

Christmas in Yellowstone: A Dream Come True



By Jonathan G. Way

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 - <http://www.easterncoyoteresearch.com/store> or MyYellowstoneExperience.org
- Previous books by Jonathan Way:
 - Way, J. G. 2007 (2014, revised edition). [Suburban Howls: Tracking the Eastern Coyote in Urban Massachusetts](http://www.dogearpublishing.com/SuburbanHowls). Dog Ear Publishing, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA. 340 pages.
 - Way, J. G. 2013. My Yellowstone Experience: A Photographic and Informative Journey to a Week in the Great Park. Eastern Coyote Research, Cape Cod, Massachusetts. 152 pages. URL: <http://www.myyellowstoneexperience.org/bookproject/>
 - Way, J. G. 2020 (Revised, 2021). Northeastern U.S. National Parks: What Is and What Could Be. Eastern Coyote/Coywolf Research, Barnstable, Massachusetts. 312 pages. E-book. Open Access URL: <http://www.easterncoyoteresearch.com/NortheasternUSNationalParks/>
 - Way, J.G. 2020. E-book (Revised, 2021). The Trip of a Lifetime: A Pictorial Diary of My Journey Out West. Eastern Coyote/Coywolf Research, Barnstable, Massachusetts. 561 pages. Open Access URL: <http://www.easterncoyoteresearch.com/TheTripOfALifetime/>.
 - Way, J.G. 2021. E-book. Coywolf: Eastern Coyote Genetics, Ecology, Management, and Politics. Eastern Coyote/Coywolf Research, Barnstable, Massachusetts. 277 pages. Open Access URL: <http://www.easterncoyoteresearch.com/CoywolfBook>.

Pay it Forward

Dear Reader,

I wrote this as an e-book to maximize the book's exposure as much as possible. Yellowstone is an absolutely amazing place and I hope this collection of beautiful pictures from around the 2020 holiday season clearly articulates that. To increase access for all people, rich or poor, majority or minority, I am offering it for free to anyone in the world who wants to read it.

Christmas in Yellowstone was a [great nature film](#), a bucket-list dream of mine to one day go out there during the holidays, and then in 2020 it became a reality. On the cover picture, I spent Christmas eve in 0° Fahrenheit weather for most of the day while looking for wildlife. I was wearing four layers in that picture and did pretty well, not retreating to my car, and braving mother nature's beautiful elements. "Merry Christmas to all from Yellowstone!" was what I noted on a Facebook post during the holidays.

In this e-book, I share with you, the reader, my experience out in the world's first national park during the 2020 holiday season in a photographic journey intended to awe the reader. If you enjoy it, all I ask in return is that you *pay it forward* by sharing and please consider a donation of \$10.00 to support my research and education efforts, as well as supporting the book's Open Access format. That is about the price of one movie ticket and you get to own this book, and all of its pictures, forever. If you do not want to donate from [my website](#), you are welcome to email me and I can provide you with a physical address: jon@easterncoyoterresearch.com or easterncoyoterresearch@yahoo.com.

Thanks in advance!

Jon Way



Entering Yellowstone National Park from the North Entrance.
Note the elk in the background to the right of the sign.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my Yellowstone-area friends Dr. Bob Crabtree, the original coyote guru; Bob Landis, cinematographer extraordinaire; and Rick McIntyre, whose dedication to studying and helping people observe wolves is unparalleled. Without their generosity, this trip never would have happened.

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Aspens in Little America.



Preface and Acknowledgements

Ever since I saw the 2006 PBS Nature film [Christmas in Yellowstone](#), I had a bucket list dream of going out there during the holidays. There seemed something magical about being in my favorite place, Yellowstone National Park, during Christmas. While it meant leaving my family, including my pets, my 12 year old son, and my extended family of parents, brother and sister, and nieces and nephew, I became enthralled with the chance to go there during 2020.

Unfortunately, car prices were exorbitant in Bozeman and I wasn't sure about housing during that time, especially with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. That's when some old friends were a game changer. Bob Landis, who has filmed many of the nature documentaries from Yellowstone that you may have watched (for example: [In the Valley of Wolves](#)), offered housing in Gardiner which was just beautiful. He was also a gracious host and I really enjoyed spending the holidays with him and his two dogs, Raven and Agate. Dr. Bob Crabtree, Founder and Chief Scientist of [Yellowstone Ecological Research Center](#) (YERC), offered his old but reliable Honda CRV, a car I have used many times in the park. It is a remarkable vehicle that has been around the park for as long as I can remember. Bob is well known for his 20 year study of coyotes in Yellowstone before and after gray wolves were reintroduced into the park in 1995-96. Over the years, I have worked with him on various projects related to our mutual passion including a part-time post-doc (2010-2012) examining the effects of mortality on coyote population demographics.

Once housing and a vehicle were secured, I purchased a plane ticket from December 23-31, 2020, which gave me 9 days to spend in and around the famous park. The ticket was remarkably cheap (\$278) given the virus halting much of the worldwide travel. Adding to my savings was the United Explorer credit card that I signed up for as I bought my ticket on [United Airlines' website](#). It gave me a \$250 credit on the roundtrip flight, making it virtually free, and it also allowed me to check-in my 50 pound bag for free each way too. What a deal!

With travel arrangements secured in early December 2020, I was immediately mentally ready to go. I was especially giddy with excitement the week before the trip even though I was working full-time as a teacher, coaching my son's basketball team over the weekend, and taking a graduate level course to keep my teaching certification valid. Just my luck, I had a class until 7:00 PM on the 22nd, the night before my trip.

Immediately after that class, I drove up to Revere, getting there after 9:00 PM, where I spent the evening a few miles from Logan Airport at my good friend (and frequent travel companion) Steve Cifuni's condo. Steve and his parents, Steve Sr. and Laurel, also living in Revere, aid me in my travels. They always provide a place for me to park my car in their driveway, along with a ride to the airport after a night on one of their couches. Due to Covid, Steve Jr. won the lucky prize of having me on his couch the night before this trip.

We left Steve's condo around 4:30 AM early on the 23rd of December and, after checking in and going through security, I boarded my flight to Chicago – the first of two legs enroute to Montana – on time. Once I arrived in Bozeman at 11:35 AM Mountain Time, Melissa Todd, of YERC, graciously delivered Bob's car to me at the airport which saved me an enormous amount of effort. Unknowingly at the time, that ultimately gave me the opportunity to see 18 members of the Wapiti Wolf Pack later that day! Melissa also arranged for picking up the car at the airport upon my departure. I greatly appreciate the selflessness of both Bobs, Melissa, and the Cifunis to make this trip happen. When in the park, I spent a lot of time with Rick McIntyre, a retired employee of the Yellowstone Wolf Project who has literally observed more wolves (over 100,000!) than anyone in history. I always appreciate the companionship and conversations while spending time with Rick.

This was my 23rd trip to the world's first national park. After all of these visits, I know the park very well and have a store of information to put this trip into context. In fact, I have published two other books related to Yellowstone. My first, is a color print guide book, [My Yellowstone Experience](#) (2013), and was based on my first 14 trips totaling 123 days. [The Trip of a Lifetime](#) is a 561 page e-book (2020) based on my 21st journey into the park during July 2019, which lasted 7 days, as well as two additional weeks in other western national parks. Altogether, with my most recent trip of 9 days and a July 2020 trip with Steve for nine more, I have been in the park for 204 days, nearly two-thirds of a year!

While I've been in Yellowstone for a good amount of time, it is a relatively short period of time for all of the images I've obtained for the three combined books. But this might not be a huge surprise for some people who visit the area since Yellowstone is one of the best places in the world to see and photograph wildlife. And as you'll notice in these pages, I go all out to make the most of my time when I am there. In fact, the energy I exert on a typical 8-9 day trip is not sustainable for much longer than that. This trip was no exception! Yet that doggedness, even though I was there for just over a week, helped to give me enough images and experiences to be able to create a worthwhile book.

This project came about in part because many of my Facebook friends (including family members) greatly appreciated the pictures that I posted while I was there, as they always do on my travels, and suggested that I make a picture e-book out of those posts. Including an [update to my Profile picture](#) on December 24, 2020, I published seven posts each corresponding to one or two days in the park. Thus, the rough outline of this tome, including most of the captions, comes directly from those Facebook postings. Naturally, I have had to edit those original posts for context and clarity. And most importantly, I put them in chronological order here, which I couldn't do on Facebook because that program puts the pictures in alphabetical order which really changed the flow and order of my posts. Here I am able to detail the 9 days in the park from start to finish.

During the trip, I took 863 images with the vast majority being pictures, along with a few videos. In this book, I use my top 259 pictures (which includes 11 maps) to show my Yellowstone experience during Christmas. In addition to those Facebook posts, I also referred to the 19 pages of journal notes that I took while in the park to flesh out this story. My mother, Robin, copy-edited the text to make it more professional, as she always does. Lastly, the National Park Service and Carol J. Scopinich, creator of the Yellowstone SPOTR app, provided useful maps to help direct readers to important locations that I visited.

I hope you enjoy it and are able to donate to support my research and keep these e-books in Open Access format. Please see the *Pay it Forward* page at the beginning of this document if you want to support my work. Thanks in advance!



The flight there. Desert country (left) transitions to the mountains (right)
near Yellowstone.



Paradise Valley, Emigrant Gulch area, on the drive from Livingston, Montana to Yellowstone.





Paradise Valley (top left), Yankee Jim Canyon (bottom right), and Devil's Slide just north of Gardiner, Montana.



Roosevelt Arch in Gardiner, Montana. View to the east of the arch with stores in the background and my vehicle for the trip in the foreground (top right); view to the North through the arch (bottom).





Life in Gardiner, Montana.





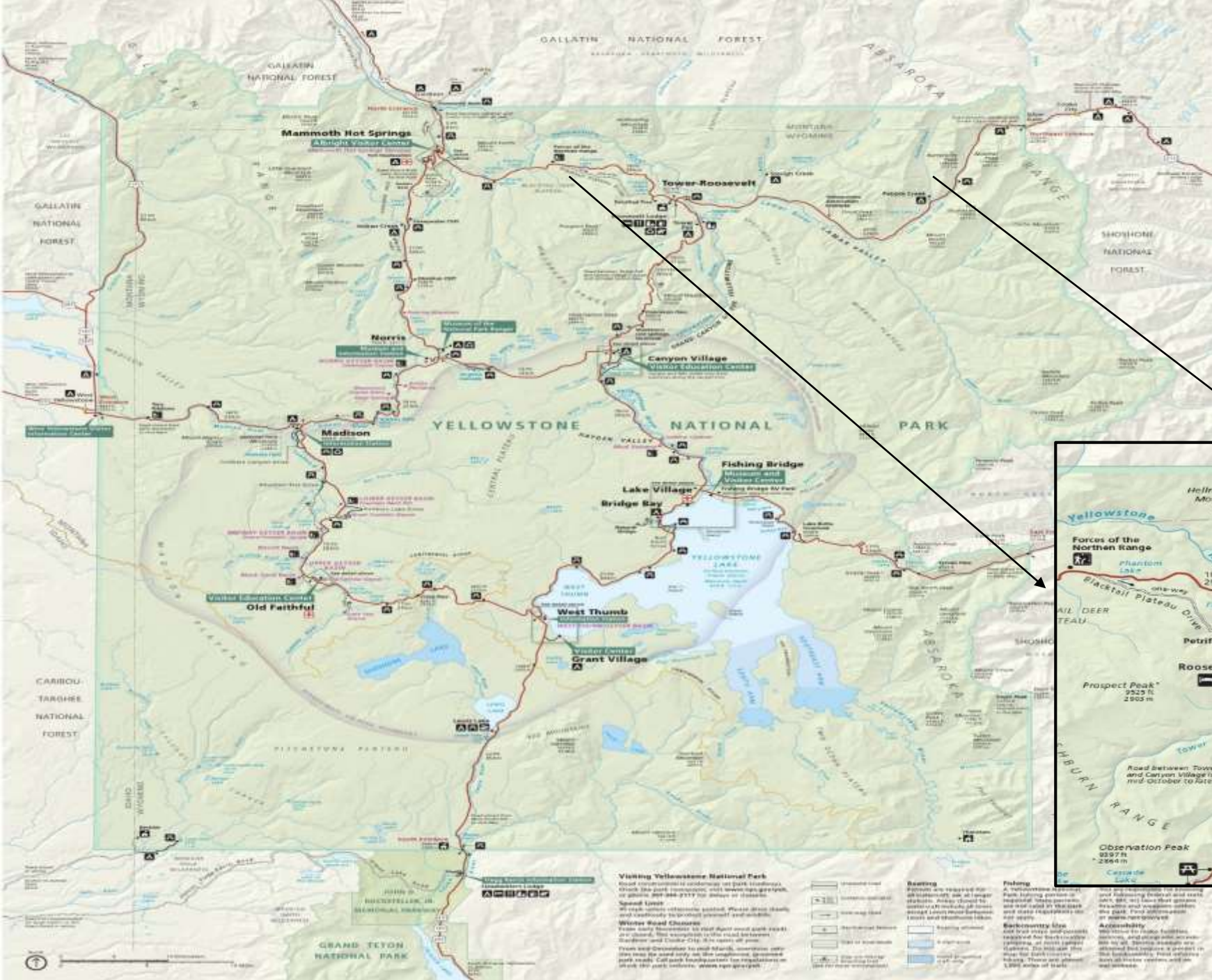
Bob Landis, legendary filmmaker, out in his domain.



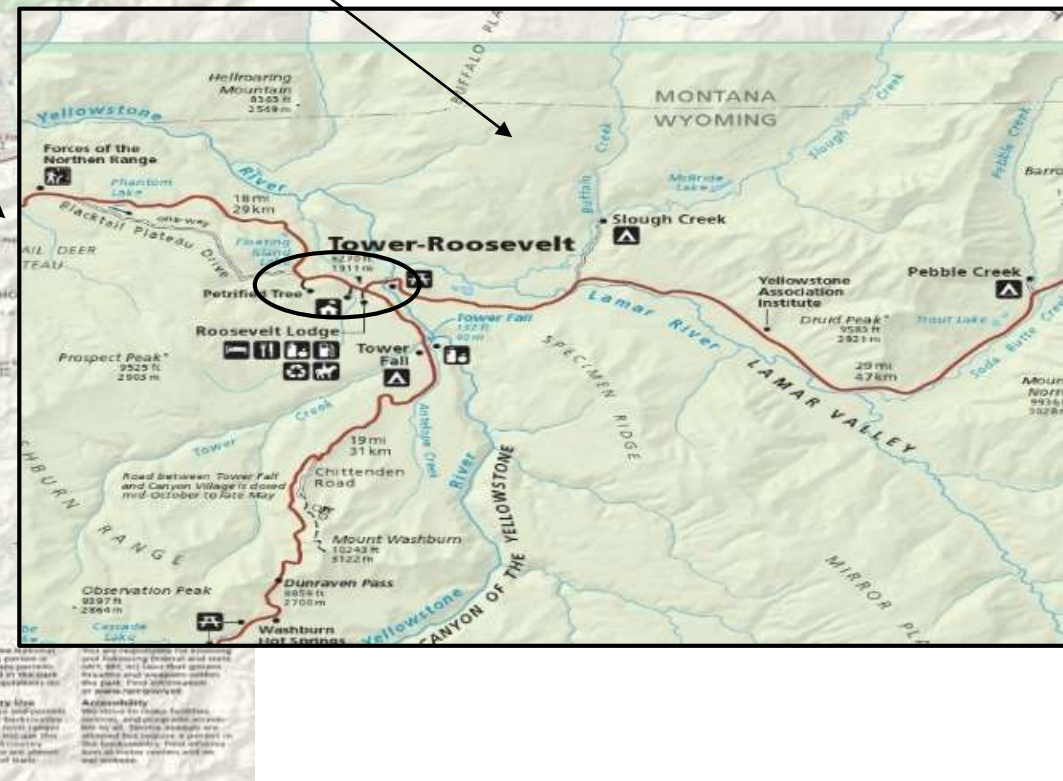
Maps of Places Visited

During winter, the majority of the park is closed with only the road from Gardiner (where I stayed) to Mammoth to Silver Gate/Cooke City open. I spent the majority of my time on this expedition in the Tower/Roosevelt area. Lamar Valley is normally where I look for wildlife when in Yellowstone, but without wolves there during this trip, my time was limited.

