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# THE BIG SQUEEZE

Can wildlife and hyperdevelopment coexist in the Bow Valley?

*By* KARSTEN HEUER

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THE AFTERNOON OF JUNE 5, 2005, STARTED LIKE MANY Sunday afternoons for Canmore resident Isabelle Dubé: after a leisurely morning with her husband and 5-year-old daughter, the 35-year-old teacher and competition mountain biker laced up her running shoes and went for a jog with two girlfriends. Their destination was the Montane Traverse, a popular hiking and mountain biking trail that skirts the town's burgeoning housing and recreational developments on the north side of the Bow Valley. Twenty minutes later, as her friends fled to the nearby golf course, Dubé was mauled to death by a grizzly bear.

The incident shocked many in this mountain community 100 km west of Calgary. Dubé's infallible determination, courage, generosity and kindness had touched many lives, both in the classroom and on the trails. She was a hero for young girls and an inspiration for countless women; the grief and anguish over her death ran deep through Canmore households and schools. But for anyone who has lived here for more than a few years, the tragedy also raised an important question: has all the building and development here gone too far?

WOLF TRACKS ARE WHAT LED ME TO WHERE Isabelle Dubé died: three sets of paw prints in a skiff of new snow, winding from Banff National Park across the slopes of Mt. Lady

MacDonald on the outskirts of my hometown. It was January 2007, one-and-a-half years since the mauling, and I was there as part of an ongoing study of wildlife corridors for the Alberta government, trying to figure how (and if) the wariest animals—critters such as cougars, lynx, wolves, wolverines and, yes, bears—moved around the houses that have crept up the

## In the dance of human/wildlife coexistence, wildlife are expected to learn the difficult steps.

mountainsides. My head was down at the time, my eyes focused on the patterns of pad and claw marks, and then it appeared amongst the pine trees before me: a simple, engraved wooden cross. The wolves had stopped and considered it, too, circling a few times before moving on. I could almost hear Isabelle's French-Canadian accent as she laughed at the injustice of it all: killed by a grizzly bear only to be pissed on by wolves!

The tracks continued east, taking me along the same path the three joggers had followed that fateful afternoon, albeit in the opposite direction. Although heavily used by mountain bikers, hikers and runners in summer, the Montane Traverse is all but abandoned in winter, and the saucer-sized wolf prints punctuated the snow in long, easy strides. Within a few hundred metres, however, the corridor narrowed and the animals' gait changed. To my right, the bright opening of the Silvertip golf course's uppermost fairway shone through the forest; to my left, the cliffs of Mt. Lady MacDonald edged closer. The wolf tracks now wandered, winding on and off the path in what became a circle, then eventually stopped in a cluster of overlapping prints.

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WILDLIFE CORRIDORS ARE A RELATIVELY NEW concept. Prior to the 1980s, the predominant approach to wildlife conservation was to simply draw a line around an area, declare it a park or reserve and assume everything within it would be fine. But in 1985 a Ph.D. student from Harvard named William Newmark questioned that assumption and, after packing up his camping gear and notebooks, set off on a road trip that changed conservation history. After visiting 14 North American national parks (including Banff and Jasper) and poring over their records and archives, Newmark concluded they weren't working. In all but one park, species had gone extinct.

The root cause was always the same: a rising tide of human development surrounding the parks, turning them into islands. And as islands they weren't big enough. Too little space led to inbreeding and widespread disease. Floods or fires left little

chance for the inhabitants to escape.

The question that followed, of course, was how big do such islands need to be? Over the following years, some radio-collared animals hinted at an answer: a lynx travelled more than 1,100 km from the Yukon to central British Columbia; a bull trout swam 1,500 km toward the Arctic; a grizzly bear ambled more than 500 km from the interior to the Pacific Ocean; and, most unbelievably, a young female wolf went from the Canmore area to Montana, then Idaho, then up to south-central British Columbia before looping back to Alberta, covering an area 20 times the size of Banff National Park!

