



Howl Surveys

By early November, evening was coming quicker in the eastern Gila National Forest. The campsite we selected faced west, to catch the last rays of the sun. As the light faded and shadows began to swallow first the distant hills, then the nearby pines, it was time to go howl. We hopped in the truck, confirming that we had the clipboard with the data-sheet and map,

and of course the GPS, compass, and pencils. This would be my last howl survey of the season before I headed home, and for six months I had cherished a hope that once – just once – I would get a response from a Mexican wolf.

Wolves howl for the same reason we call our friends and family on the phone or drop in for coffee – to stay in touch and strengthen social bonds. On the Project, we conduct howl surveys for several reasons. One primary use is to collect evidence of the presence of uncollared wolves. It was this that had us jouncing slowly along in the truck, headlights throwing the rutted dirt road into glaring relief, peering at the coordinates of the first point on the map.

I always wonder what – if anything – we are “saying” to the wolves. If they howl back, do they do so because they truly think us to be a wolf? I find it hard to believe that they can’t distinguish such a thing, given the amount of information their howls seem to be able to communicate between one another. Are they simply questioning whatever strange-accented gibberish we put out; the wolf equivalent of “Pardon me? What?” In any case, wolves (and other canids) will respond to imitation howls, and we can use this to gather valuable information about their presence and numbers on the landscape.

To conduct the survey, points are chosen a mile apart along a road through what may be uncollared wolf territory. Human ears can consistently pick up a wolf’s howl from only about half-a-mile away (though wolves, of course, can hear much farther), so the distance between points ensures we will not miss any areas. At each point, we turn off the truck, get out, and quietly closing the doors without speaking. We stand in silence for several minutes, allowing the night to settle in around us and the ripples of disturbance we created fade away. Three sets of three howls are voiced: one quiet, one medium, and one loud. We begin quietly so that should a wolf or wolves be close, we won’t startle them with what they might assume to be a strange wolf suddenly appearing nearby. The final howl is as loud as can be, a deep-breath, head-thrown-back stream of sound. Don’t be self-conscious, we tell each other. Each wolf’s howl is unique, and not always as noble and smooth as the sound bites heard on TV.

After each howl, we wait several minutes, ears straining, for any response. Often there is nothing, only the thick-textured darkness. Sometimes coyotes – known to many

as song dogs – will howl in response. Often more coyotes respond to the first, leading to a cacophonous orchestra of howls, yips, yaps, gargles, and barks from near and far. One howl survey I conducted was during the peak of the elk rut, and males were bugling everywhere. Each time, for the first fraction of a moment as I heard the squealing strains of a bugle, my heart would leap, only to fall as I realized that it was a bull elk declaring his fitness – an impressive sound to be sure, but not the one I longed to hear.

Many nights I returned to camp late and crawled into my sleeping bag with nothing to show for my efforts but a hoarse voice. One memorable night I ended a survey up on a lookout-crowned mountaintop. I laid out my bed in the back seat of the truck, grateful for sleep, only to be awakened shortly later by the unmistakable sounds of a rodent in the engine compartment. Shouting and thumping provided only temporary respite, so clad in little more than underwear, I got out into the cold wind and popped the hood, probing into the greasy depths with the beam of my headlamp as I heaped invectives on the entire rodent clan – all the while hoping fervently that no other humans were camped in the bushes to witness my performance. Luckily the engine was free from damage and I drove the truck back down the road a quarter mile, away from habituated wildlife, and slept the rest of the night.

After such (mis)adventures, I was keener than ever to get even one response. As we drove the truck to the first point, we discussed the evidence of wolves we'd found earlier that day – a fresh set of tracks for several miles down the road we now proposed to howl. There was a good chance a wolf was in the area – but their long legs can cover many miles in just a few hours, so we'd still have to get lucky. The first few points went without incident. We traded howls and listened, hearing not even a coyote in response. Then, on the second-to-last point, I started off with a faint howl. Almost immediately, a low “awhOOoooo” came quietly back at us out of the distant dark. Shocked, I had to convince myself that it was not simply an echo of my call – but no, it was different in tone and duration, and besides, my hushed howl could not possibly have echoed off distant bluffs.

“Did you hear that?!” we asked each other in strained whispers.

“Yes! Was that a wolf?”

“I think so! It had to be. Too low for a coyote!”

“Which direction did it come from?” The procedure following a howl response is to use the compass to take a bearing on the direction of the sound, to give some vague idea of where the animal could be. I was certain the sound came from the southwest; my partner, who had been standing right next to me, equally certain it was from the hills to the northwest. We wrote down both bearings on the sheet. The numbers in that box were relatively unimportant compared to the triumphant “1” in the “Adult wolf” column. With no need to continue the survey, we drove back to camp. My mind was buzzing with excitement. At last, I had gotten a response! And of an uncollared animal! As we kindled a fire and ate a late supper, several groups of coyotes howled, and at least once I was sure

I heard our lone wolf once again. In such a small population, every individual counts, so I felt tremendous satisfaction knowing that this animal would be added to the yearly population estimate – positive proof that another Mexican wolf was roaming the mountains and canyons of the Southwest.