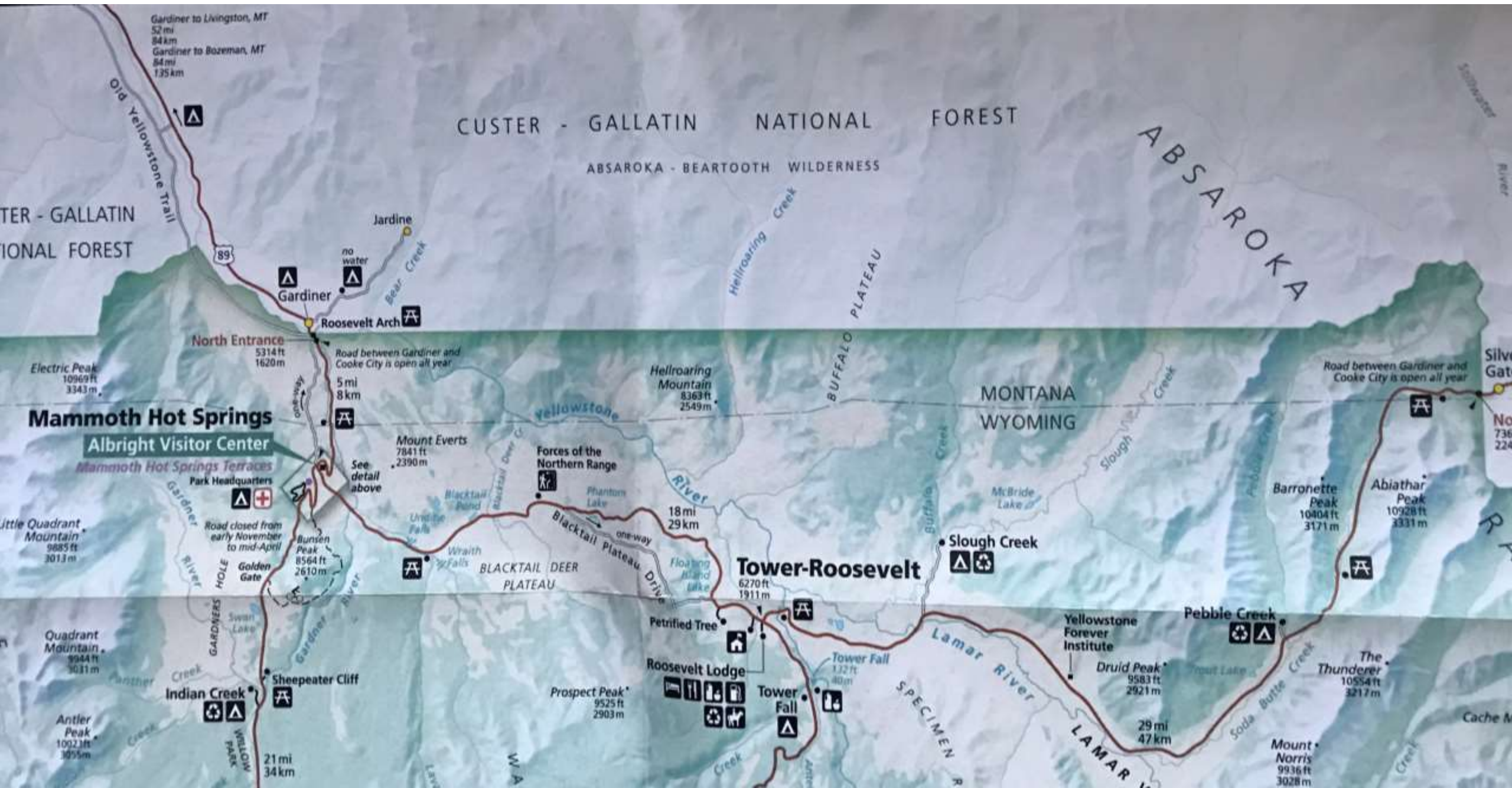




A more detailed map of where I spent most of my time while in the park. Due to wolf activity, I concentrated my activity in the Elk Creek/Petrified Tree to Tower Junction area (see oval below) during Christmas 2020. Map © of the National Park Service.



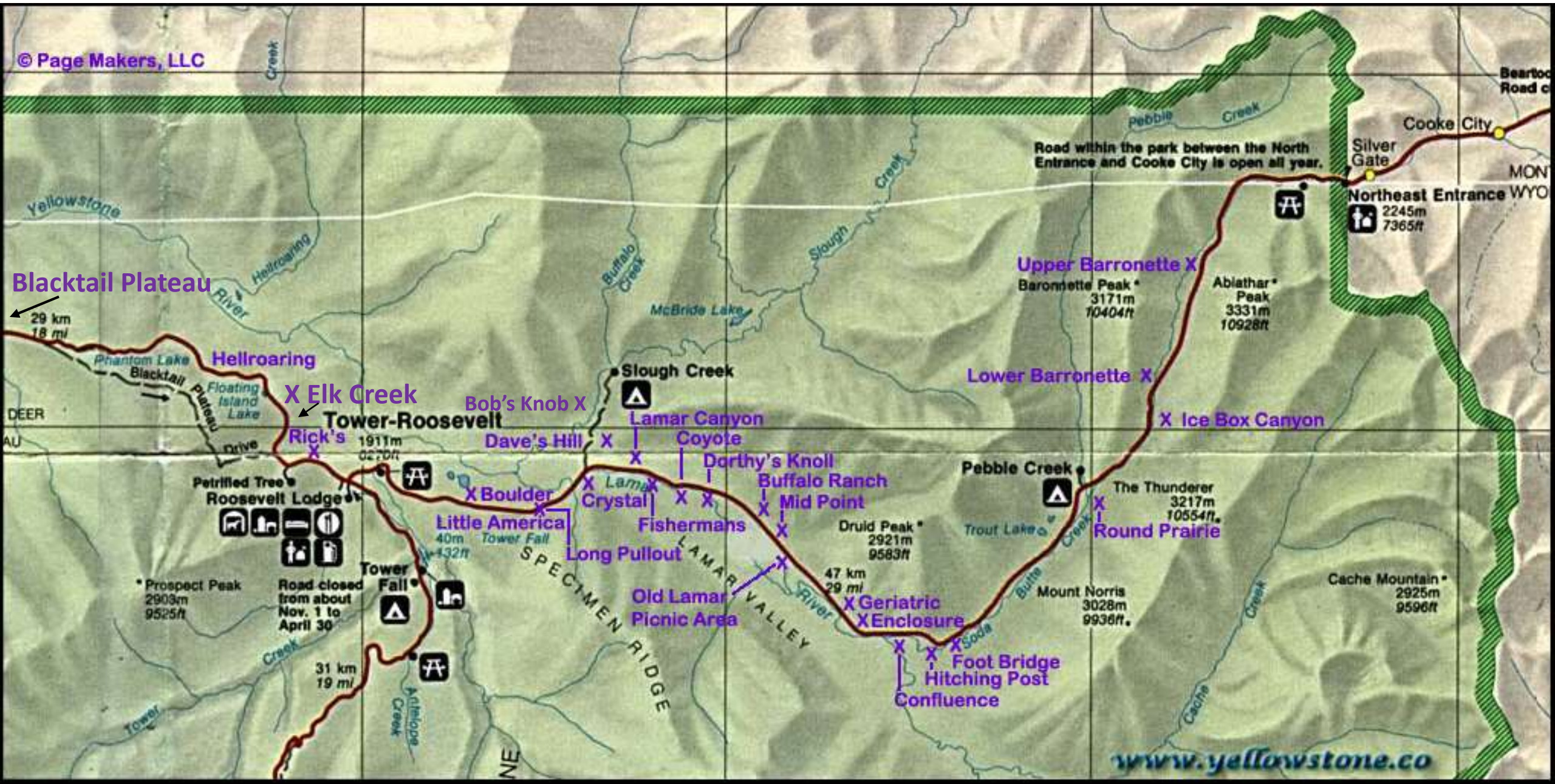
A close-up view of the northern part of Yellowstone that is open during the winter. Map © of the National Park Service.

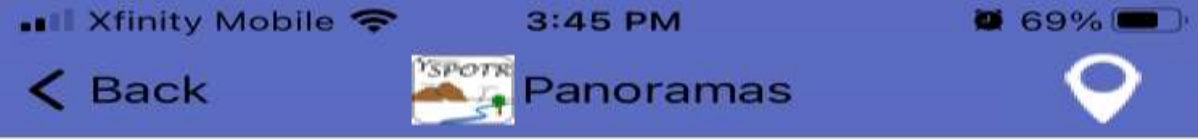


A topographical perspective of major areas visited during the trip including Blacktail Deer Plateau and the 7 mile one way ski trail (in winter); Floating Island Lake and Petrified Tree is where the Elk Creek area is (notice Elk Creek on map); Garnett Hill Loop Trail (8 miles); Tower Junction is where the Road goes south or east (notice Tower Fall 3 miles to the south); Slough Creek Campground Road (Little America is the area to the west); Druid Peak (den site is on the south side of the mountain, north of the road, and west of “Soda Butte”); and Trout and Buck Lakes just west of Pebble Creek. Map © National Geographic and Yellowstone Association: Trails Illustrated Outdoor Recreation Map.

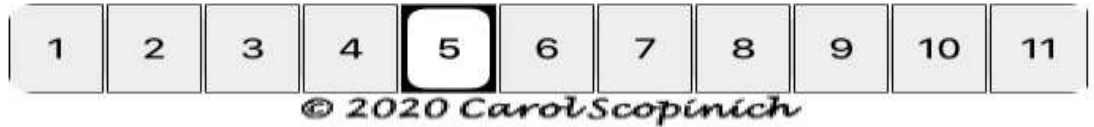
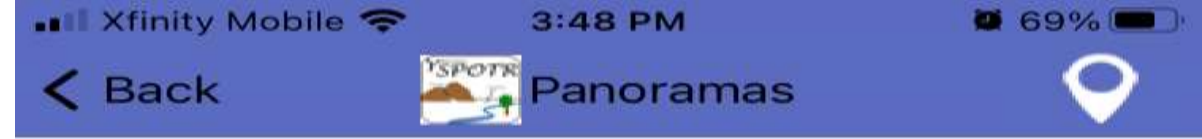
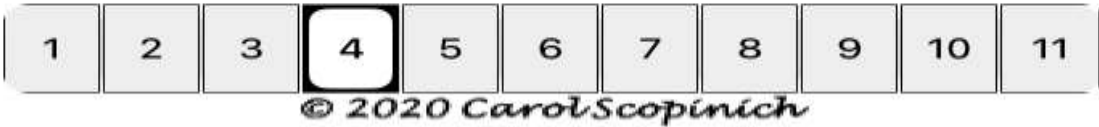
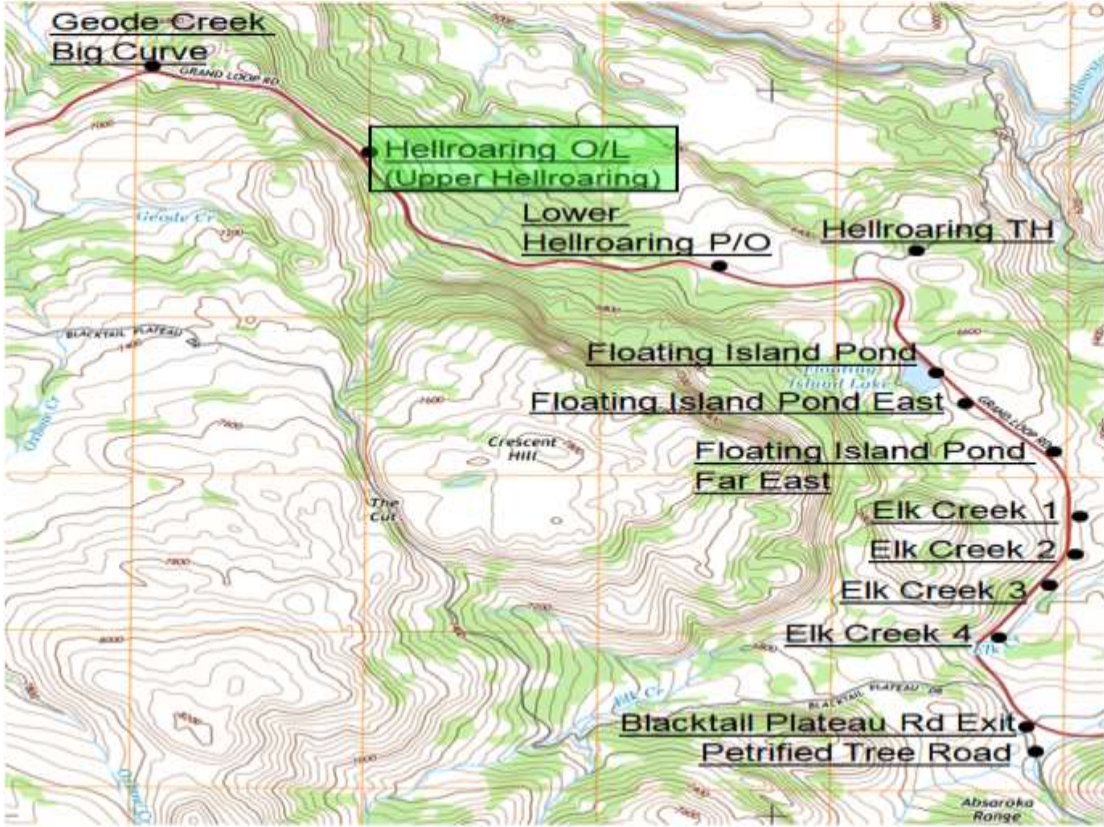


Place names of locations in northern Yellowstone in more detail. Purple indicates pullouts/overlooks where I and others stop to observe wildlife. The Blacktail Plateau is to the immediate west of this map.