The scale of such movements aligned well with what geneticists, population ecologists and mathematicians were discovering over the same time period: to ensure the long-term survival of a given group of animals, at least a thousand individuals need to interact freely. Such a number translates to reasonably small chunks of land for species such as mice and garter snakes, but for wide-ranging animals the area is enormous: around 600,000 km<sup>2</sup> for grizzly bears and wolves, according to one estimate, which is about the size of the entire province of Alberta.

Such a mega-park is politically and economically infeasible. But what about wildlife corridors? What about linking undersized parks into a network of reserves that collectively provide what no park can on its own? These were the questions thrown around by a group of international conservationists, scientists and visionary economists gathered at an Alberta forum on Rocky Mountain ecology in 1992. The Yellowstone to Yukon vision, or Y2Y as it's come to be known, was born.

I was so intrigued with Y2Y that I decided to hike the region. Taking a two-year leave of absence from my job as a national park warden and wildlife researcher in 1998 and 1999, I set off to answer a pressing question: how plausible was this audacious initiative on the ground? My method was simple: travelling south to north along the wildest route possible, I kept notes on signs of wilderness-dependent grizzlies (e.g., tracks, rub trees, stomps, digs, scat and sightings). Eighteen months after I left Yellowstone, I arrived in Watson Lake, Yukon, with an incredibly hopeful statistic: 188 days travelled, with fresh grizzly bear signs 85 per cent of the way.

There are still plenty of "hotspots of concern," as we biologists like to call them. One of the biggest is the Bow Valley around Canmore. In the end, Y2Y was an elliptical journey: after walking much of the continent, I returned to the problems of my own backyard.

WHERE THE WOLF TRACKS GATHERED, I STOPPED and listened. As always, there was the distant hum of the Trans-Canada Highway, but now, over it, came the thump of hammers and car doors closing, the scream of power saws and the shouts of kids. The Eagle Terrace subdivision. In another few hundred metres the golf course would end and the houses would be visible; the glint of windows and smell of barbecues would penetrate the thin sliver of forest right to the cliffs of Mt. Lady MacDonald and the canyon of Cougar Creek.



*A black bear cub tries to escape from conservation officers by climbing a fence in a neighbourhood in Canmore.*

To my surprise, the tracks continued toward the pinchpoint, staying off the main trail now, winding through the trees. I wanted to charge ahead to see what had happened, but instead was forced to slow down. What had been a clean canvas of snow was now muddled with boot prints and dog tracks filing up from the houses below. Struggling to differentiate triangular wolf prints from the pug-shaped tracks of their domesticated cousins, I dropped to all fours. And as I did, I couldn't help but think: how had it come to this? How, in 15 short years, had one of only two narrow corridors around Canmore become so compromised that a biologist searching for signs of wildlife had to crawl on hands and knees?

Back in the 1970s, Canmore was a coal mining town of 3,000 people clustered along the banks of the Bow River. Gritty and unglamorous, it enticed few of the tourists flocking to Banff. But when Canmore Coal Mines Ltd. shut down in 1979, a trickle of outsiders came to settle, among them skiers and climbers attracted by the scenery and recreational opportunities. A few years later, when Canmore hosted the Nordic events for the 1988 Winter Olympics and received international profile, that trickle became a flood. In the 20 years since, the town's population has tripled from fewer than 6,000 to more than 17,500 people (12,000 permanent, 5,500 second-home owners).

Such rapid growth is part of a phenomenon gripping mountain towns across the globe. Attracted by the small-town atmosphere, clean air and water, low crime rates, stunning vistas

and access to recreational activities, a generation of aging and wealthy baby boomers are flocking to these places, driving up real estate prices and triggering a building boom. And they're doing it because they can. Freed from the traditional office environment by the Internet, an improved global transportation system and cheap oil, executives are moving from high-rises in New York, London and Toronto to home offices in Aspen, Zermatt and Canmore.

Wherever demand leads, supply soon follows, and Canmore's housing market is no exception. There's one complication, though: space. Bordered by Banff National Park to the west and provincial parks and cement quarries to the east, construction has only had one direction to go in this tight valley: up.

