**International Wolf**

**Winter 2022**

**Mech Fellowship essays**

Since our founding in 1985 by Dr. L. David Mech and others, the International Wolf Center has sought to provide the latest scientific information about wolves to our visitors, members and program participants. We believe that continued investment in scientific discovery about wolves and other wildlife will lead to increased understanding of how to build a future where wolves and humans can coexist and thrive. We also understand that many barriers exist for students and early-career researchers.

To help this next generation of wildlife biologists, the Center launched a pair of fellowships named after Dr. Mech. The first fellowship winners in 2022 were Lily Heinzel and Cameron Ho. They’ve each provided updates on their important work and how the fellowships have made their work possible.

Enjoy!

**By Cameron Ho**

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Graduated 2021

I pull my jacket hood over my head and shiver as the sun rises on this frigid, Rocky Mountain morning. I reach the hilltop just as the sun peeks over a distant ridge, set up my spotting scope and peer through. A pair of yellow eyes stare back at me—the black wolf is standing over the two-day-old remains of an elk carcass, and I wonder if it notices its audience. As the air starts to warm, magpies, eagles and an impossible number of ravens descend on the wolf’s meal. It eventually gives up on the frozen bones and pads swiftly across the meadow, carrying a leg for an afternoon snack.

This year I braved my first winter field season to collect data on the scavengers that exist on wolf kills and other carrion on the vast Yellowstone landscape. My colleagues kept telling me it was a mild year, but as a “Cali Kid”—a fact that Doug Smith won’t let me forget—anything lower than 0°F was unimaginable. Still, the hundreds of hours spent on a roadside with only the occasional disinterested visitor or familiar wolf-watcher to break the stillness were worth it.

Scavengers (especially avian and invertebrate) are an underappreciated part of our ecosystems that provide critical ecosystem services including the quick removal of carrion, which limits the spread of diseases such as brucellosis. Their place in Yellowstone’s ecosystem, especially with the large shifts in predator populations, has garnered little attention compared to trophic cascades that affect elk and vegetation. The original study I am replicating was done between 1998 and 2001 by Chris Wilmers, a Ph.D. student from UC Berkeley, collaborating with the Yellowstone Wolf Project. The federal government excels at long-term monitoring programs, but rigorous examination of scavengers’ winter activities ended with Wilmers—until now.

Two decades after the original study and the reintroduction of wolves, a lot has changed. The wolf population, still recovering during the original study, has been stable for the past decade. Scavenger counts have changed; the Christmas Bird Count, an annual winter event organized by the Audubon Society and held throughout the Americas, has shown large increases in numbers of ravens and magpies around human dominated areas of Montana. These highly mobile avian scavengers outside the park are likely to have impacts on the protected system. A larger scavenger guild can inhibit the foraging of wolf packs by stealing carrion. Understanding this dynamic as scavenger numbers grow will allow us to identify changes to the system and recognize if scavengers are having overbearing negative effects on wolves.

Being the recipient of the David L. Mech Fellowship has brought my attention to the current debates around wolf hunting in the Rocky Mountains, turning me into an ambassador for the species. As a visible member of the Yellowstone Wolf Project, I’m frequently asked about the current state of Yellowstone wolves, how the hunt impacts population and social dynamics, and if we think wolves are resilient to the relaxed hunting regulations.

Informing visitors and easing tensions has helped me better understand the debates that surround progress in environmental sustainability.

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