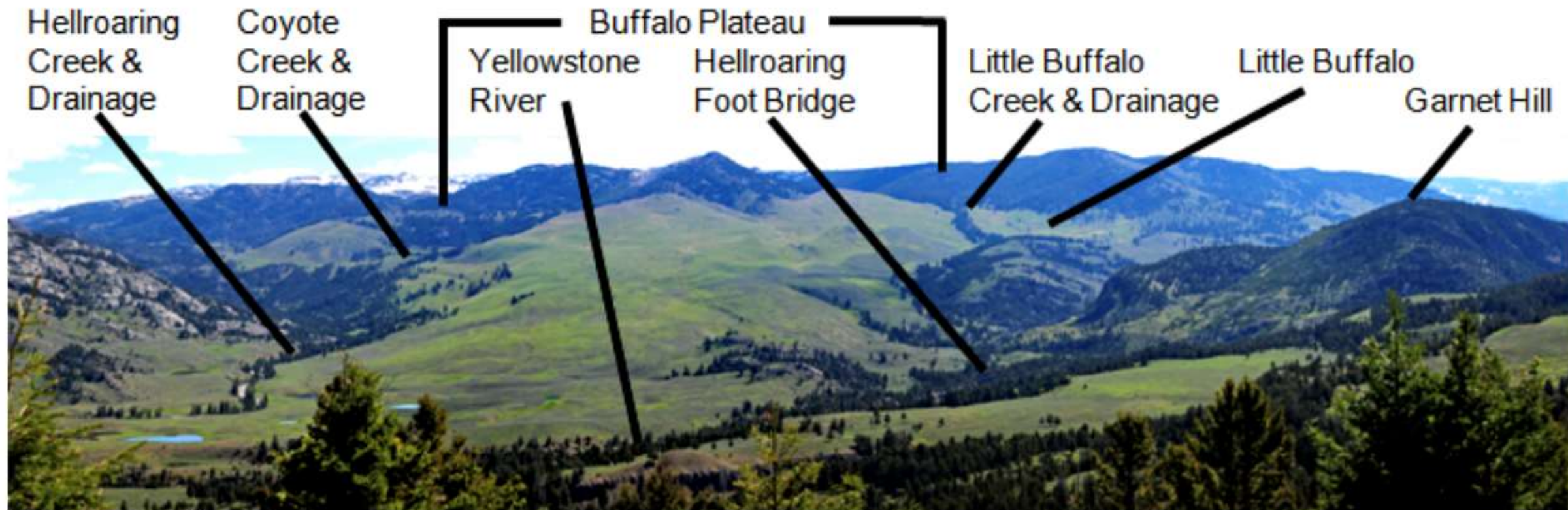
Another list of pullouts, this time a close up of the Hellroaring area to Elk Creek (left) and then past Tower Junction to the western part of Little America (right). Maps © of Carol J. Scopinich, Yellowstone SPOTR app.





View from Hellroaring O/L (aka Upper Hellroaring), facing North N44.95431° W110.48000°

View from Helloaring Pullout with descriptions of local names. Panorama © of Carol J. Scopinich, Yellowstone SPOTR app.



1

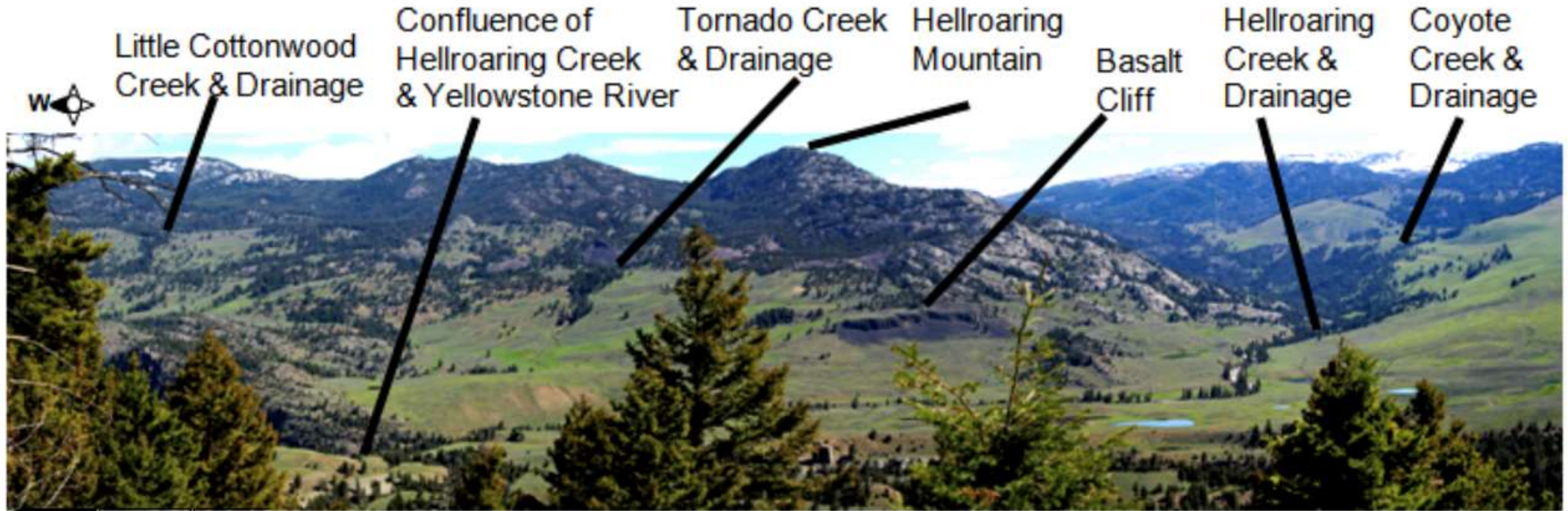
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© 2020 Carol Scopinich

View from Hellroaring O/L (aka Upper Hellroaring), facing North N44.95431° W110.48000°

View #2 (further to the west) from Helloaring Pullout with labels of local names. Panorama © of Carol J. Scopinich, Yellowstone SPOTR app.



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2

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© 2020 Carol Scopinich

View from Elk Creek 1, facing East N44.93342° W110.44219°

View from Elk Creek with descriptions of local names. Panorama © of Carol J. Scopinich, Yellowstone SPOTR app.



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© 2020 Carol Scopinich

Wild Nature: The Beginning

Yellowstone is an amazing place. All the money in the world can't buy untamed nature, especially the abundant wildlife that call this place home including coyotes, wolves, fox, bison, elk, bighorn and deer. On the first day, December 23rd, I arrived at Bozeman airport, picked up my car for the trip around noon Mountain Time, shopped for food in the area for about an hour, and then drove the hour and a half south to get into the park by mid-afternoon on a brisk 10–11°F day in the park, which chilled my bones to the core. I was fortunate to have some good wildlife sightings while driving through the park as I saw 12 elk near the North Entrance gate, 4 bighorn sheep rams on the steep cliffs of Gardner Canyon, about 6 more elk just south of the sheep, and a couple of herds of bison on Blacktail Plateau. I reached the Elk Creek area at 3:40 PM and saw many parked cars. The wildlife watchers were observing wolves there in what Bob Landis later called “one of my top days ever in the park” which is certainly saying something given his 40 years of dedication while filming the park's wildlife and producing some amazing nature films on them.

It turns out the Wapiti Wolf Pack was very close to the road and active for much of the earlier part of the day. I arrived in time to see 18 members of the pack bedded about a third of a mile away. The pack's normal range is down in the central part of the park including in and around Hayden Valley, a popular place to observe wildlife – including wolves – in the summer and fall. However, there is not much prey there in the winter as all of the elk and most of the bison migrate to lower elevations. The wolves by necessity also leave Hayden and travel 20 miles north where they spend much of the winter around the Tower Junction area. They manage to survive on elk and bison, among the other full-time resident wolf packs. I was able to see the white breeding (alpha) female and a lot of grays and blacks bedded in the snow. Given that I came from the airport earlier, I wasn't dressed in many layers. I did pull out my winter insulated Sorel boots which helped me deal with the cold.

Elk grazing on windswept ridges at the North Entrance.





Bighorn sheep in Gardiner Canyon.
Above: Two close-ups of rams. Below:
Perspective of the steep terrain that
the sheep are in.



Bison on Blacktail. Good viewpoint of the western part of the plateau (bottom right). Undine Falls, nearly frozen in winter, is just to the west of the large bovines.



Undine Falls zoomed in.



I stayed for about an hour, talking with familiar and new people. I briefly communicated with my friend and world-renowned *retired* wolf naturalist, Rick McIntyre. While Rick is officially retired from the park service, he still heads into the park every day as a private citizen and continues to observe wildlife. He had seen the Junction Butte Wolf Pack just a mile or two away from the 'Wapitis' earlier that day. There were 34 members together which is one of the biggest and most cohesive wolf packs ever documented anywhere. After watching the Wapitis hunkered down in the snow for about an hour, the activities of the day caught up with me. I decided to head back to Gardiner to meet up with Bob at his house. Once I arrived into town, which is a small, concentrated housing area consisting of about one square mile just outside the park, I saw a doe and fawn mule deer right next to the road. That sighting would be a prelude for all the deer hanging out right in the middle of town during this trip!

When I arrived at Bob's house I could tell that he was elated with the day's happening and the amazing footage he took of the Wapitis. This feeling is similar to what one experiences during childhood on the night before Christmas when the excitement of the moment is almost palpable. I know that feeling well, including every time I first arrive back in Yellowstone on all 23 of my trips, when I capture and radio-collar eastern coyotes/coywolves for study, and after seeing something new like a record pack size or an interaction between two species that I had never observed before (such as a wolf and coyote or wolf and grizzly interacting). It is a peak experience in a wildlife biologist's or naturalist's career. After catching up with Bob, and scavenging on some of his leftovers, I was able to settle into the guest duplex and unpack, check my email, and download the 54 pictures I had taken during the afternoon.

The second day of the trip, December 24, was my first full day in the park. It started out at a brisk 9°F in Gardiner and 0° in the park. I spent most of the morning searching for the Wapitis in the couple of miles between Elk Creek and Floating Island Lake but never saw them. Others had brief sightings of the wolves up the ridge west of the road in the trees but they never came into an open area long enough to have a solid sighting of them.

Wapiti Wolf Pack sleeping. There are 14 of the 18 that I saw in the main picture (below) with the white alpha female and a gray wolf to their east (top right). Following page: A perspective of where the pack was in the Elk Creek area.







Wapiti Wolf Pack



Mule deer in Gardiner.

However, on this day I was fortunate to view great scenery, as I always do in Yellowstone, as well as bighorn sheep, bison (one of my all-time favorite animals), coyote, elk, moose, mule deer, raven, red fox, and white-tailed deer. White-tailed deer, the most common large animal in North America, actually is not that prevalent in the park. I saw a doe near Floating Island Lake while searching for the elusive Wapitis. She flagged off out of sight but I didn't see anything chase her. I also jumped a red fox at the eastern part of Lamar Canyon. I was taking a picture of that beautiful canyon at its junction with Lamar Valley when it noticed me reach my body over an overlook directly above it. The fox quickly ran south over the frozen Lamar River. You know you are in a cold region when a large, fast flowing river freezes.

I got as far east as Lamar Valley on the 24th. I scanned the wide-open area, managing to see a lone coyote in the middle of the barren valley, before heading back west. Around noon I parked at the Petrified Tree lot which is right in the Elk Creek area. I flagged down a camper van heading west and asked if the couple would be willing to bring me to the Blacktail Plateau well to the west which would allow me to complete a 7 mile, one way hike on the winter-designated cross country ski trail, which finishes at Petrified Tree. They agreed, so I donned a mask due to Covid and sat in the back of their home-made movable house. I was grateful for the ride, loved it, and thought how cool that would be to have something like that.

I started my journey in snowshoes but didn't need them due to the hard-packed snow on the road, so I carried them for most of the time. I saw coyote tracks literally the entire way, and at about the second mile I found wolf tracks. They were also on the trail for most of the next 3–4 miles. During some places on the hike there were wolf tracks nearly everywhere on the trail which was amazing. Additionally, around two miles into the hike I heard a lone mournful wolf howl to the north but couldn't identify where it was other than in the distance. I also spotted some smaller canid tracks which were fox. That gave me a three dog track hike! Gray wolves, western coyotes, and red fox are the only canids that live in Yellowstone so seeing all three in one day is special for many dedicated wildlife watchers. Seeing them on a hike via their tracks is a nice consolation prize since I hadn't actually observed wolves that day. I also observed 6 bull bison on the hike in three groups of 2. They were just grazing near the road, moving their enormous heads back and forth to clear the snow and expose grass.



Elk Creek area at dawn and 0 degrees (above). White-tailed deer just east of Floating Island Lake (bottom right). They are not that common in the park. Raven at Tower Junction (bottom left).





Ravens at a picked-over elk carcass just east of Floating Island Lake. We stayed in the vicinity for hours as the Wapiti Wolf Pack was nearby but they never made an appearance in this area on that day choosing to remain out of sight in the wooded hills.





Lamar Canyon and
frozen Lamar River.



Leaving Lamar Canyon and entering Lamar Valley.
An amazing transition...



Lamar Canyon



Red fox on frozen Lamar River.



Red fox on frozen Lamar River. The little canine saw my shadow from the road above it and became nervous and ran away (notice its tracks). It took a brief look back at me before running further south and out of sight. Below: Lamar Valley and Jasper Bench, one of my favorite places.



Coyote in Lamar Valley (bottom right of picture), a small presence in a wide open area. Inset: Close-up of that same animal.





Wolf tracks (left). Compare this to a much smaller western coyote track (bottom right). Both were taken from the Blacktail Plateau cross-country ski trail. This trail is a navigable dirt road in the summer that vehicles drive on.



Wolf trail (left) and wolf tracks plastering the road (right).





Blacktail Road which turns into a 7 mile ski (or hiking) trail in the winter.

A really cool ravine on the Blacktail Road.



Two bison bulls (center of picture) off the Blacktail Plateau Road.





Bison bull up close off Blacktail Plateau Road.

