

THE FENCE

by Barbara Brease

This last spring I joined friends for a four-day ski trip out the Stampede Trail. We stayed at a friend's cabin along one of the rivers that runs through the rugged terrain of Denali and into the state land known as the "Wolf Townships."

A tranquil stay at the cabin is a chance to immerse ourselves in the wilderness, ski across the quiet landscape and watch for signs of wildlife. The first night we took our sleeping bags out to the nearby frozen river, lay on our backs and stargazed while we watched a cloud layer come in from the north. The stillness was occasionally broken by the sound of distant wind in trees, far away. I waited in vain for the sound of a wolf's howl.

The next day we strapped on our skis and set out to explore. We looked forward to weaving our way through the living landscape, impacting it only with our tracks, scents and voices. Quite suddenly the euphoria was halted when we saw something out of place. There, next to the trail, was a block of animal flesh attached by wire to a tree. I knew a trap was under the snow.

My companion and I continued to ski the trail as it winded its way adjacent to the park boundary, hoping that we would not see any more signs of traps. But as we ventured down the trail, we saw evidence of many more traps hidden in the snow, as well as snares, lying only inches from the trail. A trapper had expropriated an existing trail and turned it into his trapline. I dreaded what I might see beyond every turn in the trail.

I was dismayed to learn that this particular trapper runs a lucrative guided predator trapline and hunt, on the border of the park. The website for Midnight Sun Safaris advertises a network of over 300 miles of trails. The commercial operator sets traps and snares right along the park boundary for his clients, and uses a snowmachine and sled to haul the pelts. Clients carry high caliber guns, predator calling devices and ride snowmachines. It is easy to catch the habituated Denali wolves and other wildlife as they funnel out of the park through the river systems. The extensive network of trails and traplines on the park boundary is a fence of death for wolves trying to reach prey that winters on adjacent state lands.

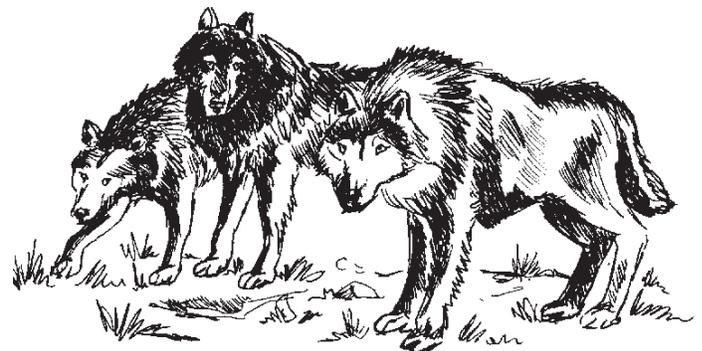
Back at the cabin, I nestled into my sleeping bag, headlamp on, and started to read from a book on the shelf, *Alaska's Wolf Man: The 1915-55 Wilderness Adventures of Frank Glaser*. Normally I would not be interested in reading about trapping, but I became intrigued by Mr. Glaser's experience in these same lands and his skill to survive in this place without modern technology and gear from Cabela's.

I was struck by the difference between Glaser's methods (including an attempt to conserve) and the trapper on the powerful Ski-Doo, sled and clients in tow, buzzing across the tundra.

New faces arrive in the Denali community eager to glamorize trapping out of a reverence for a traditional way of life. But times have changed. Today, trappers access their traplines by car, truck, aircraft and snowmachine. GPS helps pinpoint location. Clients are booked over the internet. The impact is potentially far greater than ever before. Along the Denali boundary, it isn't about an old grizzled guy mushing along on the trapline anymore or about the back-country off-the-grid Alaska lifestyle. It is a lucrative business catering to wealthy outsiders.

Change is desperately needed, as the modern, commercial model of efficient destruction in the Wolf Townships imperils the vision of Denali as a place that protects an intact, naturally-regulated ecosystem. As detailed in an accompanying article, NPS recently issued a news release alerting the public that wolf sightings by park visitors are down dramatically. In response, a number of individuals, organizations and government officials have proposed a conservation easement to Alaska Governor Sean Parnell and United States Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell to protect the wolves. An accompanying article in this *DCC News* features an update on Denali's wolves and the new conservation strategy that could change the conversation about how best to protect them.

As my friends and I skied back towards Healy, we passed mushers, a few snowmachiners and skiers heading out for trail adventures. These people love the land without killing it. But as the light fades and the temperature drops, there is an uneasy silence in the night. There are no wolf howls, just the high-pitched whine of snowmachines, a trapper and his clients checking the "fence." ❧



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