

*Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming/Montana*

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**A bison herd crossing the road in Yellowstone National Park. Oversnow vehicles are required to yield right of way to them. (Claire Walter photo)**

## YELLOWSTONE IN WINTER

*A quieter yet wilder park beckons in winter.*

By Claire Walter

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A dozen of us, bundled up against the early-morning chill, took turns at the eyepiece. There, in the slanting morning sunlight in Yellowstone National Park's Lamar Valley,

wolves of the Druid Peak Pack prowled in the distance – moving dots to the naked eye but identifiable through the tripod-mounted spotting scopes that our naturalist-guides had set up. No one was afraid of the proverbial “big, bad wolf,” or even an entire pack, a mile or more away. Rather, we amateur wildlife watchers were excited and enchanted.

Seven decades after wolves were exterminated under what was then National Park Service policy, 31 Canadian gray wolves were controversially reintroduced into Yellowstone in 1995, over the objections of nearby ranchers. Now, 14 packs totaling some 200 animals roam the park’s northern mountains and valleys. Their presence has largely restored the traditional balance between predator and prey in this section of the 2.2 million-acre park. In fact, biologists have identified the Lamar Valley as the best place on the planet to see wolves in the wild, and more than 10,000 people do so every year.

You can check a pack’s rough whereabouts at [www.wolftracker.com](http://www.wolftracker.com), and if you are sharp-eyed, you might spot them on your own. Success is more likely if you accompany a knowledgeable naturalist-guide. Some wolves wear collar transmitters, and the guides, who are in radio contact with one another, usually pinpoint a pack’s current location. The Yellowstone Association Institute’s courses include several focusing on wolves. Some programs include lodging in heated but very basic cabins at the educational institute’s field campus deep in the Lamar Valley, while others combine hotel accommodations with wolf-watching excursions.

On this day early last January, our group got a bonus. As we were leaving the valley, our guide learned that coyotes had taken down an elk in the Gardiner River and were feasting on the carcass. When we reached the site, just a few hundred yards from the road, an alpha male was alternately devouring what was left and chasing off smaller coyotes. Only when another big male came along did the first one share. One gnawed at the head and the other worked the hindquarters. Ravens perched on the ribcage, picking at the leavings. It was like having a front-row seat to a “National Geographic Special.”

## WINTER WONDERLAND

Wolves or no wolves, Yellowstone National Park is simply at its best in winter. Gone are the summer hordes watching Old Faithful’s reliable eruptions from crowded bleachers, filling hotels and campgrounds, and thronging into gift shops and cafeterias. Of the park’s three million or so annual visitors, fewer than 150,000 show up in winter. Even the park’s most popular sections revert to a sense of wilderness and backcountry isolation, and when snow covers the paved roads, parking lots, and other components of the vast infrastructure, Yellowstone looks and feels pristine.

The massive caldera of an ancient volcano comprises the heart of the park. Its legacy is 10,000 hot springs, mud pots, and geysers that are simply spectacular in winter. Plumes of white steam rise steadily from streambeds, mudflats and fissures. Vapor coats nearby trees with rime ice, while heat keeps the ground snow-free and attractive to wildlife. Brightly hued algae and mineral deposits in warm ponds and rivulets contrast with the white snow, black tree trunks, and patches of dark, bare earth.

Wolves aren’t the only animals you’ll spot. Winter visitors are virtually guaranteed to see other species too. Mule deer, coyotes, and even bighorn sheep are common around Mammoth. The Old Faithful and Fishing Bridge areas abound with bison and elk. Bison, the biologically correct name for buffalo, travel along snow-

covered roads – and they have the right of way. Moose inhabit wetlands, while ducks, geese and rare trumpeter swans glide on unfrozen sections of rivers and lakes.

Of the five routes into the park, ordinary vehicles can use only the North Entrance, where park headquarters and the Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel are located. This entrance also accesses the 55-mile road through the Lamar Valley, plowed only because it is the lifeline for the hardy year-round residents of Cooke City, at Yellowstone's northeastern corner. Elsewhere, over-snow vehicles – snowmobiles and snowcoaches – are the only way to ride. Snowcoaches transport both day visitors and Old Faithful Snow Lodge overnight guests. These unusual vehicles – a cross between a snowmobile, a vintage tank, and a school bus – carry eight or ten passengers in heated but otherwise minimal comfort.

Snowmobiling is popular in the park. Most snowmobilers travel in guided or private convoys to Yellowstone Lake, Old Faithful and other mid-park attractions. Some enter from the south, from Flagg Ranch, but most come in at the West Entrance in the morning, blitz the park, and leave before dusk. Wolf reintroduction was Yellowstone's big controversy in the early to mid-'90s. The big issue now involves snowmobiles. The Clinton administration banned them, effective in 2003, to cut noise and pollution in the park. The buzz is that the Bush administration might rescind this ban, but for the moment, if you want to snowmobile in Yellowstone, this would be the winter to do it. Every day between December and March, a thousand or more snowmobiles zoom along the park's unplowed roads. If the ban is upheld, that number will be cut in half in 2002-03, and the following winter, there will be none.