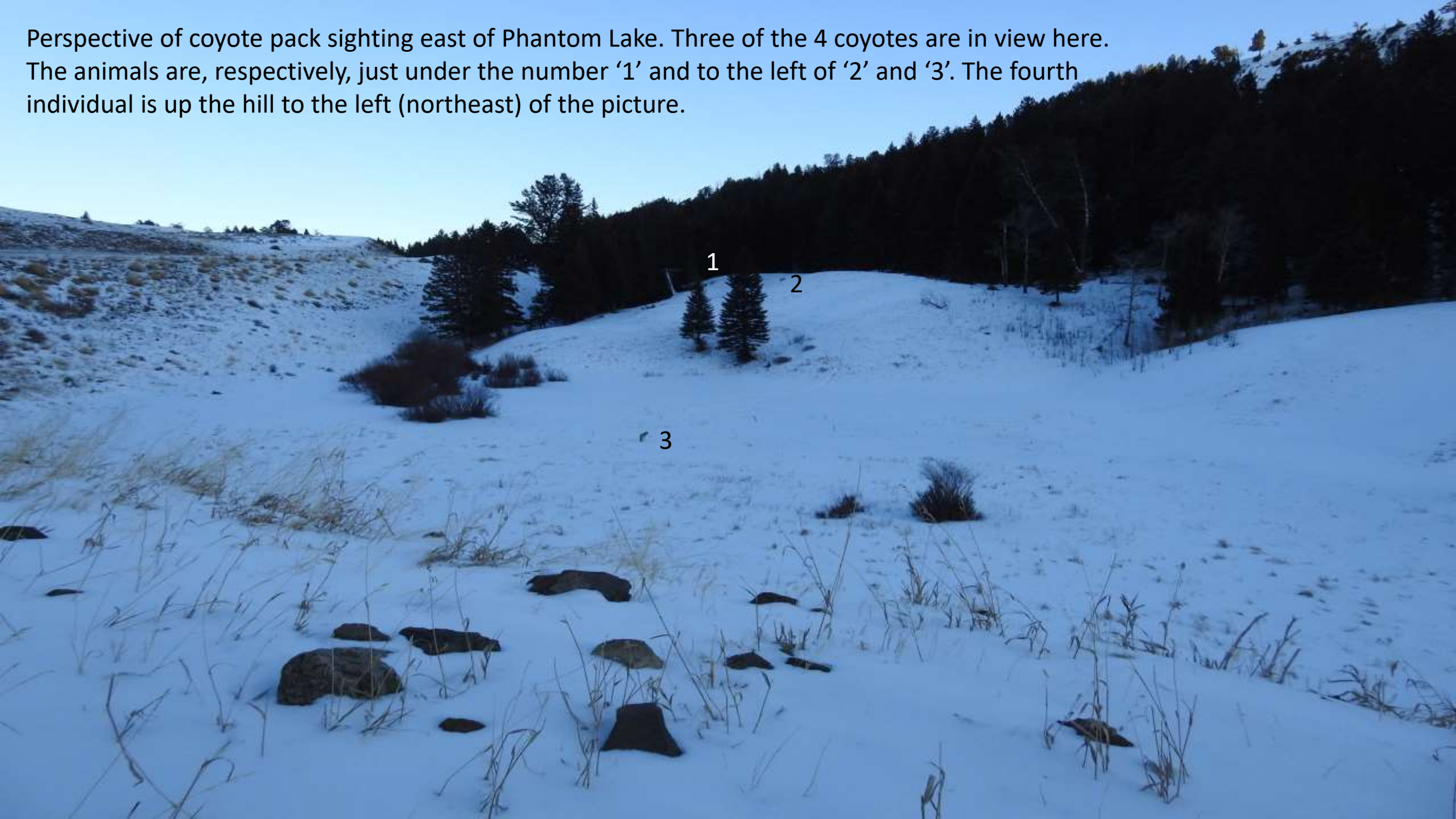
I arrived back to the car at 3:45 PM after a wonderful but exhausting hike. A guy I met in the parking lot reported that he had heard loud howling from the Wapitis up on the ridge south of the eastern section of the trail about a half mile from where the trail ends. I never heard them while I was on the hike. Once I stopped to talk and had a quick snack, I realized that it was pretty cold out, as it was a chilly 9 degrees there. That seemed correct as whenever I got warm on the hike and removed my hat, my ears would soon begin to freeze. So too did the water bottle that I had stored in one of my jacket pockets.

On my drive back to Gardiner I managed to spot and take some great photos of 4 coyotes about a half mile east of Phantom Lake in a steep topography area. From the top of a hill, they were looking southwest into the woods and loudly bark-howling, an obvious sign that they were disturbed about something. The most robust and bold one of the group, whom I assumed to be the breeding male, was gorgeous. He had a tawny coat and a different appearance than many of the coyotes I see in Yellowstone. I watched them for about ten minutes since they were spread out in that localized area. After they went out of sight, I left the area and then hustled back to Gardiner, arriving there at 4:50 PM, just before dusk. I was tired and needed food and rest. I devoured an entire frozen pizza and other snacks upon my return. I was in the park for 10.5 hours and had expended a lot of energy, so I needed many calories to replenish myself. The next morning, I learned that the small Carnelian Wolf pack, consisting of 4 pups and 2 adults, was seen near a kill at Phantom Lake earlier the previous day. That was no doubt why the coyotes were so agitated when I was observing them.

On Christmas morning, I left the apartment in Gardiner at 6:20 AM which ensured I would arrive into the heart of the park around 7:00 AM, well before first light. It was 0°F, the third day in a row that I started out with an arctic chill while in the park. I met Bob at Elk Creek where we quietly stood in the pre-dawn cold for an hour, waiting for the day's action to begin. It was really peaceful to stand in the silence in Yellowstone, but we didn't hear anything so I left there at 8:03 AM *only* seeing about 40 bison in front of us down by the creek and about 20 elk bunched up on top of a slope in a relatively snow-free area.

I drove back to the west and met Rick at Hellroaring Overlook where we scanned for wolves and anything else that might be around. That area provides a sweeping view of the Northern Range, where one can see for miles in a 180° panorama. On the far, open slope to the north we found 20–30 elk and over 100 bison spread out. I also saw a white-tailed deer who was much closer and lower on the slope. She was on our side of the Yellowstone River. When Rick told me that it was -5°F there and -10° in the Lamar Valley earlier in the morning, I was amazed, especially when considering that we were standing out in the elements for most of the morning. However, I realized how cold it was when I went to drink some tea *in the car* and the mug was frozen!

Perspective of coyote pack sighting east of Phantom Lake. Three of the 4 coyotes are in view here. The animals are, respectively, just under the number '1' and to the left of '2' and '3'. The fourth individual is up the hill to the left (northeast) of the picture.



Coyote howling to the previous coyote. There were 4 in this group.



Coyote traveling on alert.





Coyote near Phantom Lake. A very pretty and robust western coyote.



Gardner River View from Mammoth High Bridge.

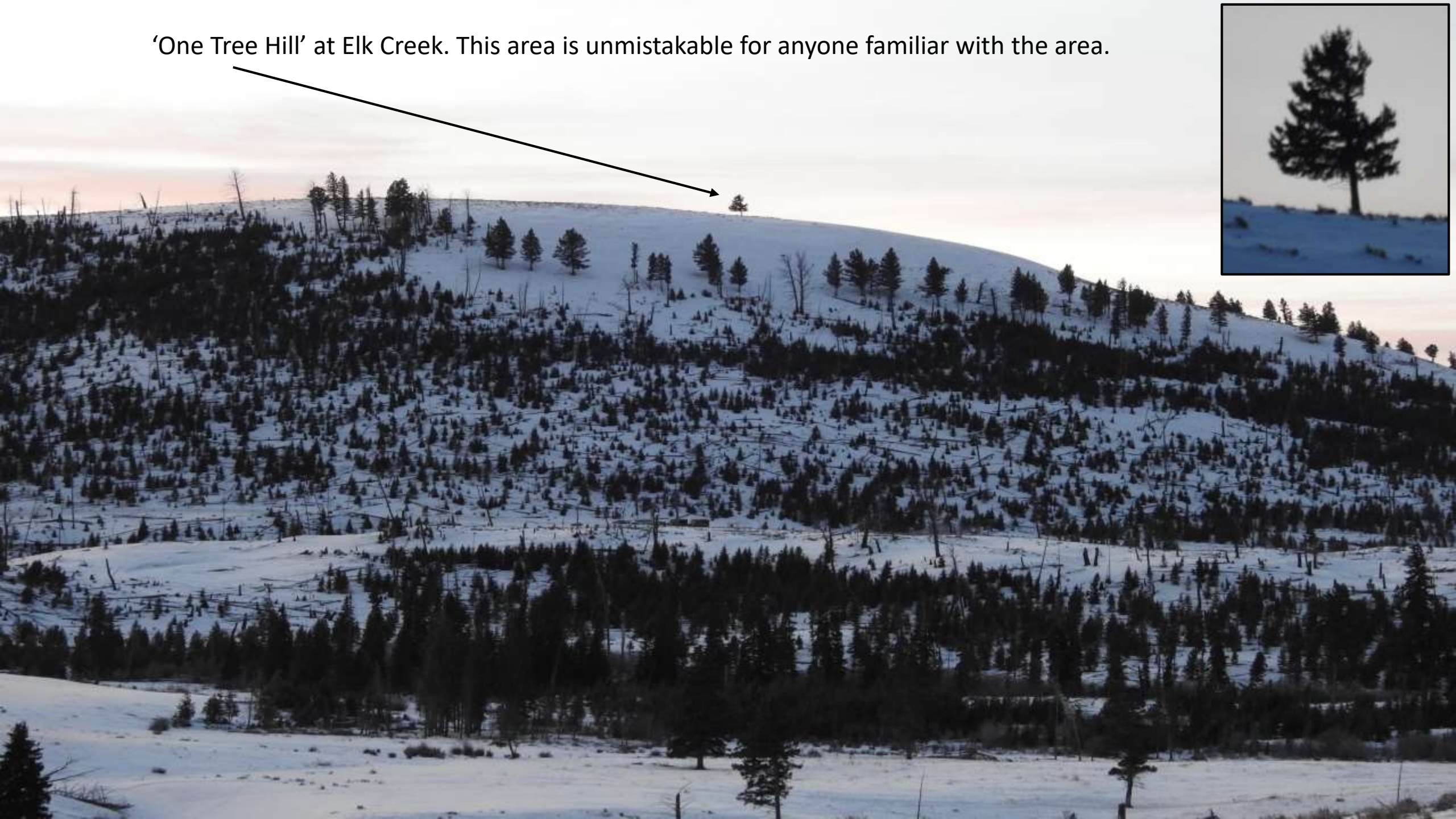
View of Mammoth area on my way home on Christmas eve.



Sunrise at Elk Creek on Christmas morning.



'One Tree Hill' at Elk Creek. This area is unmistakable for anyone familiar with the area.



Hellroaring area. Wolves are often seen 1–2 miles away from this overlook.



Conifers behind Hellroaring Overlook. A pretty winter scene.



Rick and I went back and forth between Hellroaring and Blacktail Plateau and scoped both locations without spotting any wolves. On our second attempt back at Hellroaring, we managed to find a carcass down in the trees by the river. It was out of sight behind a bush so it was difficult to identify but we did spot over 20 ravens, a coyote, and an eagle on the dead animal. While I scanned the immediate vicinity of the carcass area, Rick panned the open plateau and found a small group of 5 wolves that we suspected was an offshoot of the Junction Wolf Pack. The 'Junctions' consisted of 34 members during most of the fall but were recently subdividing. The group we watched consisted of 4 blacks and 1 gray. They were mostly bedded and flat out on their sides but occasionally moved. Two of the blacks were collared but Rick wasn't exactly sure who they were. While there, we were able to assist many people in seeing them by describing where to look. Normally, we let people watch through our spotting scopes but with Covid we weren't sharing them to maintain proper social distancing. I managed to also see a second coyote at Hellroaring while scanning near the bedded wolves. It eventually went east into trees near the Yellowstone River and might have been attempting to head to the carcass.

At 11:25 AM, I departed the area and took a great hike to Petrified Tree then I continued to Lost Lake and back. There was a young bull moose bedded down in a gully about halfway to the fossilized tree. The quarter mile long road is closed in the winter so I was hiking by it. I snowshoed to the east side of Lost Lake which was about a mile from the parking lot. I had to get off the trail and hike around 4 bull bison just west of the lake which is a marsh during the snow-free months. It is always nerve-racking to be in the backcountry and have to negotiate around those 2,000 pound animals. While generally docile, they are fast and agile creatures for their size so it is important to give them a wide-birth of space. On the way back all four bison were on the path so I had to really go off-trail this time. I trudged to the south side of the marsh and got a good 100 meters away from them. I was now at the southwest part the lake. The sun there is blocked by a steep ridge above the lake, so the snow was deeper. I managed to sink into snow drifts up to three feet deep. I noticed on the way that the lake was completely frozen over and there were some wolf tracks up by the lake. It looked to be a small group crossing the ice coming from the steep hill. I was amazed how they are able to navigate challenging terrain.

Bison grazing on wind-swept ridge where there is less/little snow.





Three of 5 bedded wolves that we saw at Hellroaring Overlook.

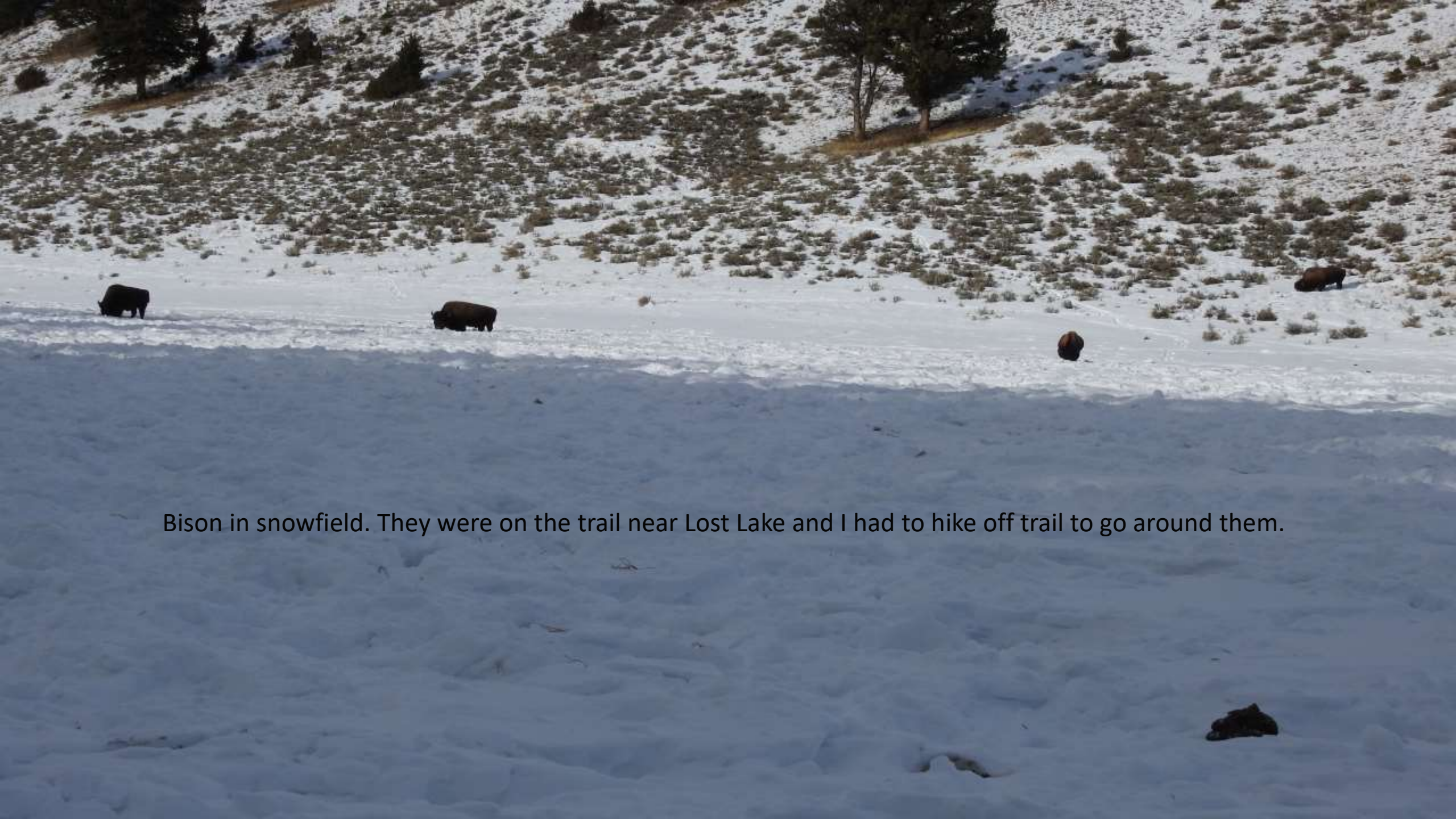


Bull moose near Petrified Tree. I love the lighting on this pic (right). Above: Lost Lake. This is a great 1 mile each way hike. It is a really hidden looking lake, hence the name. Snowman on the road which is covered in snow and turns into a ski/hiking trail during winter (bottom left).



Bison on Lost Lake Trail. Inset: Close-up of one of the bulls.





Bison in snowfield. They were on the trail near Lost Lake and I had to hike off trail to go around them.



Lost Lake view to east (top left). Bison grazing just to the west of the lake (bottom right) with 3 of the 4 in the picture. Wolf scat observed on the trail on the hike back to the car (bottom left).



