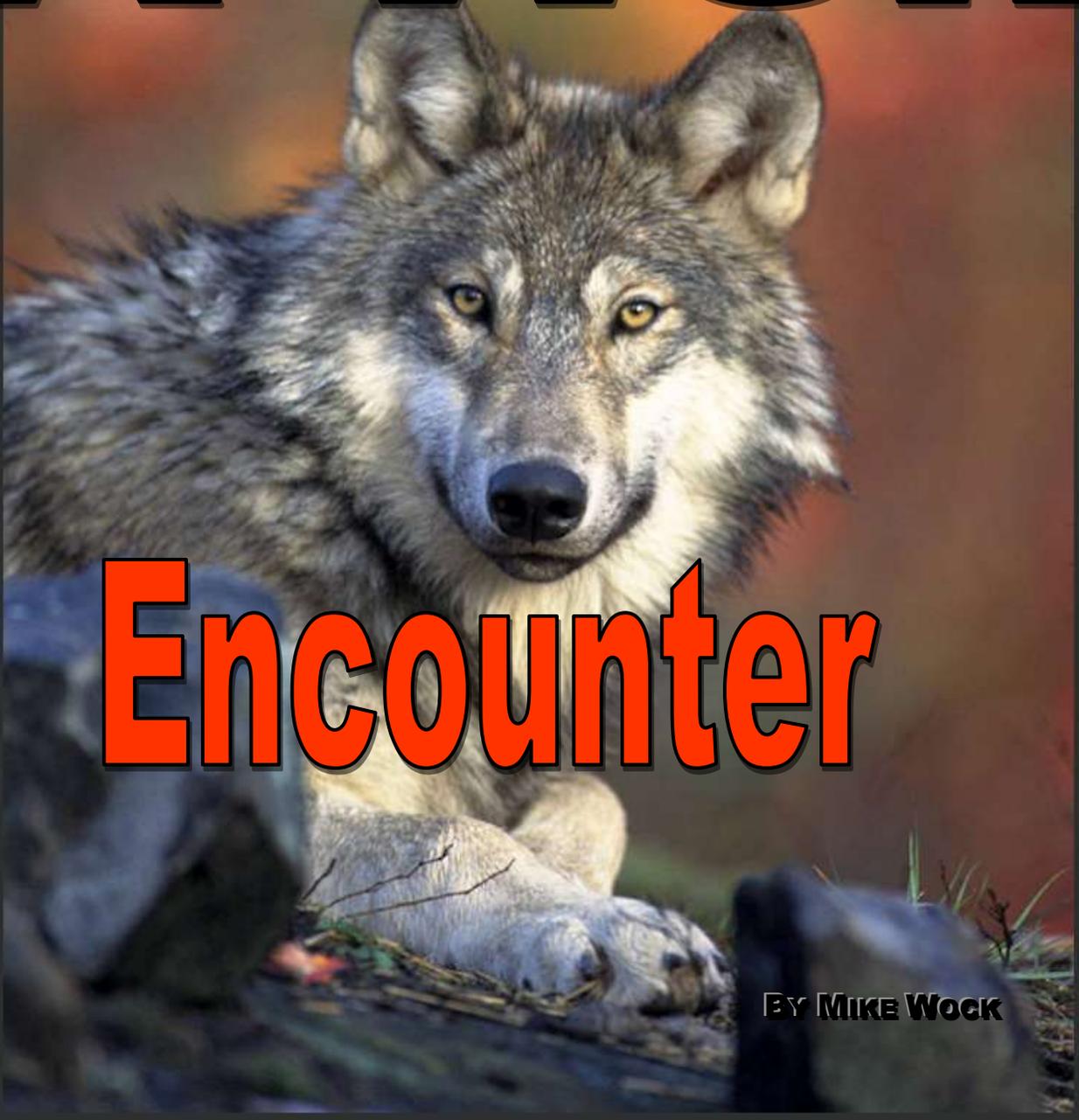


A Wolf



Encounter

BY MIKE WOCK

Shades of Gray

In our sparsely lighted hunt cabin I pulled on my gray turtleneck and long johns. Genetics and years of living had ensured that there was little resistance as I ran a fine tooth comb through my thin and gray hair. I gulped down a cup of black, lightly sugared and highly caffeinated coffee. I grabbed my gray barrel Thompson Triumph .50 caliber magnum inline muzzleloader and headed out the cabin door. Gray smoke bellowed from the chimney of the cabin as I slowly ambled to my deer stand. The skies were overcast and gray, the forest was gray; even the dried out leaves lying lifeless on the ground seemed gray. Gray squirrels were out, not to play but to search for any remaining acorns to stash in advance of gray wintry skies that loom ahead. It was the start of a very gray day.

In stark contrast my bright orange hunting coat and bib overalls made me stand out like a ripe pumpkin. High above the ground in a stick built tree stand called Six Pack, I could see around me for seventy five yards or more. I caught glimpses of the Grouse stand where Jenna (first time deer hunter) had shot two fine does during the 2008 rifle season. The Tower stand was within sight, but barely. During its prime, it was jokingly outfitted with its own mail box. Now the Tower stand and its mailbox are neglected, weathered and gray.