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THE BEAR THAT KILLED ISABELLE DUBÉ WAS NO stranger to local wildlife officials. Eight days before the attack, it was seen in the same corridor by a woman taking pictures of wildflowers, not far from the Silvertip Resort and Eagle Terrace subdivisions. Curious, the bear approached but stopped when the woman stood up, grabbed her dog and quickly backed away.



*Images captured two and a half hours apart by a remote, motion activated camera along a popular Canmore-area hiking trail.*

When wildlife officers heard about the incident, they immediately set their traps, captured the bear and, after fitting it with a radio collar, airlifted it to a side valley of Banff National Park.

Like most relocated bears, it soon returned. On the morning of June 5, 2005, just hours before Isabelle and her two friends set off on their run, the 4-year-old male grizzly now known as Bear 99 was chased off the Silvertip golf course by a maintenance crew. Wildlife officers armed with radio receivers and rubber bullets arrived soon after, determined to instill some fear into the bear when it stepped out of the wildlife corridor back onto the fairway. It never did.

Although none of them realized it at the time, the bear, the photographer, the wildlife officers and Isabelle and her two friends were all participants in an intricate and dangerous dance initiated by developers, politicians and town planners decades earlier. To their credit, the planners had incorporated wildlife corridors into area structure plans at a time when no other jurisdiction in North America was doing so. But their power to make them functional was constrained by guarantees the provincial government had made to developers when they sold them the Crown lands in the 1980s. And so now, instead of the kilometre-wide corridors biologists recommended, animals are confronted with a convoluted maze of dead-end funnels and 300–500-metre-wide squeeze points on steep slopes. As is so often the case in the dance of human/wildlife coexistence, it's the wildlife that are expected to learn the difficult steps.

I WOULD HAVE BEEN PLEASANTLY SURPRISED IF THE wolves had somehow solved the riddle Canmore had laid out for them; if, unlike Bear 99, they had somehow found that elusive middle ground of tolerating human development but managing to stay wild. But after a few more minutes of crawling on hands and knees I came to a swath of undisturbed snow where the wolves had finally stopped and circled back. Their wildness had kicked in. The squeeze point had proved to be too much.

What had been a mild February day was turning cold by that point, and after confirming the wolves had gone back, I abandoned their spoor and headed downhill. My car was parked several kilometres away by that point and with the lights of my downtown neighbourhood visible in the valley below I decided to walk home. Two minutes later, I was crossing the Silvertip golf course, heading for the uppermost of the many housing developments that have crept up the mountainside in recent years.

## Wildlife corridors link a network of reserves that together provide what no park can on its own.

It would be easier to justify narrow wildlife corridors if the houses that encroached on them were modest-sized and built for families who lived and worked in the community, but as I made my way downhill, the majority of the massive homes I passed were dark, their curtains drawn, and save for the tire tracks left by the local security company trucks, their snowy driveways were unmarked. For anyone who knew Isabelle or knows the plight of local wildlife, the irony is hard to swallow: most of the homes and golf courses that have plugged this narrow valley over the past 15 years have been built as second, third and even fourth homes for people who live somewhere else.

HAD ISABELLE DUBÉ LIVED, SHE WOULD NOW BE part of what local demographers and statisticians expect will be the last generation of middle-class people who can afford to work, live and raise a family in Canmore. When she moved here from Quebec in the mid-1990s, the average price for a single family home was under \$200,000. Now, less than 15 years later, it has more than quadrupled to \$850,000. Property taxes and rents have skyrocketed alongside real estate values, and an

exodus of young couples and families has followed. School enrolments are decreasing, local businesses are struggling to retain long-term employees and the population demographics are shifting toward older people who have brought their wealth from elsewhere and second homeowners who, according to a recent survey, aren't interested in getting to know another set of neighbours or contributing time to community programs and events.

Such trends aren't unique to Canmore. In Aspen, Colorado, the average single-family house now costs \$4-million and sits vacant much of the year, necessitating a system where the local workforce is bused in daily from more affordable towns an hour or two away. It's an extreme case of how the free market can destroy a community. Residents and politicians in other mountain towns are taking notice. In Crested Butte, Colo., for example, a 2,500-square-foot cap on house size has prevented opulent trophy homes from taking over the town. In Zermatt, Switzerland, local officials have capped total second-home construction to a town-wide limit of 9,000 square feet per year. And in Basalt, Colo., deed restrictions, resident-only districts, appreciation caps, property buybacks and affordable housing projects have all been instituted to prevent what happened in nearby Aspen from happening there.