Bighorn sheep on top of cliff in Gardner Canyon. Great perspective.



I arrived to the car at 1:30 PM, and then headed back to Gardiner. I saw 8 elk on the slope of Mount Everts near Mammoth, a group of bighorn sheep on top of Gardner Canyon, and 15–18 elk in Gardiner Hole just past the entrance gate. They were all grazing right next to each other. I also saw 6 mule deer feeding together near Bob's house which was a cool way to end the day in the park. I was able to walk back from the driveway of the duplex and get within 30 feet of them for some close-up pictures. "Amazing," I thought.

I had Christmas dinner with Bob as a very kind wolf watching couple made him enchiladas and he was generous enough to share them with me. I was even able to watch my home town Boston Celtics play on Christmas evening! It was a great first two and a half days in the park.

On my first full Facebook post from this trip, I noted the following, which rings true in this book as well, "The world is definitely a better place with protected areas like Yellowstone where wildlife can live like they have for thousands of years. The latter pictures include images from Christmas day. I hope you enjoy this first round of pictures..."

Bighorn sheep in Gardner Canyon.





NORTH
ENTRANCE
ELEV 5314



Elk in Gardiner. I love these panoramas of them.





Mule deer in Gardiner. Notice exclosure around tree to protect it (bottom right). Next page: Close-up of those deer.





Snow!

The name of the game for the day after Christmas was snow. It was a white-out for most of the day on the 26th and was quite warm with 30 degrees in Gardiner and a balmy 27°F in the park. I was fortunate to see 5 wolves from Hellroaring Pullout immediately before the snow came in, but was not able to obtain pictures. I heard howling to the east of the overlook and wildlife watchers in the lot were able to spot the wolves traveling west into falling snow. It was probably the same Junction Butte pack sub-group from the day before that Rick McIntyre and I observed but we were literally looking into a blizzard while watching them so discernibility was poor. Then we completely lost visibility for long distance viewing. We had the privilege of hearing one more bout of howling but couldn't see anything. "Great music," I jotted into my notebook.

A quick note about wolf/wildlife watchers: There are many people who regularly visit the park and watch wolves as well as all of the other animals that live there. Some individuals, most notably Rick, live there full-time. Rick has written two books on the wolves of Yellowstone (click to see my reviews of his [first](#) and [second](#) books), with two more in progress. Rick and the cadre of wolf watchers keep tabs on them and know the individual wolves very well. I come once or twice a year, as do many other die-hard visitors, and am part of that loose collection of folks when here. We mostly use spotting scopes, which are essentially mini-telescopes, and search for wildlife which is often over a mile away, such as when we are at Hellroaring Overlook. During our time in the park, many less experienced visitors also look for wolves and other wildlife. For the most part, they are very appreciative of the veteran spotters since we often help them observe wild wolves, sometimes for the first time in their lives.

There is a great website, <https://yellowstonereports.com/index.php>, which details the daily activities of the wolves and other Yellowstone flora and fauna. Laurie Lyman, a retired teacher from California, and a friend of mine, summarizes the happenings of the wolves between her observations and her friends' reports when she is not in the park. Quite amazingly, she writes a daily report of wolf activity on that website to keep folks like me up-to-date.



Driving in snow. Top left: The whiteout is letting up around lower Hellroaring. Lower right and left: Bison near Tower Junction in snow-storm. There was a group of bison in that general area all week.



Lamar Canyon, one of my favorite areas.





Top: Lamar Canyon panoramic including "my" car in the distance. Bottom: Lamar Valley in a whiteout. Jasper Bench is in the background.



Historic Lamar Ranger Station, also called Buffalo Ranch or Lamar Institute.



The Confluence of Lamar and Soda Butte Rivers. Another of my favorite places.



Confluence up close.





Below: The confluence with the road to give one a good perspective. Top: Dipper, an aquatic songbird who goes underwater to catch aquatic insects. It is a really neat bird. This one is just coming up from being underwater and caught a couple of insects that it is eating (the little black dots on the ice).



At 8:30 AM, I left Hellroaring Overlook and drove east in the snow hoping for better visibility, taking pictures of the scenery and some more bison along the way. Lamar Canyon and the confluence of the Lamar and Soda Butte Rivers were particularly beautiful on that day with both areas cloaked in a fresh blanket of white. The snow was falling rapidly in those areas, however, so it was tough to see far away. I did manage to see a dipper, an aquatic songbird who feeds on freshwater invertebrates, at the confluence.

After scenery gazing, I took a couple of really cool hikes, including one of my favorites to Trout and Buck Lakes. Visibility was poor so I knew I would have to return to this area later in the week on a clearer day for better pictures since I couldn't see the mountains above the beautiful, frozen water bodies on this two mile roundtrip. I didn't observe any wildlife on the jaunt, but I did hike in over a foot of fresh, powdery snow without my snowshoes, which I had left in the car.

Next, I had enough energy for another short hike so I visited the nearby 'Old Druid Den Site' area in the western part of Soda Butte Valley. This area, just a few miles west of the Trout Lake trailhead, has been used regularly by wolf packs since the 1990s and is often closed in the spring and summer when wolves den there. It was amazing to explore this hallowed area in the winter when the large canines aren't often there as they nomadically travel around their few hundred square mile territory. There was a wetland/marsh area which went about a half mile west to east. I was surprised how large the area was just on the other side of a sagebrush dominated ridge that leads to the park road. We know the wolves use that marsh in the summer, which is so close to – but out of sight of – the road.

While exploring the area, I saw a few ghostly looking herds of bison magically appearing in the falling snow including about 12 by the marsh, 10–15 in the lowest part of the forest, and then a dozen up above the second group. They were all heading in a general southwesterly direction toward the park road except the third group, consisting of cows and calves of the year, who ran uphill and away from me to the northeast. They then looped back to the west and went south toward the road. As I hiked in this sanctified wolf-use area, I also noticed a large cow bison up on a ridge above where I saw the three previous groups. She was so big that I thought she was a bull at first. Curiously, she stood among the trees and never moved, instead just staring at me. I kept an eye behind me as I hiked by her, ensuring that she didn't attempt any funny business by attempting to come after me when I wasn't looking. Fortunately, she never moved from her position and I gave her a wide birth (about 25 yards) to respect her boundaries.



Bison in Lamar near "21's Crossing". This is where the famous wolf #21M of the Druid Peak Pack regularly crossed during his heyday in the area (1997–2004). Above: One of my favorite sequences of the day as the bison group navigated the road in the snow.





Bison are true survivors and snow is a part of their life to which they are adapted.



Cool shot of Soda Butte Cone and bison in the distance.



Trout Lake. Not the scenic mountain view but nonetheless a special, personal experience in a white-out. I knew I would have to get back there on a sunny day during this trip to better see the beautiful scenery.



Left: Trout Lake inlet stream with a few conifers dotting the landscape. Right: Buck Lake and one of my favorite trees, the leaning tree. You can climb up about 20 feet for a better view of the area. In my Facebook post, I noted, "Embarrassingly, I can't remember if the tree is a Douglas Fir or Ponderosa Pine. I'll have to go back there and check." More on that later.



Right: Buck Lake. A true backcountry lake. There were not many human tracks here which was cool as there is no official trail leading up from Trout Pond.
Bottom: Buck Lake panoramic during snowstorm.





The next five slides show the 'Old Druid Den Site' area in the western part of Soda Butte Valley. This area has been used regularly by wolf packs since the 1990s and is often closed in the spring and summer when wolves den there. It was amazing to explore this hallowed area in the winter. There was a wetland/marsh area which went about a half mile west to east and are shown in both of these pictures solidly frozen over.





Bottom: I saw these bison on my second hike of the day in the Lamar area. It was almost magical how they were gliding across the landscape. Left: This lone cow bison stood at the top of a ridge stubbornly not moving from her location while three herds were on the move in the area. I gave her a wide birth to avoid disturbing her. As you can see, it was really snowing.

Next page: The 'Druid Den Forest' was really open with spaced conifers but not much of an understory of vegetation besides grass.







Top: Another view of the savannah-like 'Druid Den Forest'. This is a view of the forest toward the park road with the marsh in middle of the panorama. The park road is a couple of ridges to the back (south) of this picture.



Close-up view of the 'Druid Den Forest' with a good perspective of the cliffs above the forest and below Druid Peak which was not visible in the clouds on this day.



The 'Druid Den Forest' area continued north to northwest all the way to a steep ledge with trees in between. I decided to turn around and not continue past the spot where I had good visibility of that area. I guessed that the den was still to the north past the open forest but wasn't actually sure. Given the hilly terrain, it was very easy heading back to the car as it was mostly downhill the entire way. I got back within 15 minutes once I established a line of sight bearing where to head toward. Altogether, I probably went another couple of miles, crisscrossing the area.

Besides the bison sightings, I spotted fresh coyote tracks in the den forest traveling west. Interestingly, once I got back to the car and drove west, I quickly saw a coyote as it crossed the road about a half mile west of where I parked. I surmise that the song dog was just traveling through the area while I was exploring in there. We probably just missed each other in the forest. Once that coyote reached the flats south of the road and the den forest, it somehow materialized into two animals. I watched the duo travel past ~50–70 bison as they headed southeast of the confluence area.

After that cool sighting, I began the hour drive west back to Gardiner. I saw about a dozen more bison, this time on the road in Little America. It was my first near 'bison jam' of the trip. I had noted in my journal a couple of times thus far how noticeable it has been that the bison have been in much smaller groups than when I come during the summer when there are often a couple thousand together in the flats of Lamar Valley.

On the drive I also saw 4–5 elk in the rolling hills on my way from Mammoth to Gardiner which involves a steep five mile descent from 6239 to 5314 feet. Shortly after those elk, I saw a single elk right at the edge of the road licking salt and/or dirt about half way to Gardiner. I reflected on the drive of how amazing it is to see all this wildlife while essentially commuting an hour from where I hiked to back to where I was staying.

It was nice to get in relatively early (~2:15 PM) which gave me plenty of time to buy a few groceries at the Gardiner Market, gas up, and then work the rest of the day on photos, emails, and other things. I also took a jacuzzi while overlooking the Yellowstone River, which was fantastic! I was able to hike every day up to that point which was awesome, but it also wore me out so this early respite mid-way through the trip helped with my energy level for the rest of the trip. It gave me time to rest and then consume a couple thousand calories during mealtime which is always a good problem to have in today's society.

Despite the snow, I was enjoying the mild temperatures knowing that it was supposed to be only slightly colder the next day. However, I was also bracing for a cold spell that was predicted to soon bring temperatures into the negative range after the storm passed. Thus, I enjoyed the conditions while they lasted. I hope you appreciate these images, courtesy of your first national park...

Two coyotes traveling away from me between the confluence and 21's crossing area.



The bison is just ignoring the two coyotes as they make their way to the south.



Little America area in cloud cover.





A 99 cent buzz courtesy of the Gardiner Market. It doesn't take much after 3 days of hiking... I'm glad to report that I didn't have a headache the following morning. 🤪

Wild Yellowstone

There was a fresh, light coating of snow on the ground and it was a mild 25°F in Gardiner and 15–17 degrees in the park on December 27. I started relatively late, not getting to the Elk Creek area until dawn. At 7:15 AM, I saw 5–6 elk to the east on the exposed, rolling hills. I also spotted a lone cow elk to the south way up at the top of the area we call ‘One Tree Hill’ above Petrified Tree. After an hour of observing, there were reports of wolves at Hellroaring Pullout so I decided to head in that direction. The lot was full when I arrived so I continued west another 0.7 mile and parked at a pullout where you hike up a hill and get a view of the Cottonwood Creek area. Once I arrived up there, I scoped to the east for only about 10–15 minutes when I lost visibility as a snow squall came in. I then hiked down the slippery, icy ridge back to the car.

What happened next was unexpected and unbelievable. After I summarized my notes on the early morning happenings noted above, I did a slow U-turn to head back to the east. There was plenty of space on the road, with room to spare, to make the turn but the Honda CRV slid on black ice from the center lane all the way down to a six inch bank of snow on the edge of the road. Had it not been for the little bit of snow off the road that stopped my momentum to leave the road, I almost certainly would have continued the slide down into a deep gully. It was terrifying as it literally happened in near slow motion given the sluggish rate that the car was moving.

Elk Creek area at dawn.





Top Left: Elk up at One Tree Hill perspective of their location.

Right: Elk and One Tree Hill. Two lone individuals near each other.

Top right: The Elk zoomed in.



After quite a few cars drove right by me like I (and the stuck car partly on the east-bound lane) didn't exist, a couple from Boise, Idaho stopped and assisted me. They had these two amazing emergency boards which resembled a solid sled. We dug out around the four tires and placed those boards under the rear tires and pushed our way back to the street which was at an upward angle, and was all ice. It was really nerve-wracking as we were literally at the edge of a mini-cliff which would have sent me and the car into a wetland about 25 steep feet down. Luckily, however, we managed to get the car out and onto the road and out of that real-life nightmare. I was so nervous during the half hour debacle that I never documented any of this on camera! I was so appreciative of the couple's help, I signed and gave them a copy of my book, [*My Yellowstone Experience*](#), and thanked them profusely for their kindness. (I always bring 3-4 copies of that book with me when I visit the park.)

It was still only around 10:00 AM when that ordeal ended so I relaxed by having breakfast in the car in a nearby pullout slightly away from the scene of the incident. I literally felt like I was in luxury eating cereal, raisins, and (nearly frozen) milk after what I had just experienced. Getting some food into my system helped to relax my nerves.

After I ate, I drove back to Hellroaring Pullout and found parking this time. I was lucky as the same 5 wolves that we had been seeing were bedded in view from nearly the identical location (about 50 meters apart) from two days ago. With good visibility and veteran wolf watchers in attendance, we were able to confirm the 4 blacks and 1 gray as a sub-group of the Junction Butte pack. They were sleeping from about 1.5 miles away from us but it was a good, unobstructed view of wild wolves!

After watching wildlife in the morning, on most trips I get into the routine of taking a hike afterwards no matter what the temperature or weather conditions. That was the case during this trip as well. The first order of business before a hike in cold weather is to shed a few layers of clothes to not be too bulked up while being physically active. While this meant a cold start to a hike (and being briefly in boxers and a T-shirt out in the cold and standing on ice while changing at the car), it ensured that I wouldn't sweat through all of my layers which can be dangerous when you stop being active and the moisture from your clothes chills or freezes onto you.



Left: Five sleeping wolves:
3 blacks, a gray, then
another black behind the
gray. They are about 1.5
miles away from me.

Top right: The bedded
wolves zoomed in.

