

The buffalo wolf: predators, prey and the politics of nature

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BOOK REVIEW

The buffalo wolf: predators, prey and the politics of nature

By: Lu Carbyn

Publisher: Smithsonian Books, USA, 2003, 248 pp.

ISBN: 1-58834-153-4.

Lu Carbyn has been studying wolves and bison in the Wood Bison National Park of northern Alberta on and off for 25 years. If you want to find out about the science of these studies then read the other book by Carbyn et al. (1993) and the associated papers. This book is not a summary or synthesis of wolf-bison relationships.

However, if you have spent recent years stuck in front of a computer, slaving through statistical analysis, answering referee comments, or pounding out grant applications and want to rediscover the spirit of adventure and love of nature that got you into this business xx years ago - buy this book. Unfortunately it is a relatively slim volume, because by the end I wished it was twice as long.

Through these pages Lu Carbyn takes us along in his canoe as he paddles the channels of the Peace-Athabasca delta. We experience the music of wolf howls at night and the gory details of predation as wolf packs spend hours in sustained attacks trying to drag ever-weakening bison to the ground. The pages of this book bring us the smell, sights, sounds and emotions that are sanitised from our journal articles. It reminds us that graphs of functional response actually involve life and death on the parts of the predators and prey, and hard work on the part of the researchers. The main focus of the book is on the dance of life (and death) played out by wolves and the bison in this flat delta country. The descriptions of these predation events will make most carnivore biologists jealous who only know their animals as beeps emitted from radio-collars.

However, no detail from the natural backdrop is too trivial for Carbyn to point it out; from tracks in the snow, to ducks and otters seen swimming in the creeks, or the geese flying overhead as the clockwork of the seasons runs its course. The irony is that much of this research was done without his employers' (the Canadian Wildlife Service) support. Using holidays and leave, and finding many novel sources of funding and logistical support (such as film crews), Carbyn was able to string together a 25-year study mainly through his own dedication and ingenuity.

All in all this is an uplifting book for all biologists. However, the joy of natural experiences and the pay-back from hard work in the field is tempered by the questions that hang over the fate of this ecosystem. The delta itself is threatened by drought and the damming of the river. The bison's fate is also uncertain as discussions continue about how to manage them in the face of disease (brucellosis is widespread and there are fears that it could spread to cattle on ranches outside the park) and their hybrid status (plains bison were intermixed into the original wood bison in past decades). There are strong forces at work lobbying to exterminate the entire population and replace it with dis-

ease-free, pure-blood, wood bison. Carbyn's own stance on the issue is clear, but his presentation of the debate is balanced and the reader can draw his own conclusion.

The bottom line of the book is that it is possible for wildlife researchers to care deeply about their study animals and study ecosystems and still do good science; in fact Carbyn's view is that without this connection to the study system it is probably hard to really understand it.

Reference

Carbyn, L.N., Oosenbrug, S.M. & Anions, D.W. 1993: Wolves, bison and the dynamics related to the Peace-Athabasca Delta in Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park. - Circumpolar Research Series Number 4, University of Alberta, 270 pp.

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