The Butte

As part of an intensive monitoring effort on a particular pack, there were a couple months when, every night, one of the three volunteers was sleeping in their truck on top of a small butte and waking up every hour to listen to telemetry. It was, in many respects, miserable — as you can imagine, the back seat of a truck, even for a not-too-tall person such as myself, is not the most comfortable; and when the alarm goes off yet again at 3am, I don’t think any of us felt too cheery. However, there was a part of me that grew to love the butte and my time spent there. The views were amazing, pronghorn sparred on the plains below, and the wind sang you to sleep at night.

Here are my field notes from a particularly idyllic over-night:

Sunday 10:50 pm New Mexico time

I can see the distant lights from the coal plants, I think, in St. Johns, and one yellow house light far to the northeast — and that is all. Gibbous moon, puffy drifting clouds, many stars. Crickets. A Whippoorwill? Maybe a Poor-will. The wolves are together between the buttes. I imagine them regurgitating food for the pups, playing, nuzzling. The moon is bright enough to maybe use the binoculars, although the wolves would have to be very much out in the open for me to see them. Quiet. Air cooling, yet still warm. No harsh edge to it. The plains stretch wide to the north, while to the south the ridges roll like stony waves. I will sleep with the truck doors open tonight, unless it begins to rain.

Monday 7:15 am New Mexico time

It was lovely, sleeping with the doors open. Many stars. Got up at 6:30 New Mexico time. The alphas were just starting to head towards the gap. At about 6:40 the pups and 1276 howled down below me. The sun came up a few minutes later. Gorgeous — stunningly gorgeous — morning. Hummingbirds everywhere, a light haze of them, silhouetted against the dawn sky. Enjoying my sweater and could use a hat. Can hear cows lowing to the north. Dawn chorus of birdsong begins. Two kestrels hover over the pines.

Birthday

I woke up before my alarm one bright sunny morning. The first real winter storm of the season had come through two nights before, leaving the world cloaked in snow. As I lay in bed, my first thoughts were about which pack I might attempt to get a track count on (determining the number of animals based on the tracks), where their recent locations had been, and how I might
go about attempting to find their trails. Only after a few minutes of this did I remember with a start that it was my 25th birthday.

That day, as I made my way carefully on the slippery roads southwards towards the area I wanted to search, I had to keep reminding myself that this was my job. There is nothing quite so magical as new snow, and the Gila was really putting on a show. Finally the truck slid to a halt at the junction to the Bearwallow Lookout road. My plan was to walk up the road towards a recent location of the Dark Canyon pack, gotten on a telemetry flight the morning before, and look for their tracks between there and an even more recent location downloaded from the alpha male’s GPS collar. As I began my hike, the snow-covered road lay like the page of an enormous book, telling the stories of animal passage in the past 48 hours. Elk tracks were present in abundance, and I took advantage of their trails to ease the walking. I quickly learned why the wise elk so often hugged the south edge of the road – the shadow cast by the small berm along the ditch kept the snow cool and fluffy, whereas out in the open it had developed a hard crust. Coyote tracks wove hither and thither, a bobcat had made its wavy way along the road, light enough to float on top of the crust, and one unmistakable set of bear tracks waddled their way across.

Just as I was beginning to grow tired and hoping I wouldn’t have to hike all the way up Bearwallow Mountain, I suddenly saw just what I was looking for. “That’s not a coyote track!” I exclaimed, crouching to examine the big paw print mixed in with the elk hooves. I quickly saw that the wolves had come up the road towards me and then veered off to the northeast – straight towards that GPS collar point. That made me very confident that these were the right animals, and not dispersers or unknowns. Newly energized, I headed off in pursuit.

While in theory a track count is simple – the number of tracks equals the number of animals – in practice, it can be very confusing. Wolves often travel single file, especially in the snow, which makes getting an exact count very hard. I would have to follow the tracks long enough to find areas where they split up, and then attempt to not get lost in tracks crossing, joining, and splitting again. As I left the road, I thought I saw three sets. There were three collared animals located together on the flight, so I thought that was a reasonable assumption for a minimum number (though I hoped very much to find evidence of more). The tracks moved fairly purposefully through the woods. The wolves seemed to be interested in covering ground, not in poking around exploring.

Time and again, one set would split off, and in the remaining tracks I could only distinguish two animals. Several times they split into three, each with only one set. For two hours I followed, and consistently saw evidence of precisely three wolves. They led me across snowed-in forest service roads and through thick brush, over sun-drenched hilltops and through shadow-hushed ravines. As every good tracker should do, I tried to imagine the wolves leaving the tracks before me – tried to see them trotting single file, jumping a downed tree, pausing to urinate on something or sniff at coyote and elk tracks. While I was disappointed that there were not more (at least with the pack at that time), as
I ate my lunch seated on a log in the sun, I literally could not think of anything I would rather have been doing to celebrate my birthday.