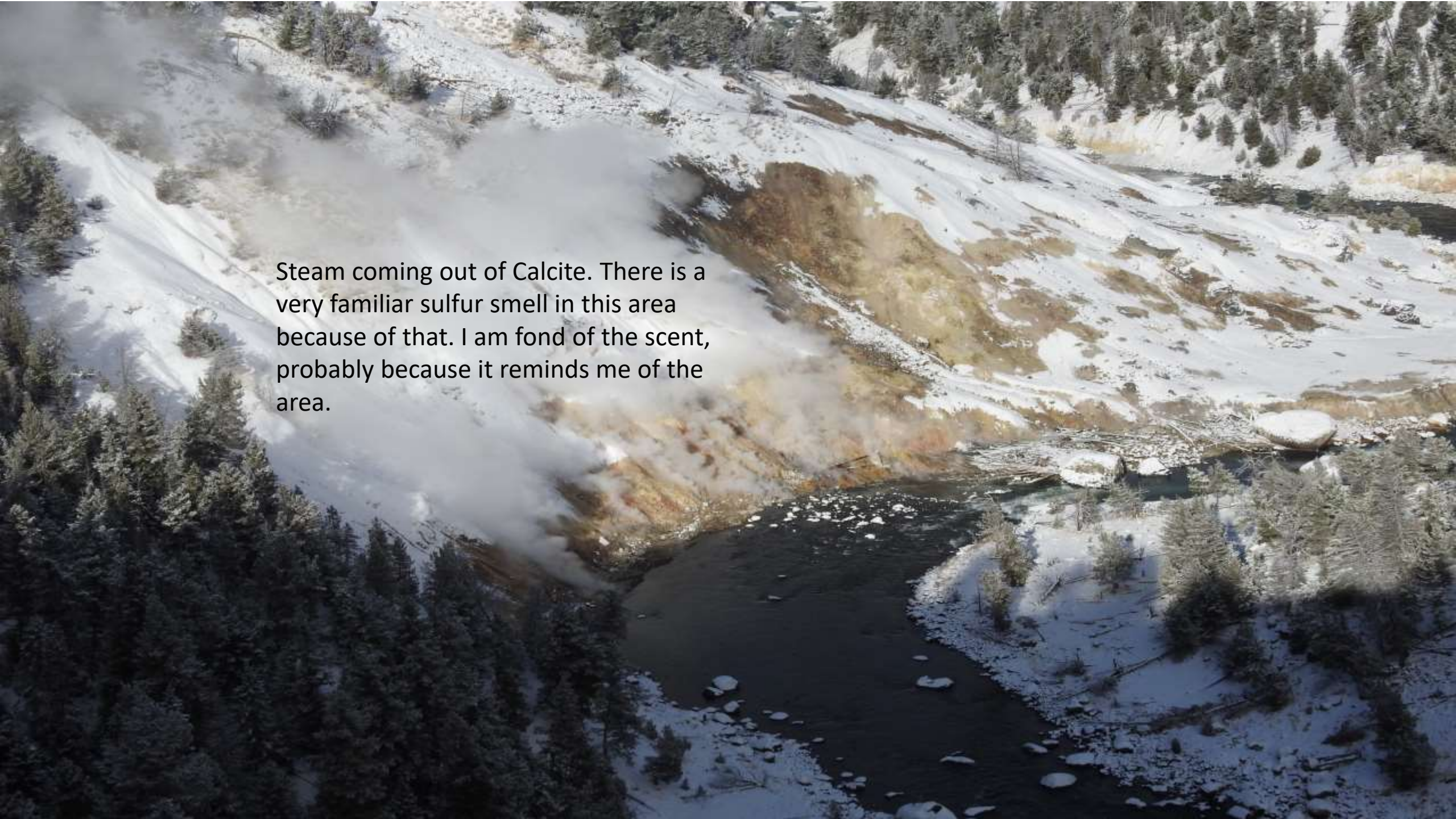
Bison near Tower Junction.





Above: Frozen Rainy Lake on the way to Tower.

Left: Beautiful Calcite springs near Tower Fall.

An aerial photograph of a geothermal landscape. In the center, a large plume of white steam rises from a rocky, sulfur-colored area. The surrounding terrain is a mix of light-colored rocks, patches of yellowish-brown sulfur, and sparse vegetation. A dark, winding stream or river flows through the lower right portion of the image. The left side of the image is dominated by a dense forest of dark green evergreen trees. The overall scene depicts a natural, possibly volcanic or geothermal, environment.

Steam coming out of Calcite. There is a very familiar sulfur smell in this area because of that. I am fond of the scent, probably because it reminds me of the area.



Top: Calcite (left) and cliffs above Yellowstone River (right).

Left: Another perspective of Calcite.



Cliffs near Tower.

On this day, I took a really sweet hike that I had never done in the winter which involved parking at Tower Junction and hiking up to Tower Fall on the snowed-over park road. I went past the Tower Fall area, around the nearby campground, and a half mile past (and above) the campground on the Chittenden Ski Trail before circling back. I obtained some great views of Calcite and the frozen fall which was most impressive as it was frozen in ice. I came face to face with a magnificent bull bison in the campground and saw a lot of bison trails in the area but didn't see any other of the shaggy beasts. The trip ended up being ~7 miles once I arrived back to Tower Junction at 1:00 PM. That included jogging most of the last 2.5 miles as it was downhill and easier for me to run than walk with all of the forward momentum I had.

On my way back to Gardiner, I saw the now standard half dozen or so elk in the hills around the park road on the descent to the town. I made a 'packie run' to the Gardiner Market at 1:45 PM and then went back to the apartment to name and organize my newest batch of pictures. I spent the rest of the afternoon and evening working and relaxing to recharge for the remainder of the trip. I often need one or two shorter days in the field during my typical 8-9 day expeditions to avoid burning out. It was another good day, as they always seem to be in Yellowstone. While in the park during this trip, in addition to the local (and possibly rental) Montana vehicles, I noticed that there had been quite a few Colorado license plates as well. It seemed pretty obvious that most of the visitation to the park was by relatively local travelers from a roughly 10 hour driving radius.

It was beginning to get colder the next morning, December 28, as predicted, with 7°F in Gardiner and 3° at Tower in the park. I spent about 1.5–2 hours from pre-dawn to mid-morning looking for wolves a few miles west of Tower Junction with no sightings. Driving to Tower enroute to my planned trip to Slough Creek around 8:50 AM, I spotted many cars parked there. It turns out they were looking at the Wapiti Lake Wolf Pack right on the Tower Trail where I was hiking yesterday afternoon! They had a kill about 100 meters away which was out of sight by the unoccupied horse stables at Roosevelt Lodge area. A ranger closed the road to hikers and skiers. These wolves often use the park roads to travel so are comfortable and relatively habituated to the presence of people. They essentially don't see people as good or bad, but just another 'object' in their environment. This is not a big deal when in the park but could be fatal outside of its boundaries where hunting is legal.

Good perspective of frozen Tower Fall in the center of the frame.





Tower Fall
frozen in
time; very
impressive.





Bison at Tower Campground which was a 3.5–4 mile hike at that point to see it.

Bison and perspective at Tower Junction (well before my hike later that day on December 28th).



Wapiti white female and her handsome mate. Tails up signal confidence. Bloodied face indicates she recently fed on a kill, likely an elk.



Wapiti wolves including the alpha female.





Wapiti wolves chilling on Tower Road. Most of these are pups of the year, including the bedded ones.

There were reportedly 20+ wolves there which is the entire pack. I managed to “*only*” see about a dozen of them. After parking at the recycling area, I walked east of Tower Junction on the park road a couple of hundred yards and immediately saw the wolves to the south which was really exciting since I hadn’t observed that pack since my first day in the park 5 days ago. At that time, they were about a quarter mile out on the road by a ‘Speed Limit 35’ sign. I saw 2 blacks and 1 gray; all three looked young with nice fluffy, furry faces. They were no doubt 8.5 month old pups who are nearly full-size at that point in their development. Soon after seeing those 3 lounging on the road, I saw a big black wolf who is the dominant or alpha male of the pack. He was dubbed ‘1014M’ based on the order of when he was captured and radio-collared. His mate is a gorgeous white female who is well-known to watchers and is almost 9 years old, the oldest known wolf in the park. She was uncollared but was born and has lived in and around Hayden Valley for her entire life, making these extra-territorial movements to the Tower area during winter.

The duo sniffed the snow by the speed limit sign with both of their tails up, which is a sign of dominance. They then went out of sight to the west. At that point I walked further east on the Northeast Entrance Road and was able to see a little more of where they had disappeared. There, I saw 10–11 wolves, with a relatively even mixture of black and gray colored wolves, bedded on a knoll. A few had blood on their faces and a couple were chewing bones, an obvious indication that they had recently fed on the unidentified carcass. Nobody knew where the Wapitis had been for the past 3–4 days in between their appearances in the Elk Creek to Tower area. It is possible that they traveled back to Hayden Valley to check out and scent-mark their territory. In this chapter’s round of pictures, I share some amazing images of these special canines.

After watching the wolves, I drove to the east around 10:00 AM with a simple goal of warming up my chilled body. Yet, I stopped within a half mile as there were 8 bighorn sheep just south of the Yellowstone River Bridge on the east side of the river. There were 2 large rams with some ewes. It was a great view of these cliff-dwelling animals as they grazed on vegetation, and I obtained some nice pictures of them.

Wapiti wolves on Tower Road/ski trail (which was closed because of their presence). Note the raven on the speed limit sign.



Wapiti wolves. Look at the blood on those grays.



Eight of the Wapiti wolves lounging on a ridge.





Bighorn sheep above
Yellowstone River.



Right: Bighorns above Yellowstone River. Top Left: Perspective of coyote on Yellowstone River Bridge (bighorns are to the right of this picture).

Parked at the bridge, I then decided to hike up the steep ridge north of the road and west of the river. It was strenuous and challenging as it went up two levels that you can not see from the road. The snow made for slippery conditions. From the top, I had a great view of the Wapiti sighting area from a commanding vantage point. But I couldn't find any wolves despite much effort. I surmised that they were sleeping in the woods out of view. At 10:40 AM, on my way down the mini-mountain, I heard a great group howl that echoed off the rock wall behind the trees where they were bedded. It lasted about two minutes and was special to experience all by myself on the hill. I recorded it with my Nikon 83× point and shoot camera but the audio was marginal, the only deficiency of an otherwise amazing \$500 device.

When I got back to the car, there were 3–4 vehicles next to mine. The occupants were mostly out of their vehicles looking at the sheep. Just as I approached my car, a coyote appeared on the snowbank right next to the bridge on the south side of the road 30 feet away, then leaped north onto the south side of the road. It proceeded to travel east right down the middle of the street on the bridge. Cars parked on both sides of the quarter mile long bridge and watched the coyote as it passed them. The canine then jumped off the road heading southeast on the east side of the river. I spent about a half hour looking for it around Junction Butte, the wolf pack's namesake, but couldn't find it again. I then headed back to the west deciding to hike the Garnet Hill Loop. The trailhead was just a quarter mile east of Tower Junction.

From 11:30–3:00 PM, I hiked the 8 mile loop in just my boots and gaiters, deciding not to bring along my snowshoes as I generally hike so much slower while using them. Completing the loop was quite a feat considering that the trail was around a foot deep and wasn't marked as most of the markers were buried under the snow. Wearing the gaiters prevented snow from entering my boots which was a game changer from a comfort standpoint.

I had only done that hike one other time previously which was over five years ago, but I felt that I had a pretty good spatial memory of the area. I went on intuition and rough cardinal direction of travel: hike north for 3+ miles west of the Yellowstone River, then go west toward the Hellroaring area on the north side of Garnet Mountain, then come back south for 3+ more miles on the west side of Garnet and along Elk Creek. I obtained some great scenic views along the way, and saw coyote and wolf tracks right next to each other for great perspective. I also found a very fresh solo wolf track in the snow heading south right up the north slope of Garnett Mountain. The animal rubbed its head and neck in the snow making a compacted mat two times with fresh blood saturating the area. It was impossible to tell if the blood was from the wolf or from a prey animal that it was wiping off itself. The area along the Yellowstone River 3–4 miles into the hike was fantastically desolate of people yet rich in wildlife so I felt right at home as I slogged forward.

Coyote on Yellowstone River Bridge.





Top: Great panoramic of Garnet Hill Loop with Ponderosa Pines and Yellowstone River.

Bottom: Garnet Hill Loop Panoramic early in the hike when it was really open (and hard to follow the trail).



This picture isn't saying much but this was the first trail marker I saw/found about 2 miles into the hike. I was like "Gee thanks" once I finally knew I was actually on the official Garnet Hill Loop...





Top Left: Red Fox track, a little canine print.

Right: Yellowstone River on Garnet Hill Loop.



Garnet Hill/Mountain.



Coyote (bottom near my hand) and wolf tracks (above) in the same picture.



Very large wolf track nearly the size of my hand.



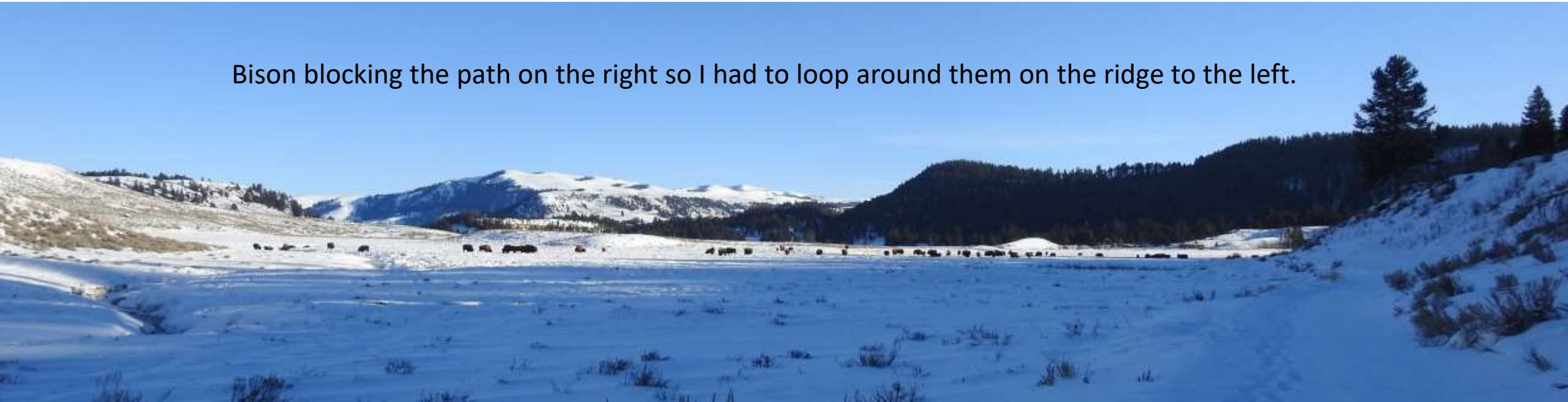


"Christmas"
(young spruce)
trees on the
Garnet Hill Loop.

On the way back, and nearly within sight of the Tower area and my car, I had to completely redirect my last mile to get out of the way of the large ~100 bison group that had been using the area for the previous few days. I had noticed them every day while driving to and from Tower Junction. While hiking, I had wondered where they were going to be on my return. It was a more challenging circumstance than it appears from the pictures since I was exhausted from walking at that point since parts of the western side of the loop had over a foot and a half of snow. The bison had just about saturated a bottleneck in the valley preventing me from passing them anywhere near the trail. I managed to navigate around the large bovines by first jumping across a semi-frozen 8 foot wide stretch of a stream in a foot and a half of snow that I first compacted before lunging. I then climbed a ridge to the northeast of them, and finally hiked past them just to their north while I went east-southeast. The nearest bison stared at me the entire way. I didn't want to disturb them foraging but also needed to ensure my own safety.

Upon reaching the car on a frigid day with a high of 15°, I drove straight back to Gardiner, arriving there at 4:00 PM. Along the way, I only saw the ~50 bison that had been hanging out in the western part of the Blacktail for most of my trip. Altogether, it had been another amazing couple of days...

Bison blocking the path on the right so I had to loop around them on the ridge to the left.