Overnight visitors already discover what the park's director of interpretation Diane Chalfont calls "the value of quiet." She believes that "as snowmobiling is phased out, more people who desire quiet and solitude" will visit the park in winter.

#### FAMOUS SITES EASY TO VISIT

Most of the really famous thermal features are easily accessible via oversnow vehicle. From a huge winter parking lot, it is just a short walk to Old Faithful, the park's signature. This fabled geyser is the centerpiece two contiguous basins, where a smooth, cleared walkways pass other geysers and pools. Oversnow vehicles also call on the Norris Geyser Basin. In a surreal landscape created by the most active thermal area in the entire park, you can see 20-odd major geysers and thermal pools from a walkway and boardwalk. Steamboat Geyser, the world's tallest, spews water as high as 300 feet at full eruption. Puff 'n Stuff chugs and chortles and gurgles constantly, but never really erupts. Similarly, the dramatic West Thumb area of Yellowstone Lake and the spectacular Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone are close to the road, easy to explore and dramatic when frosted in winter white.

For my money, human power is the most satisfying way of experiencing Yellowstone. Some features are only reachable on snowshoes or cross-country skis, but you don't have to be a gonzo winter jock to do so. Just as a single example, there are two trails from the Old Faithful area to Lone Star Geyser, which erupts about every three hours but often keeps going for 30 thrilling minutes. You can follow the flat and easy four-and-a-half-mile Lone Star Geyser Trail or the more difficult Howard Eaton Trail. They join near the distinctive geyser, so you can combine the two routes into a loop. These are just two of Yellowstone's miles of winter trails – some wide roads and some

narrow-cut trails. Many are periodically groomed; others are marked but ungroomed. The two most used trail systems are near Old Faithful and Mammoth Hot Springs.

Hotels at both locations offer ski rentals, guided excursions and instruction. Snow sports aside, Yellowstone is a fine place for a few days of winter R&R. There are no televisions in the hotel rooms, so take some good books, and be prepared for conversation. At the Old Faithful Snow Lodge, find a comfortable reading chair by the fireplace in the lobby, and later, take an inspiring and invigorating mid-day walk to Old Faithful and the rest of Upper and Lower Geyser Basin. It's a short walk or shuttle ride from Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel to the sculptural beauty of the travertine terraces, constantly changed by mineral-laden flowing waters. Soak in the hotel's hot tub, attend a ranger presentation, go ice skating, visit the museum at the visitor center or just look outside. You might see elk or deer grazing right outside the window. In troubled and uncertain times, there is something supremely comforting about being close to nature – whether on a ski trail or on the other side of a pane of glass.

## IF YOU GO

Location: Jackson, Wyo., 60 miles from the South Entrance, and Bozeman, Mont., 90 miles from the North Entrance, are the best air gateways to Yellowstone National Park, which is in Wyoming's northwest corner. It is about 500 miles from Denver to South Entrance/Flagg Ranch.

Lodging: Old Faithful Snow Lodge and Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel are open from shortly before Christmas through early March. Rates and reservations: (307) 344-7311 or [www.TravelYellowstone.com](http://www.TravelYellowstone.com). The most lodging close to, but not within, the park is in West Yellowstone, Mont. Contact (406) 646-7701 or [www.westyellowstonechamber.org](http://www.westyellowstonechamber.org).

Programs: Most of the Yellowstone Association Institute's field camp courses include two or three nights' barebones lodging at the Lamar Buffalo Ranch, meals and instruction from a noted naturalist. Non-members' fees are \$135-\$235 per person. For details: [www.yellowstoneassociation.org](http://www.yellowstoneassociation.org). Multi-day programs with comfortable hotel accommodations range from Winter Wolf Discovery (two nights at Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel, most meals, naturalist-guide, many extras) starting at \$229 per person, double occupancy, to The Wonderland (three nights at Old Faithful Snow Park Hotel, two nights at Mammoth, most meals, in-park transportation, extras), starting at \$729 pp/do. Contact: (307) 344-7311 or [www.TravelYellowstone.com](http://www.TravelYellowstone.com).

Snowmobiling: Information on tours and rentals from Flagg Ranch, (800) 443-2311 or [www.flaggranch.com](http://www.flaggranch.com); West Yellowstone, (406) 646-7701 or [www.westyellowstonechamber.org](http://www.westyellowstonechamber.org); Old Faithful Snow Lodge and Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel, (307) 344-7311 or [www.TravelYellowstone.com](http://www.TravelYellowstone.com), or Jackson Hole, (800) 782-0011 or [www.jacksonholechamber.org](http://www.jacksonholechamber.org).

Yellowstone National Park: (307) 344-7381 or [www.nps.gov/yell/](http://www.nps.gov/yell/).

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