I'd been steadfast on the Six Pack stand for over an hour when I recognized the scrunch, scrunch, scrunch of something bigger than a mouse or squirrel moving across the forest floor. To prepare for the opportunity, I turned in the direction of the sound, aimed my muzzleloader and cocked the hammer. Silence was followed by the scrunch, scrunch, and scrunch of dry leaves. In nervous excitement my breath fogged over my glasses. My photo gray lenses worked overtime to lighten up. My blue eyes strained to see through the gray fog. Without using my hands, I unsuccessfully tried to rotate and cup my ears so that the origin of sound could be pinpointed. I remained motionless knowing that something was about to pop out of the gray landscape.

Shortly, I could hear the scrunch of leaves once again. Like a gray owl diving through a foot of snow for its cherished gray mouse, sensory stimulation had kicked into high gear. Then the source of the sounds magically appeared about 25 yards from my stand. It was gray and tan and brown. My on-board computer brain's first pass at the input data



registered that it was a deer. Further study of the critter disclosed a two foot long tail. Based on stored images of whitetail deer, my gray matter concluded that it wasn't a match, it wasn't a whitetail. Therefore it had to be a common coyote. But coyotes aren't as big as black Labradors are they? They don't weigh an estimated 80 to 100 pounds do they? Through deductive reasoning I realized that before me stood a gray wolf.

Head down, slowly trotting, the wolf deftly followed a scent trail and paused to look around. It had no idea that danger lurked above it in the tree tops. Instinctively I had centered the fluorescent red and green open sights dead center on the wolf's chest. More gray. Should I squeeze the trigger?



I had pondered this question many times before. Fellow hunters, neighbors and acquaintances had kicked this question about. Pros and cons were offered up with much gusto. Seemingly almost violent verbal agreements were reached. Most times the discussions would conclude with the wolf going down. In a hush they'd say: "If you shoot a wolf don't tell anyone." What should you do? What would you do? I never really thought that someday I'd actually be faced with this choice.

Why is it even a dilemma? We all know that there isn't a wolf hunt season. We all know that they are an endangered and protected species. Don't we all abide by the rules and regulations set forth by the MN DNR? Then why should this be a big whoop decision?

The devil half of my brain encouraged me to shoot. It repeated a message something like this: "Shoot! Why not? Go for it! Wolves are predators and they're taking "your" deer. Many people say wolves are a nuisance. Shoot now before it's too late!"

The angel side of my brain counter argued with a message along this line: "Don't shoot! The wolf may be radio collared or have a transmitting micro-chip embedded under its hide. The MN DNR will hunt you down and send you off to jail."

The wolf continued its meandering through the forest, ever alert, forever in search of its next meal. I released the hammer to its safe position and breathed a huge sigh of relief. Not that I was relieved that the danger was gone because I was never really in danger sitting high in the treetops. I was relieved because I had made the right decision. I didn't squeeze the trigger. I wouldn't go to jail.

A Wolf Encounter

For the next few moments I reflected on what had just occurred. Seeing a wolf in the wild on its home turf was way cool I thought to myself. Way cool! My only regret was leaving the camera in the pickup. But then I questioned my reason for not shooting the wolf. The reason was; “I didn’t want to go to jail.” That’s a great reason but should that be the primary reason? Shouldn’t the reason be centered more along the lines of: Wolves are an important part of our eco-system and play a key role in maintaining a healthy balanced deer population?



Let me explain what’s rattling around in my thin skull. Wolves were in MN long before humans. Wolves are finally rebounding from the brink of extinction. They survive in large part by killing and eating whitetails. Not your whitetails or my whitetails, not their whitetails but our whitetails. Wolves are predators and integral to having a balanced natural environment. Wolves provide a natural check and balance to deer herd size. They’re only doing what nature intended. Why is it so difficult to recognize and accept these facts?

What is the compelling temptation for human hunters to shoot wolves? Is it because *Canis lupus* has been depicted as “The Big Bad Wolf” in Little Red Riding Hood? Is it because they are a perceived threat to livestock and our pets? Or is it because they compete with human hunters for whitetails? We don’t shoot eagles because they compete with fisherman for fish do we? Most people relish



A Wolf Encounter

seeing eagles and are ecstatic if they're fortunate enough to see them pluck a fish from the water? What's different about seeing or hearing about a wolf knocking down and eating a deer?

Three years ago I hunted 15 consecutive times in a MN intensive harvest area without seeing a single deer. Turns out our hunt area is inhabited by wolves. They killed and ate a deer barely 100 yards from our deer camp. Did they kill all of the deer? No, but we suspected that they had run them off our 135 acres of hunt land. Did we like the fact that we hunted hard but saw no deer? Of course not, but meantime the deer have returned and they are plentiful. Unlike wolves most of us do not hunt deer to survive. We hunt because we enjoy nature and the thrill of the hunt and the collective hunt experience. Actually shooting something is secondary for many hunters. That said, seeing wolves and co-existing with wolves should enrich our hunt experience. Am I wrong?



With about 500,000 MN deer hunters a field this year, I'll bet other hunters faced the choice of shooting a wolf or not. Were gray wolves put down when hunters squeezed their triggers? Was it a gray day for the human hunter, the wolf, or both? Hope not!

After telling friends and acquaintances about having sighted a wolf, they would invariably ask; "Did you shoot?" This made me wonder: Are we all a bunch of gun toting lawbreakers? Do we all have an anti-wolf bias? Their comments spurred

me to elicit an answer from them to the following question: "Faced with an opportunity to shoot a wolf; would you?" Push come to shove the consensus was that they would not shoot. It was black and white for all responders; there were no shades of gray. Perhaps it's not such a gray day after all.