Bison that I had to skirt around during the Garnet Hike. It isn't as impressive looking as being down there and having to avoid them on the trail. This is me getting up a ridge in the snow to move around the bison. The background of the scene (to the far left) is where I had to hike to get back to my vehicle.







Bitter Cold

The name of the game on December 29 was cold, bitter cold. My weather app reported minus 2°F in the park that morning before I left the apartment but when I got there the actual temperature ranged from -12° to -22°F on various people's car thermometers, depending on location. My phone stopped working shortly into the morning, my water bottles froze INSIDE my car, but thankfully the camera still worked with a fresh charge I gave it the night before.

On this day, I drove straight to the Garnett Trailhead and climbed up the hill above the trail, setting up at very first light right around 7:00 AM. I was about a quarter mile further east than yesterday's sighting of the Wapiti wolves, and slightly further away from them, but it was a good choice as I immediately saw them leaving the corral area where the carcass was. They trotted south on the ski trail. I spotted 3 grays and 7 black at once but suspected that there were more that came in and out of view. They milled around the road again near the 'Speed Limit 35' sign then they meandered west up the ridge that they bedded on yesterday, heading back into the woods. Most of this happened at very low light so not a lot of people saw the wolves if they were near Tower Junction parking lot since I had a better perspective further to the east.

The pictures were extremely challenging to take in low light and extreme cold. In fact, the first part of my gear to fail me on this day wasn't my clothes as I managed to tough it out with four layers on both my upper and lower extremities. Rather, it was my tripod which froze and made it really difficult for me to move. That made it hard to focus on and keep up with moving animals. Also, my fingers, when exposed to the elements, nearly instantly froze and I had to cover them back up to avoid frostbite. It was quite an experience. I used a 'foot' warmer, designed to be placed inside a boot, on my hands. The slight warmth generated from that five year old item was enough to make it manageable for me but the sticky part of the warmer, engineered to adhere to the toe of your boot, was annoying. In the future, I noted, I would have up-to-date hand and feet warmers with me to ensure optimum comfort on really cold days.

Nonetheless, I persevered and was able to point out to others, including Rick McIntyre, a gray and a black who went to sleep under a pine tree three trees from the snowed over park road. I watched them, with little activity from either canid, for over a half hour.

Wapiti pack on a -12 degree Fahrenheit day near Tower Junction. Light was really low and wolves soon moved off so it was tough to get good images.





Left: Gray wolf of the Wapiti pack at Roosevelt corrals.

Bottom Right: Cropped image (hence the graininess) of gray wolf at Roosevelt Corrals.



At about 7:55 AM, a different gray came out onto the road and explored the area around the corrals. It looked to be a pup that wasn't concerned about people near it. I was further away and definitely not contributing to that animal's potential habituation. Admittedly, it is hard to resist the urge of not getting close to wildlife if given the opportunity even though suppressing those impulses is definitely best for the animals. Park rangers even attempt adverse conditioning with animals like this beeping their horn at them, chasing them away, firing flares at them, and sometimes even shooting them with a non-lethal rubber bean bag. Sometimes it works in scaring wildlife away from people; other times, an animal may have to be killed if it doesn't change its behavior.

To my amazement, the young gray sniffed the actual corral and then went under it and into the stable sniffing around the area. There must have been a slight dip in the landscape or larger sagebrush than appeared, because I lost the pup in there a few minutes later. I had no idea where it went and never saw it again. At 8:10 AM, the resting gray and black got up from under the tree and traveled northwest into the woods. As they moved off, I quickly spotted another gray with them no doubt having been just out of my view on the backside of that small ridge. Once the trio reached the woods I saw two blacks above the Roosevelt Corrals, meaning that another wolf had joined them.

It was still early after these wolves went out of sight, and it looked like they were hunkering down for the day, so at 8:30 AM I traveled west to Hellroaring and searched for wolves with Rick and others. It was nice to warm up in the car along the way. When I say 'warm up', it was still under freezing in the car but definitely considerably warmer than -10° to -20°F. Unfortunately, we *only* saw bison and most watchers left there around 9:15 AM. I decided to head back to the east and past Tower Junction where I went to the Slough Creek area off the Campground Road. I am normally in this area many times when I am in the park, yet this was my first time there during this trip and I only had two days left! That was quite a difference from the norm.

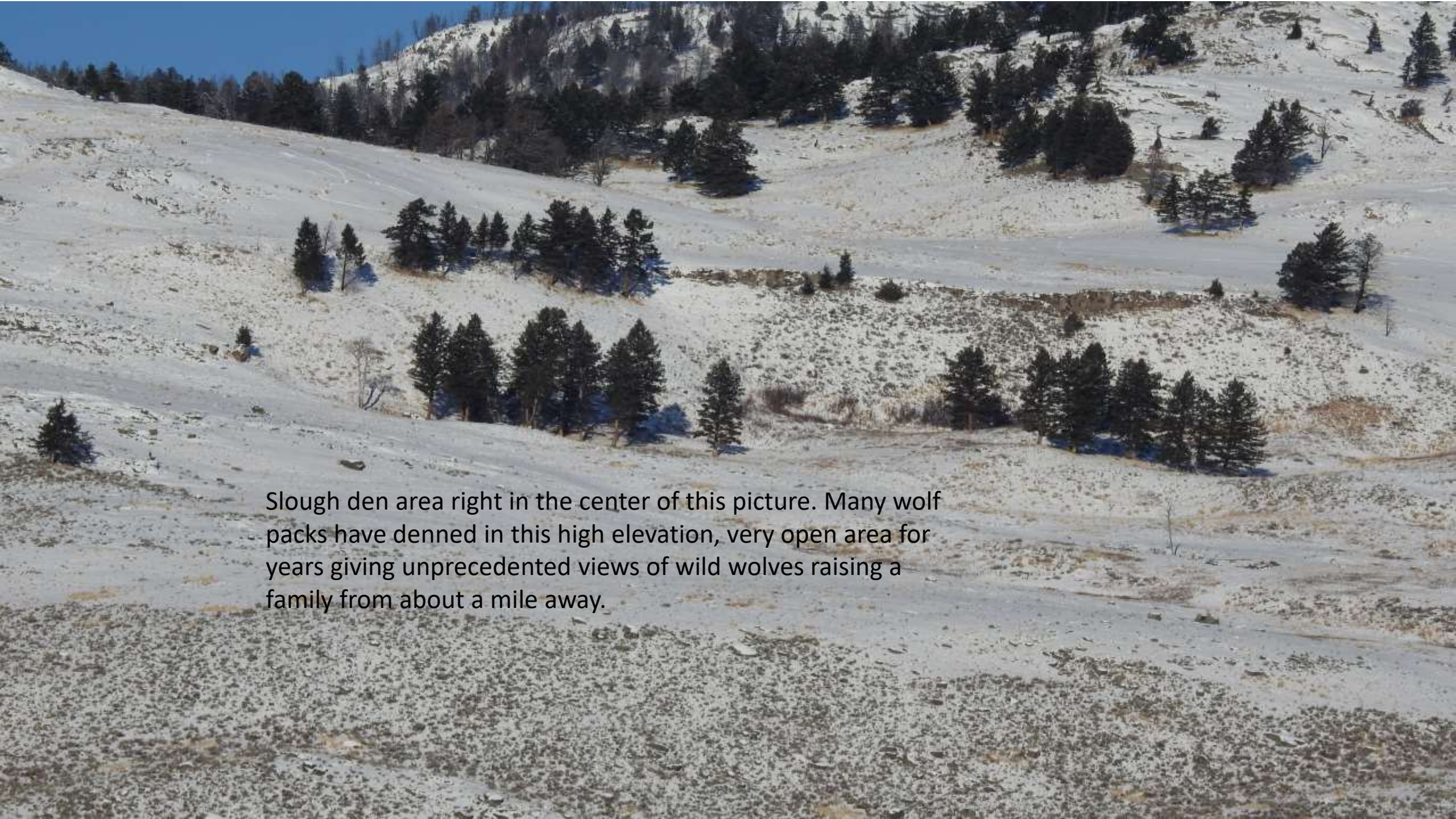
It was really peaceful and quiet out on 'Bob's Knob', a place named after Bob Landis since he nearly always starts his morning observations there. The overlook, consisting of a small hill, offers a commanding view of the Slough Creek area. A mile to the north is where the Junction Pack has dened, in full view from April to June, for the past couple of years. Those observations provide people with an unprecedented view of wolf society during a critical time period of pup development which is normally not seen anywhere else. Other wolf packs have also dened there in the past so it brought great excitement to wolf watchers when the 'Junctions' began using that homesite as well.



Top: Floating Island Lake panoramic.

Bottom: Slough Creek Pano. The wolf den area in the next picture is in the top center of this frame.





Slough den area right in the center of this picture. Many wolf packs have denned in this high elevation, very open area for years giving unprecedented views of wild wolves raising a family from about a mile away.



Bison herd on Slough Creek flats. This was my first time 'scoping' here during this trip (normally I spend lots of time here).



Top: Lamar Canyon on a cold, clear day. Bottom: Hoar frost on trees and panorama of Lamar Valley.



I had ~200 bison down on the flats by the river. I also saw 2 bull elk to the west. They were just above the conifer forest where I often see wolves in the area of the 'Marge Simpson tree', a swirling-shaped Douglas Fir that resembles the hairdo of the famous cartoon character. Due to the cold and my success earlier in the day, I only spent a half hour there then ten more minutes from the Slough bathroom lot. I only saw more bison. Clearly, the main part of the Junction Butte Wolf Pack was not in their regular area.

At 11:00 AM I headed to Lamar Valley and obtained fantastic images of frozen hoar frost in the cottonwood trees. I made it all the way to Round Prairie for the first time this trip. I normally stay in the Silver Gate – Cooke City area which means I normally pass this area at least twice a day. I was really happy with the scenery pics I obtained on that little excursion, as shown below.

I then hiked back to Trout and Buck Lakes for the second time during this trip. It was a clear day which enabled me to get a different perspective than during the blizzard a few days prior. I could tell that it was going to be a cold, raw hike as it was a very bright, sunny day meaning that there were no clouds in the sky to retain any heat. The high was 10 degrees, which made dressing down a challenge in the parking lot.

I was lucky to be able to see some really spectacular scenes on the hike including hoar frost on many of the trees, literally frozen in time. The trail up to Trout Lake was packed down and easy to walk on but the side, off the map, route to Buck Lake was a foot and half deep with fresh snow covering the area. I did not bring my snowshoes and could have used them this time. There were many fresh bison tracks and a faint outline in the new snow of my old tracks from a few days ago which helped me navigate to the pond. While I didn't see any bulls on the way to Buck Lake, which is northeast of Trout Lake, I had a close encounter with three of them when I hiked south of Trout Lake up a ridge, which provided a wonderful view of Soda Butte Valley to the southwest.

I returned back to the car at 1:00 PM after a great hike with beautiful scenery. I couldn't believe how raw and cold it still was during the middle of the day. The water bottles were again frozen *inside* the car which forced me to put one in my coat jacket to warm it enough to get a literal few drops of H₂O on the drive back to the west. At 2:10 PM, I arrived at the Mammoth Visitor Center but it was closed. I always enjoy going there to look at their taxidermied wildlife exhibits including just about all large fauna inhabiting the park.

Lamar Valley from the car.



Hoar frost on cottonwood in
Lamar Valley.



Hoar frost on Cottonwoods lining the road in Lamar Valley.



Soda Butte Valley



Soda Butte Valley at Soda Butte Cone as seen while driving.
Bottom: Confluence of the Lamar and Soda Butte Rivers on a clear, cold day.



Bison bull enduring the cold and the winter hoping to make it to spring.



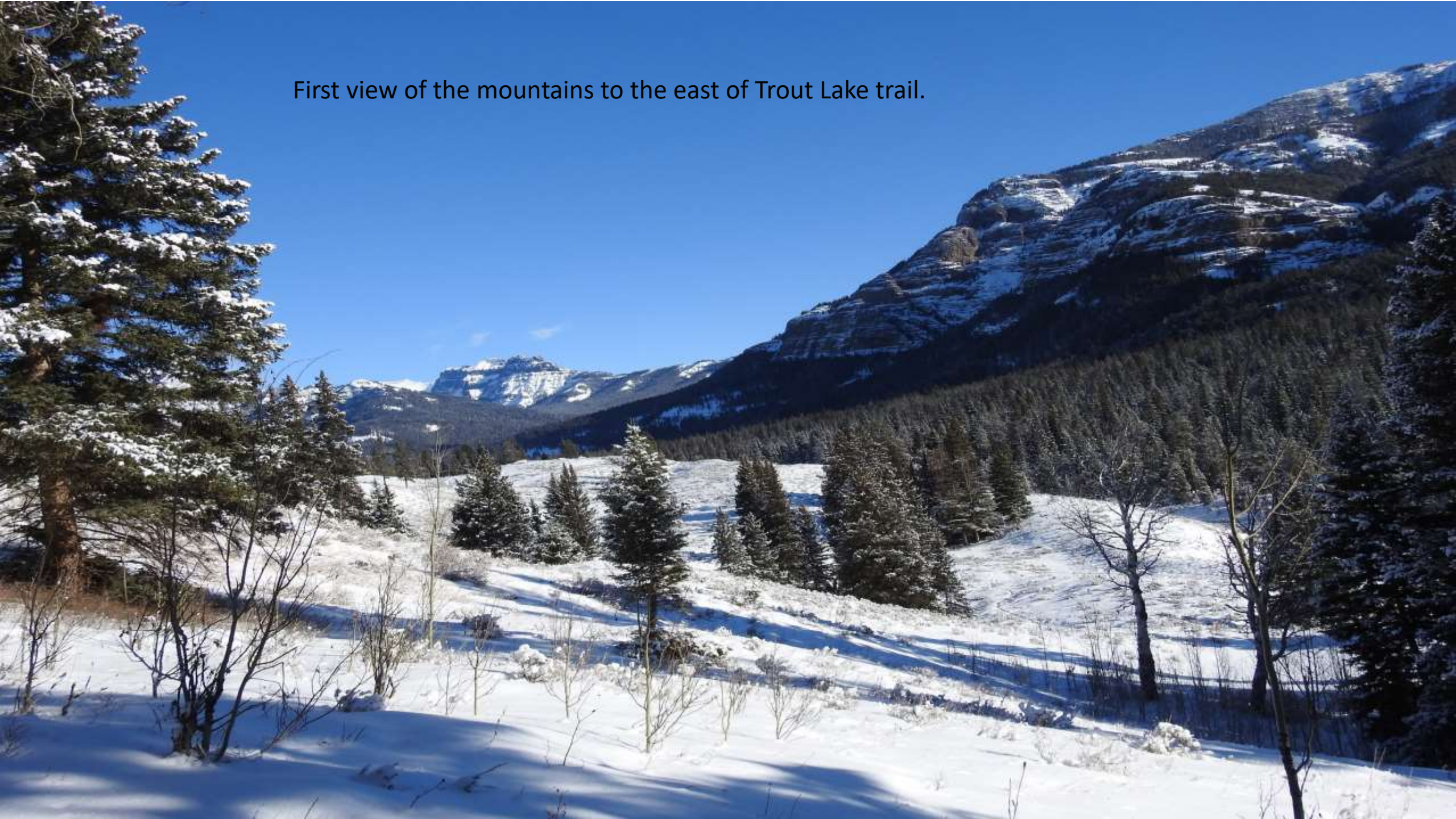
Frozen conifers in Round Prairie.



Round Prairie on way to Silver Gate, Montana.



