

Dr. Deer's Whitetail World

BY DR. JAMES C. KROLL

Are There Too Many Predators? Part 1

Adam Felser is a giant of a young man, having grown up in the logging business in Wisconsin. He has a gentle nature and seldom gets excited. Yet, on June 3, 2009, something happened that brought out a much different nature in this typically good-natured man.

Adam has two dogs, a Labrador named Homer and a German shorthair named Jarrett. That evening, Adam was in his house taking a nap before heading to work later that night. His wife, Heather, was in the back yard with the dogs, doing some yard work. Homer had gone his own way, leaving Jarrett in the back yard near Heather. Suddenly, Jarrett let out a terrifying yelp. Going to his aid, Heather saw what she thought was a large dog on top of Jarrett. She hollered to Adam for help.

Dashing out the back door, Adam immediately knew it was a wolf — not another dog — on top of Jarrett! He ran straight at the terrifying scene to help Jarrett. But Homer beat him to it. The big golden Lab streaked by Adam and "t-boned" the wolf, knocking him off Jarrett. The surprised wolf jumped up and ran into the woods, with Adam hot in pursuit. A brief encounter ensued back in the woods as the wolf turned to confront Adam. After a momentary standoff, the wolf turned and ran away. Adam returned to his yard to find that Jarrett did not have any life-threatening wounds.

AN ISOLATED EVENT?

Actually, this scene is repeated as many as four times daily in Adams County, often with completely different results. Of late, there have been so many wolf attacks on dogs in Bayfield, Burnett, Clark and Oneida counties that many bear hunters have given up on training their dogs. The Wisconsin DNR has posted a Web site to keep people informed about the growing wolf problems and how to keep their dogs from becoming wolf fodder.

I ran into Adam and his father,



Homer, the hero dog

Homer, a male yellow Labrador, disrupted a timber wolf attack on his buddy, Jarrett, a German short-hair pointer, recently at the home of their owners, Adam and Heather Felser, who reside on County Road CC west of Tomahawk.

– Leader Photo by Tom Colstad

'Homer' saves his buddy in wolf attack

By Tom Colstad
Tomahawk Leader Sports Editor
sports@tomahawkleader.com

On the evening of June 3, Heather Felser was in the backyard of her home on

Fortunately for Adam, the wolf didn't continue its aggressive behavior and retreated into the pine forest.

"I was prepared to grab the

over, and Jarrett scrambled to his feet and raced for the house. Homer also headed for the door.

Adam yelled at the attacker,

their pups when they attack domestic dogs that venture into their territory.

Adam wondered aloud, "I suppose we must have a den around here somewhere because that's the only

PHOTO COURTESY OF ADAM FELSER

On June 3, 2009, Adam Felser had a close encounter with a wolf near Tomahawk, Wisconsin. The wolf attacked his German shorthair pointer, and the animal would have killed the dog had not his other dog, a golden Labrador retriever named Homer, intervened. The area around Tomahawk experiences episodes like this almost daily.

Carl, on a recent speaking tour in five states (Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota). In preparing the 3 1/2-hour lecture I presented in 14 cities during the tour, I was well aware of potential problems with wolves and bears in these states. So, I included information on what I know about the topic for the tour. Little did I realize that it turned out to be a much greater problem than I had originally thought.

Working with the "club lands" in northern Michigan, I already was concerned about the growing numbers of black bears in that region. In fact, I arranged to get Dr. Daniel Scognamillo, my colleague at Stephen F. Austin State University, involved in a bear population study in the area. Daniel is a recognized expert on predators, having worked with jaguars and mountain lions in his native land of Argentina.

BEARS AND WOLVES AS DEER PREDATORS

Although professional biologists had repeatedly asserted that black bears were not over-abundant in the club lands, over a 30-day period Daniel and his graduate student, Amy Braig, captured and marked 48 bears on one hunting club! During the spring turkey season of 2009, there were three close encounters with bears on this club by hunters. Since my interest focused on whitetails, I had become concerned about the bears' impact on the herds of northern Michigan. So in this column I'll present some of the information I have found on bears and wolves as deer predators. I think you'll be interested.

