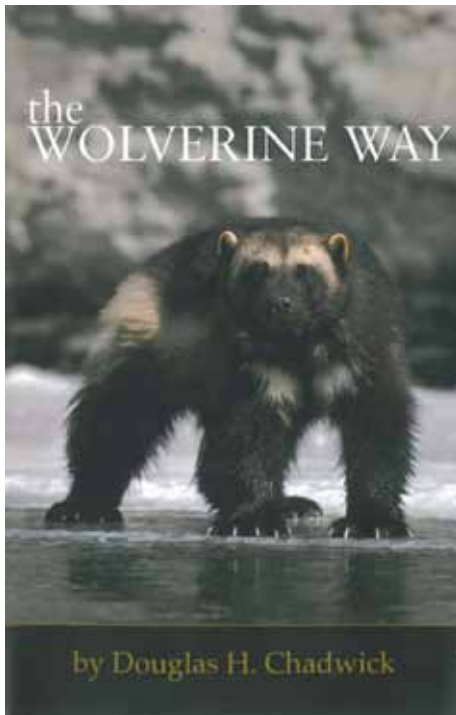


READER'S CORNER



Douglas H. Chadwick,
the Wolverine Way,
(Patagonia Inc., 2010)
Reviewed by Nigel Douglas

For years AWA has talked about the grizzly bear as the ultimate symbol of wilderness: an iconic species which captures the very essence of wilderness itself and defines what it means to be wild. But another worthy candidate for wilderness poster child could just as easily be the wolverine. While the grizzly bear could be the most studied creature in North America, startling little is known about the wolverine; its numbers, its behaviour, even some of its most basic natural history remain cloaked in mystery.

In his beautiful new book, *the Wolverine Way*, Douglas Chadwick, a self-confessed “unrepentant wolverine groupie,” sets out to shine some light on the elusive and enigmatic wolverine. *the Wolverine Way* describes Chadwick’s experiences as a volunteer with the Glacier Wolverine Project, a five-year study of the wolverines in Montana’s Glacier National Park. Comprehensive long term studies of *Gulo gulo* begin to

reveal previously unexpected behaviour; the wolverine, long believed to be an unsociable loner, begins to emerge as a creature with a far more complex social structure than had ever been imagined. Males, long assumed to have little to do with raising their young, are tracked as they travel side by side with adolescent youngsters. The sheer physical endurance and stamina of his subjects becomes abundantly clear. “There’s wild and there’s strong and there’s unrelenting, and then there’s wolverine,” he points out cheerfully. “Nobody keeps up for long.”

A biologist, turned conservation writer, Chadwick writes from a position of profound respect for wolverines and for the spectacular mountain scenery they call home. His love of the mountains comes through again and again. “The passage of years – of ages – has height, width, points, planes and edges here. Time takes on shape and volume. History stacks up around you nearly two miles high. Written in stone, it is the truth about the world, and it is beautiful.” And his deep and abiding respect for this uncompromising wolverine pervades the entire book. “Wolverines,” he writes, “are the ultimate role models for not taking crap from anybody of anything.”

At times it is hard not to feel a sense of unease at some of the research techniques described. Radio collars are impractical for a wolverine, whose neck is short and as wide as its head, so instead the transmitter and battery are carried in a capsule surgically implanted beneath the skin of the belly. Individuals are caught and sedated numerous times throughout the study. But of course it is difficult to imagine how such an elusive animal, observed only fleetingly by the scientists tracking them, could be studied in any other way. And for those involved in the wolverine study, it is obviously more than an academic exercise: these are people who genuinely want to find out more, and to use their knowledge to help to protect this embattled species. Wolverines are going to need all of the help they can get.

The dedication of the researchers is captured dramatically in an episode related by Chadwick. He describes two

volunteers skiing off to check on a trap which has been triggered, presumably by a captured wolverine. One of the skiers falls and breaks his leg but, declining help, he implores his colleague to carry on and deal with the captured wolverine, which is imprisoned in the trap in sub-zero temperatures. He hops and one-leg-skis his way back to their base cabin, and the next day, he hops and skis his way back out to the road, not wanting to be a burden on his research colleagues or on the National Park service.

Of course the wild and untamed nature of the wolverine is a function of the landscape in which they live. Chadwick pays tribute to some of the huge and magnificent protected areas of the Rockies, from Yellowstone to Glacier to Jasper, but emphasizes that “not one of them... is truly large enough to sustain its great beasts over time by itself.” While large protected wilderness is undoubtedly critical, so are the bits in between. “An animal traveling between Glacier and Banff has to get past massive coal mining projects and still more extensive logging operations, cross a major east-west highway with heavier volumes of traffic every year, negotiate a spaghetti-spill of backcountry roads associated with recently installed oil and gas fields, contend with rapid subdivision for new homes and resorts in the scenic valleys, more homesites and recreational facilities spreading upslope, heavier hunting pressure, et cetera, et cetera.”

Ultimately *the Wolverine Way* is a call for a better understanding of the animals themselves, and a desperate appeal to protect the big interconnected wilderness which they need while we still have the option. “As the wolverine becomes better known at last, it adds a fierce emphasis to the message that every bear, wolf, lynx and other major carnivore keeps giving: If the living systems we choose to protect aren’t large and strong and interconnected, then we aren’t really conserving them. Not for the long term. Not with some real teeth in the scenery. We’re just talking about saving nature while we settle for something less wild.”