment by crowding too close or pushing forward snippy dogs. But Romeo's good-natured tolerance deflected conflicts. Without doubt, he recognized and sought not only individual dogs, but also certain humans. He'd sometimes trot over to say hello, even when I skied out with no dogs. Despite rumors, I never saw anyone feed or touch the wolf.

Juneauites and members of the various agencies whose jurisdictions overlapped Romeo's realm sat back and watched agape as this inexplicable magic continued: a year, then another. The wolf we called Romeo became the poster child for Alaska's wolves. This in a time when the species was subject to a predator-control program that featured aerial shooting by

private pilot-gunner teams. In the case of Romeo, living scarcely a 20-minute drive from the governor's mansion, the forbearance displayed on all sides could only be described as extraordinary. Still, dark mutterings percolated. There were clearly those who wanted the wolf gone, or better yet, dead.

Oblivious to our angst, Romeo fared onward. Though without a pack, he not only survived, but also prospered. He had become the single-most watched and accessible wild wolf in Alaska, and probably the world, but much of his life remained cast in shadow. He disappeared for days or weeks at a time, who knew where. Alaska wolves live hard lives, averaging less than four years. Each time I saw him from the very first day, I watched as if it would be the last time.

And then it was. In September 2009, a full six years since he'd first appeared, Romeo vanished. Persistent online sleuthing by Romeo friend and advocate Harry Robinson and resulting operations by federal and state wildlife enforcement led to the arrest of two serial poachers who had illegally shot him at point-blank range. Despite roiling community emotions, the killers were given hand-slap fines and no jail time. It was a bitter reminder of just how little the state of Alaska values a wolf.

Part of the court's decision, however, included the provision that Romeo's hide be put on permanent loan to the U.S. Forest Service for the construction of an educational exhibit at the Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center, featuring a world-class taxidermy mount of the wolf. The deal seemed certain at the time. I was appointed as the facilitator for the project, the guy who would find the right people to make it happen, and help raise the ten grand or so we figured it would cost.

But Romeo, in death as well as life, proved a lightning rod for human emotions. The state of Alaska has seldom seen eye to eye with the feds, especially when it comes to wolves. The wrangling is best left to imagination. Suffice to say it took not

the one or two years I thought, but seven; two alone to complete the actual transfer of the hide, and two more mired in formal steps and slow-motion details. Meanwhile, the project morphed from a simple taxidermy mount to a Smithsonian-grade exhibit with a designer, interpretive panels, a sound wand to hear Romeo's recorded howls, and a bronze cast of his paw print. Back and forth between agencies, gathering and coordinating the high-end craftspeople necessary for the job, and raising the money (much of it in under 25-dollar dabs) took three years. People told me it wasn't going to happen. At times I believed them but kept going.

All the pieces, however, came together with breathtaking speed this past January. Two hot-shot exhibit builders led the charge, with my friend Vic Walker and I pitching in, starting with moving the completed wolf mount from my buddy Joel's garage to the Visitor Center. A faux-rock outcropping of foam blocks over wooden framework practically flew onto the wall in less than four days, detailed down to moss and glacial striations, the interpretive panels, sound wand, and bronze paw print. And atop that ledge lay Romeo, casting a relaxed, alert, Mona Lisa gaze about the room, so lifelike and himself that he seemed about to yawn, stretch, and rise. The Forest Service hosted a grand opening, complete with ribbon-cutting and speeches and presentations, attended by an overflow local crowd. Emotion hung thick in the air. Romeo had come home. 🐾

Nick is a longtime contributing editor to Alaska and author of the national bestseller, A Wolf Called Romeo, available from nickjans.com.

