Science and the Return of Wolves

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Endangered species account for some of the high points and low points in my career as a wildlife biologist. One of the lowest points involved the Attwater's greater prairie chicken, to which I devoted three years of intense field effort while completing my Ph.D. in the 1970s. Today, despite decades of conservation effort on its behalf, the Attwater's chicken is essentially extinct in the wild–although dedicated teams continue to raise captive birds for release into remnant habitat. The high points include the de-listing of endangered and threatened species and, most especially, the large carnivores such as the grizzly bear and the wolf. The recovery of these species is a rousing biology success story. But biology alone would not have achieved this outcome. Equally important was an evolution in public understanding, attitude, and tolerance levels that made possible the return of these keystone species to ecosystems from which they had been lost.

For the wolf, the shift came only after decades of research revealed that there is more to this "varmint" than was historically acknowledged. Certainly, the wolf is an efficient killer of animals, both wild and domestic, and can bring hardship to people whose livelihoods are affected. On the other hand, the science reveals that wolves can serve important and positive roles in maintaining the health of game populations, their habitats, and ecosystems overall.

The Boone & Crockett Club has figured prominently in this evolution of knowledge by supporting research through its Conservation Grants Program, formerly called the Grants-in-Aid Program. The program dates back to 1948, and investigations of wolf depredation in Alaska were among the first projects supported.

The B&C Club was involved in what is often called the world's longest running wildlife research project, a wolf and moose monitoring program in Isle Royale National Park that commenced 50 years ago. Isle Royale is a wilderness archipelago in the northwest corner of Lake Superior, established as a national park by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940. Moose immigrated to the island early in the 1900s, but without predators to keep the population in check, they over-browsed their food supply and experienced a couple of cycles of population crashes. Then, in the severely cold winter of 1948-49, an ice bridge formed that allowed wolves to move in from Canada. The result was a natural before-and-after study and an exceptional opportunity to follow predator-prey dynamics through time.

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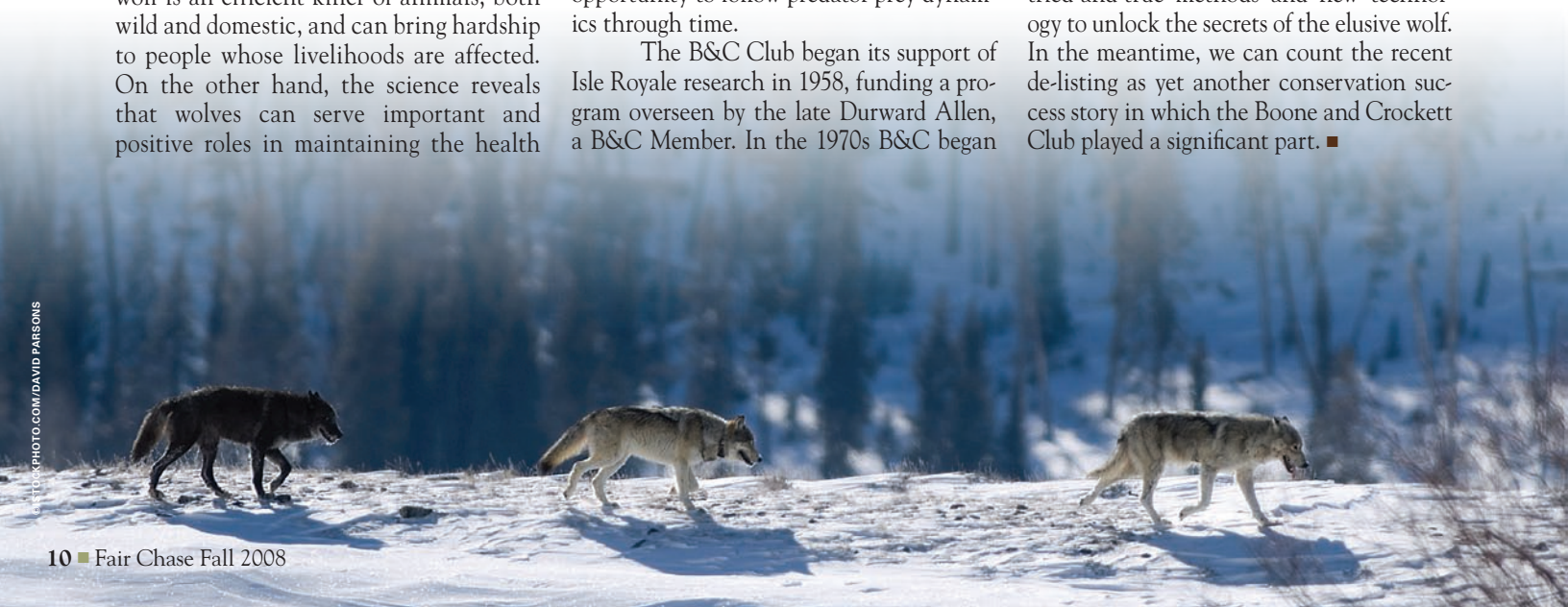
The B&C Club began its support of Isle Royale research in 1958, funding a program overseen by the late Durward Allen, a B&C Member. In the 1970s B&C began supporting the work of Isle Royale researcher Rolf Peterson as well as graduate student David Mech, who also went on to become a wolf researcher of international stature. Through time, the research has provided solid evidence for the wolf's positive role in maintaining fitness of the island's moose and other wildlife populations. Mech's subsequent research on Minnesota wolves also received financial support from the B&C Club.

The B&C Club went on to fund a variety of wolf studies including: "Movements and Food Habits of Recolonizing Wolves along the Rocky Mountain Front" by Forest Service scientist Seth Diamond; "Landscape Ecology of Wolves in Jasper National Park" by John L. Weaver;" and "Wolf Ecology on the Copper and Bering River Deltas, Alaska" by John Carnes. As well, the Club supported "Estimating Wolf Food Habitats in a Multi-Prey System" by Dan Pletscher, who later became a Professional Member of B&C and today holds the distinguished position of Honorary Life Member.

More recently, a B&C conservation grant enabled the Ph.D. study of Todd Atwood and his colleagues, Eric Gese and Kyran Kunkel, which examined how predator-prey relationships changed in response to the return of wolves to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Their interesting findings, including positive effects on mule deer populations, are reported in the Fall 2006 issue of *Fair Chase*.

We can look forward to new discoveries as new generations of scientists apply tried-and-true methods and new technology to unlock the secrets of the elusive wolf. In the meantime, we can count the recent de-listing as yet another conservation success story in which the Boone and Crockett Club played a significant part. ■



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