I am a classically trained wildlife biologist. Receiving my education at Baylor and Texas A&M universities, I "grew up" academically with the dogma "Predators are a good thing." In those days (1960s and '70s), predators like bears and wolves were almost non-existent. For years, I faithfully taught my students that large predators were necessary in the "balance" of nature. In their absence, hunters would have to assume the role to control deer populations.

After 40 years, I must now admit that I was wrong on both counts. There is no balance of nature, and neither hunters nor predators are doing what we want them to do!

The "big four" of deer predators are black bears, coyotes, wolves and bobcats. Mountain lions are trailing these effective predators, but not for long. All indications are that they will soon make it the "big five." Already, there is concern about potential Florida panther predation on the endangered Key deer (since panthers seem to be expanding their range). I am somewhat amused by this, considering that both species are endangered. This is an interesting dilemma, to say the least! But how much impact do large predators have on whitetails, and how do state and federal agencies view these animals?

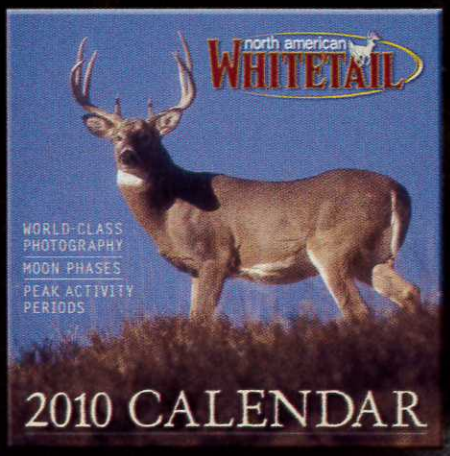
A COMPLEX ANSWER

Are these large predators a legitimate concern for hunters and wildlife managers? And when we add hunters to the list, which ones have the greatest impacts on deer populations? For a long time now, professional biologists and sportsmen's groups have touted the idea that hunters are a critical component to deer management.

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Unfortunately, however, the data do not support the premise (at least as far end as results are concerned).

Whitetail herds throughout most of their range have been pretty much out of control for the last three decades. Sticking illogically to a "traditional" deer management philosophy, one in which harvest focuses on bucks, state agencies have not been able to control population growth using hunters. And hunters are not innocent in this game, either!

Consider the turmoil in Pennsylvania over antler restrictions and liberalization of the doe harvest several years ago. Deer biologist Gary Alt was encouraged to "retire" over the issue, in spite of the fact that he almost singlehandedly improved the quality of bucks and hunting to a level not seen in Pennsylvania in our lifetime.

I've done a little fact checking on what we know about the role the above-named predators play in the population dynamics of whitetails. And as you might expect, scientific studies have not kept up with the rapid increases in predators. Some biologists really do not want to know the impact, probably due to the biases I'll discuss later. Others think whitetail hunting has been given too much attention from state agencies.

THE IMPACT OF COYOTES AND BOBCATS

Dr. Daniel Harrison (Dept. of Wildlife Ecology, University of Maine) asserts: "Does it make biological sense to manage (non-native) deer as THE featured species in northern Maine to the possible detriment of other game species and endangered and threatened species that are evolved to live there?" Apparently, Dr. Harrison thinks that whitetails are non-native animals.

Reading the published literature, there is no clear consensus on the impact of coyotes, probably due to the fact that they have expanded their range significantly during the last century. Within their traditional range, impacts seem to be rather minimal and within acceptable limits to allow maintenance of "huntable" populations of deer. My own experience indicates that in areas having adequate cover and a concise rut (producing a concise fawning season), coyotes are a big concern.

However, in the areas where coyotes did not traditionally exist, it may be a very different story. For example, there now is growing awareness that coyote predation in such states as South Carolina may be higher than we originally thought.

Bobcat predation, mostly on fawns, can be significant. One Florida study reported that 33 fawns and six adult deer were killed by bobcats during a three-year period in the Everglades. Published studies indicate that occurrence of deer remains in bobcat scat (whitetails and blacktails) was 40 percent in Maine, 22 percent in New Hampshire, 5.3 percent in Oregon, 2 percent in Alabama and Florida, 29.6 percent in Utah, and up to 32 percent in Texas. I generally consider bobcats as fawn predators and have not found a substantial impact on deer by these predators.

In Part 2 in our February issue, we'll examine the three predators that definitely impact our deer the most — black bears, wolves and mountain lions. See you then!