Canmore has considered some of these options—resident-only zoning in certain neighbourhoods, for example, and a 3,500-square-foot limit on house size—but hasn't adopted them because of the Charter of Rights & Freedoms. Which invites the question: is compromising the lives of others (animals and humans alike) in order to own a second home a legitimate human right?

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TWENTY MINUTES AFTER LEAVING THE WOLF tracks, I emerged at the bottom of the Silvertip subdivision, crossed the Trans-Canada Highway and sauntered into Canmore's downtown core. It, too, has changed in recent years—the local grocery and hardware stores are gone, replaced by real estate showrooms, upscale bistros and high-end furniture boutiques. I couldn't help but notice the slogans as I walked past the realty office windows: Move Closer to Nature; Experience Luxury in the Wilds of Canmore; Silvertip: The Reason Nature Created the Rockies. Meanwhile, a different version of the same story lay on the slopes above me, written in the tracks of three wolves and a young woman's memorial cross.

Fortunately, many citizens and politicians who know the whole story in Canmore are working to steer it clear of further tragedy. It's why an exhaustive overhaul of the town's principal guiding document (the municipal development plan) has been the subject of dozens of heated public forums and hearings over the last three years. It's why an innovative sustainability screening is now part of the development permit process, putting the

onus on the proponent to demonstrate a social, environmental or economic benefit to the community. And it's why an organization called Bow Valley WildSmart formed soon after Dubé's death: to better inform residents about wildlife corridors, bear safety and other issues regarding human/wildlife coexistence.

As well-meaning as they are, however, such initiatives skirt more than confront Canmore's big problem—too many people trying to build too many big homes in too small a space. A cap on development is the logical solution, something that takes into account all we've learned from William Newmark and Y2Y about parks and the need for wildlife to be able to move between them, and from Aspen and other mountain towns ruined by excessive development and the proliferation of second homes.

WHAT I AND EVERY OTHER PERSON WHO CARES about this issue have come to understand is that change is as difficult to track as a wolf or grizzly bear, twisting and turning, stalling and surging, behaving in ways no one can predict. Change, too, needs corridors and sometimes our job is just to keep them open: corridors of hope between reservoirs of possibility.

It's this belief in possibility, I think, that has helped point my journey in a new direction. Two-and-a-half years have passed since that February day when I followed the wolves past Isabelle's cross. The economic recession that now grips much of the world has forced one of Canmore's two major developers (Three Sisters Resorts) into receivership, creating an opportunity which our once-powerless mayor and council quickly pounced on. In a motion that passed unanimously this April, Canmore's urban growth boundary was moved inward to exclude lands on Three Sisters Mountain, some 600 acres for which as many as 2,500 "dwelling units" had been slated. If the motion holds, approved growth in our stressed town will be cut by more than 60 per cent. According to long-time Canmore resident and current mayor Ron Casey, it's a chance to undo some of the mistakes of the past two decades and reclaim a sustainable vision. "It really comes down to what the Town thought they were getting into," he says. "This was never about building a second-home mecca residential neighbourhood."

So Canmore is doing its best to wrest control back from at least one developer. It's a bold move that won't go unchallenged. Indeed, a public hearing about the motion was recently postponed because of legal threats from the receiver. Meanwhile, letters to push on despite the challenges are crowding the op-ed pages of the local newspaper and e-mail inboxes at town hall.

And when this challenge is over our focus will shift to the 100-acre plot where the other big developer—Stone Creek Properties—plans to build 1,000 condos, 300 hotel rooms and 100 shops. I know the place well. It's up on the slopes of Mt. Lady MacDonald, not far from where wolves still try to get around the town. Not far from the spot where Isabelle's spirit still lives. ■

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*Karsten Heuer is a wildlife biologist, park warden and author of three books, including Walking the Big Wild (M&S, 2002).*