First view of the mountains to the east of Trout Lake trail.

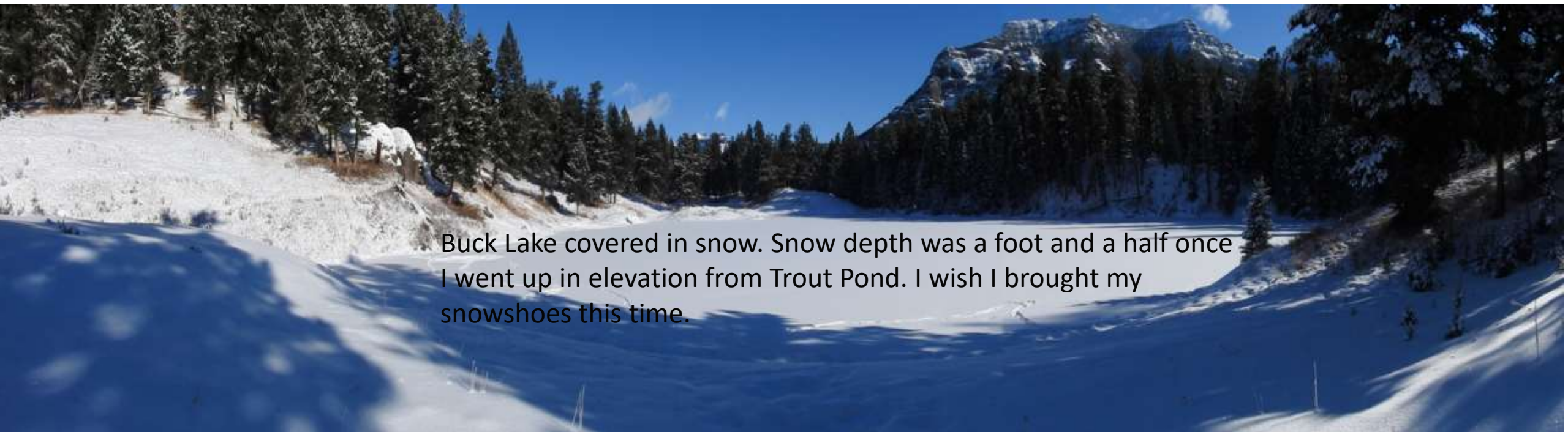


Trout Lake on a cold, clear day.





Trout Lake and inlet stream.



Buck Lake covered in snow. Snow depth was a foot and a half once I went up in elevation from Trout Pond. I wish I brought my snowshoes this time.

My favorite tree, a Douglas Fir at left (yes, I looked it up in my field guide!),
and Buck Lake behind it.





Left: Coyote trail up west of Trout Lake. Bottom: Bull bison in the backcountry near Trout Lake.



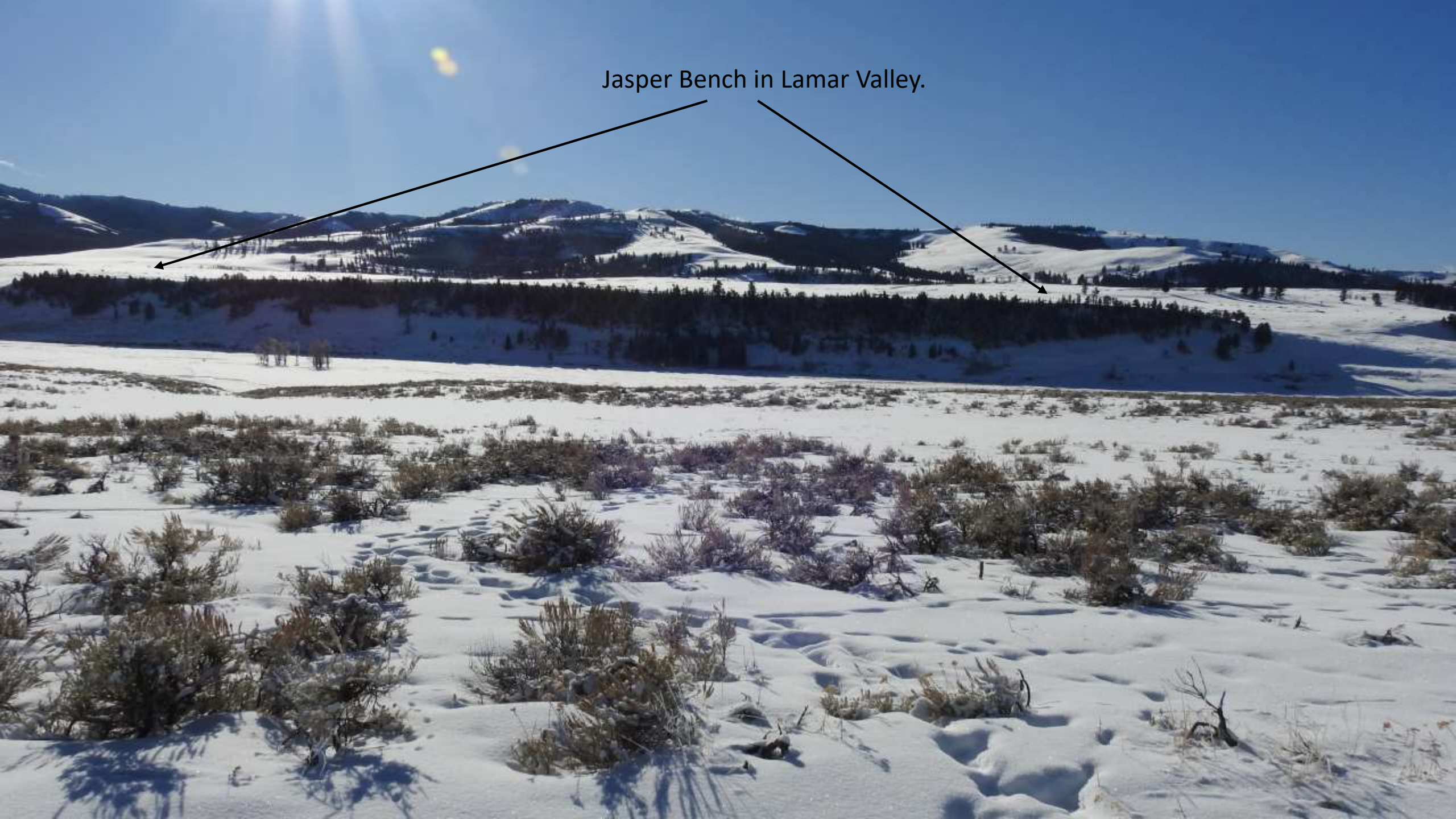
A hike above Trout Lake produces a great view of Soda Butte Valley and the beginning of Lamar Valley in the background.



Traveling the park roads in Lamar Valley.



Jasper Bench in Lamar Valley.



Traveling the park roads. This time in Lamar Canyon.





Top: Elk near Mammoth, park headquarters.

Bottom Right: Traveling the park roads. This scene is near Hellroaring area.



My descent into Gardiner, Montana. It is a deserty area so less snow and generally warmer (although the day started at 0°F here). Inset: Elk halfway between Gardiner and Mammoth.



Disappointed that I couldn't go into the building, but understandable with Covid still rearing its ugly head, I drove out of the parking lot and had the fortune of almost immediately seeing 10–12 elk just outside of town. "Yellowstone never disappoints," I thought to myself. I then saw 3 more mule deer in Gardiner and close to Bob's house. They were just browsing on juniper trees in people's yards. I arrived back "home" to Gardiner at 3:00 PM where it was a balmy 20 degrees. Enjoy the following pictures...

Roosevelt Arch and Yellowstone Forever store. The pigeons (next page) were at the top of this building.



The elusive pigeon, aka rock dove, on top of Yellowstone Forever building in Gardiner.



Nearing the End

As I near the end of a trip to Yellowstone, I always develop a feeling of nostalgia and sense of loss knowing that it will likely be months before I get back to this special area. It is always nice to have good wildlife watching days, like I do just about every time I am in the park, even on some relatively slow wolf days where I *only* have brief, or sometimes no, sightings.

My last full day in the park, December 30, started at a chilly, but more manageable, minus 1° Fahrenheit. It felt comfortable compared to the previous day. I started the morning scoping from Tower but quickly sensed that the Wapitis weren't in the area so left and headed back west to scope from Hellroaring Overlook. The wolf watchers and I didn't see any wolves there, but did find many bison on the open slopes as well as two different groups of 4 bull elk each. I also saw another white-tailed deer from this overlook. It was out in the open plateau toward the east edge of my field of view which was an unusual place to see one as 'white-tails' normally like more wooded areas.

I left Hellroaring around 9:00 AM and drove west to the Nature Trail on the Blacktail Plateau. On the way, I saw at least 12 cow elk on the steep, mostly snow-free, south facing slopes north of the road just east of Phantom Lake. I then saw 3 more elk in the snow south of the road about a half mile west of Phantom Lake and near the Blacktail Ski Trail. I also saw a nice mule deer buck cross the road from north to south just east of Phantom Lake and west of that larger group of elk. He was walking right through the snow after coming down from the steep slope north of the road.

Hearing that people were seeing wolves in the Cottonwood River drainage to the west of Hellroaring, I decided at 9:45 AM to hike up the ridge to look for them. I carefully backed into the lot to be able to drive straight out of the parking spot in a safe manner to avoid duplicating the terrifying experience I had a few days earlier. Hiking up the hill was a good decision as the other wolf watchers and I eventually found the Junction Pack after much effort. They were scattered to the north about 3–4 miles away. It was a far view even through my powerful 60 X spotting scope and was too far to obtain decent pictures through my camera. There were now 29 in the main pack since the 5 had split off to form '1109's group'. This was the group I was seeing earlier in the week. 1109F is a female that has not been with the main part of the pack for a year or so as the other females are aggressive to her when she attempts to join them. There were originally 35 wolves in the pack in the fall, including 1109 when she was with them. The last wolf had been missing for a few weeks before I arrived in Yellowstone. There is a chance that it dispersed and left the family to find a territory of its own. But with that many wolves, it was often hard to know who was who even to the park employees and long-time wolf watchers like Rick McIntyre.

Perspective of
Hellroaring area with
a wildlife watcher in
the frame.





Left: Bull elk grazing on Hellroaring slopes. This view is about 2 miles from me!

Bottom Right: Perspective of the slope north of the road just east of Phantom Lake. The following pages show those elk close-up.





Top Left: Elk grazing on snow-free patches.

Right: Elk cows on alert. Note: This is a very steep area and south facing, hence the lack of snow.





Mule deer buck at the east end of Phantom Lake. The elk were just above him in the previous pictures.

Next Page: Elk cows above Phantom Lake in relative snow-free patches.





Rick counted 29 individuals just before I arrived at the observation location. I was only seeing 2–3 at a time at the beginning of my observing, but then Susan Carberry, a dedicated wolf watcher, found 10 wolves surrounding a bull elk. They were darting in and out while wagging their tails, trying to get the bull to run where they would have a greater chance of bringing it down, but none gave it serious effort. After about five minutes of pestering the healthy male, they left it and traveled east in and out of trees. They probably sensed its strength and never seriously challenged it. While watching those wolves, at least 10 others just trotted by the area ignoring the scene. It seemed odd to see 10 actively engaged with a bull, albeit relatively briefly, while others seemingly didn't care. It is possible that the "engagers" were young wolves consisting of pups of the year and yearlings, while the "passerbys" were older, more experienced wolves who knew better than to spend their energy on a healthy elk that they had little to no chance of killing.

Soon after the wolves left the bull, I noticed 7 other bulls just below that first elk the wolves had just left. The ungulates were grouped up, staring in the direction of the wolves in a defense posture but didn't appear overly concerned. I was happy to be seeing elk all over. That meant there was plenty of food for them and the carnivores that ate them.

I continued to follow the traveling canines as most wolf watchers left to head back downhill to their vehicles. The canids were spread out and difficult to accurately count as they moved in and out of view in a general eastward direction. Eventually they came to a low clearing below a sage ridge that looked like a pseudo-basalt cliff where around 10 piled onto something and seemed to be eating while another 10 or more passed by them. Just like when they surrounded the bull, it seemed odd to me that so many would be so focused on whatever they were into while an equal amount just ignored them on their travels.

At 10:40 AM I watched as 2 blacks and a gray chased 6–8 more bull elk a half mile to the east. They were really moving for a good quarter mile among trees and rocks but the elk were healthy and ran with their heads up, a distinctive gait that seems to tell the wolves that "we are healthy and strong, so don't bother trying to kill us." They were difficult to keep track of as they went in and out of view behind ridges and trees but it seemed quite clear that the wolves were unsuccessful in their pursuit of the large ungulates. They never managed to get close to them. I was losing the ability to see wolves as they were now all well to the east, so I hiked down from the overlook at 10:55 AM and drove three-quarters of a mile east to look for them back at Hellroaring Overlook.



Previous Page: Perspective view from Hellroaring where the bull elk and wolves were photographed.

Bottom: Junction pack members about 2 miles away from my location.

Next page: Some members of the Junction pack bedded near bison who are largely ignoring the wolves. This is the last picture of the Junction pack which currently consists of 29 members. It is up to 34 if all are together but there are currently 5 members forming a sub-group lead by female '1109F'.





I was the only person in the parking lot at Hellroaring as I set up my scope at 11:08 AM. I immediately found the canids down low to the left (west) of the overlook immediately west of the 'Tornado Drainage' a distinctive looking area with a swirled pattern of trees. They were slowly moving east and were milling around down by 10–15 bison. I counted 18 wolves with mostly blacks and only 3 grays. Clearly all of the pack was not in view. They stayed local in that area and were occasionally forced to move for bison as the large beasts grazed right next to them and would push them away so they could feed, obviously not too concerned about the wolves. I found the laissez-faire attitude of the bison interesting because the wolf project is starting to document wolves killing more bison in the park. That is especially significant since bison are much larger than elk and provide considerably more food for a pack.

It was frustrating as there were a couple of hills blocking my view so it was hard to get an accurate count of the wolves as some would come into sight while others went out of range. I'm sure there were more given my limited visibility. Having had a couple of good hours of viewing the pack, I departed at 11:54 AM with 8 bedded (6 blacks and 2 grays) still in view. I drove back to the west slowly heading toward Gardiner.

I continued to see many elk on this day as I counted 13 cows and a bull above Phantom Lake on the steep, largely snow-free slopes. I suspected that most of these were part of the same group I had seen earlier in the day. It was interesting to view and obtain photos of them surviving winter on the area's steep, windswept, south-facing hillsides. Just to orient the reader: A south-facing slope is usually on the north side of the road; that is why snow is always less on that side compared to the actual south side.

On my way back west toward Gardiner, I took a short nap at the Blacktail Plateau "S curve" lot from around 12:15-12:45 PM. It is a beautiful area and I liked the thought of resting there. The hectic schedule was catching up to me as it had been a busy first week and I was feeling the effects of all of my prior activity. I was able to doze off, even in 20 degree weather, since I was all bundled up in the car. That half hour respite gave me the energy to drive to then hike the Lower and Upper Terraces at Mammoth Hot Springs.





Previous two pages: Yet more elk pictures. It was good to see so many elk on this trip! Clearly the wolves aren't nearly eating them all like some claim.

This page: View of Blacktail from the car from the "S curve" area. I took a nap just to the right of the lower right part of the view. What a scene!





Left: Lava Creek picnic area. The frozen river was so cool. It's hard to imagine I had lunch here just a couple of months ago during a July visit.

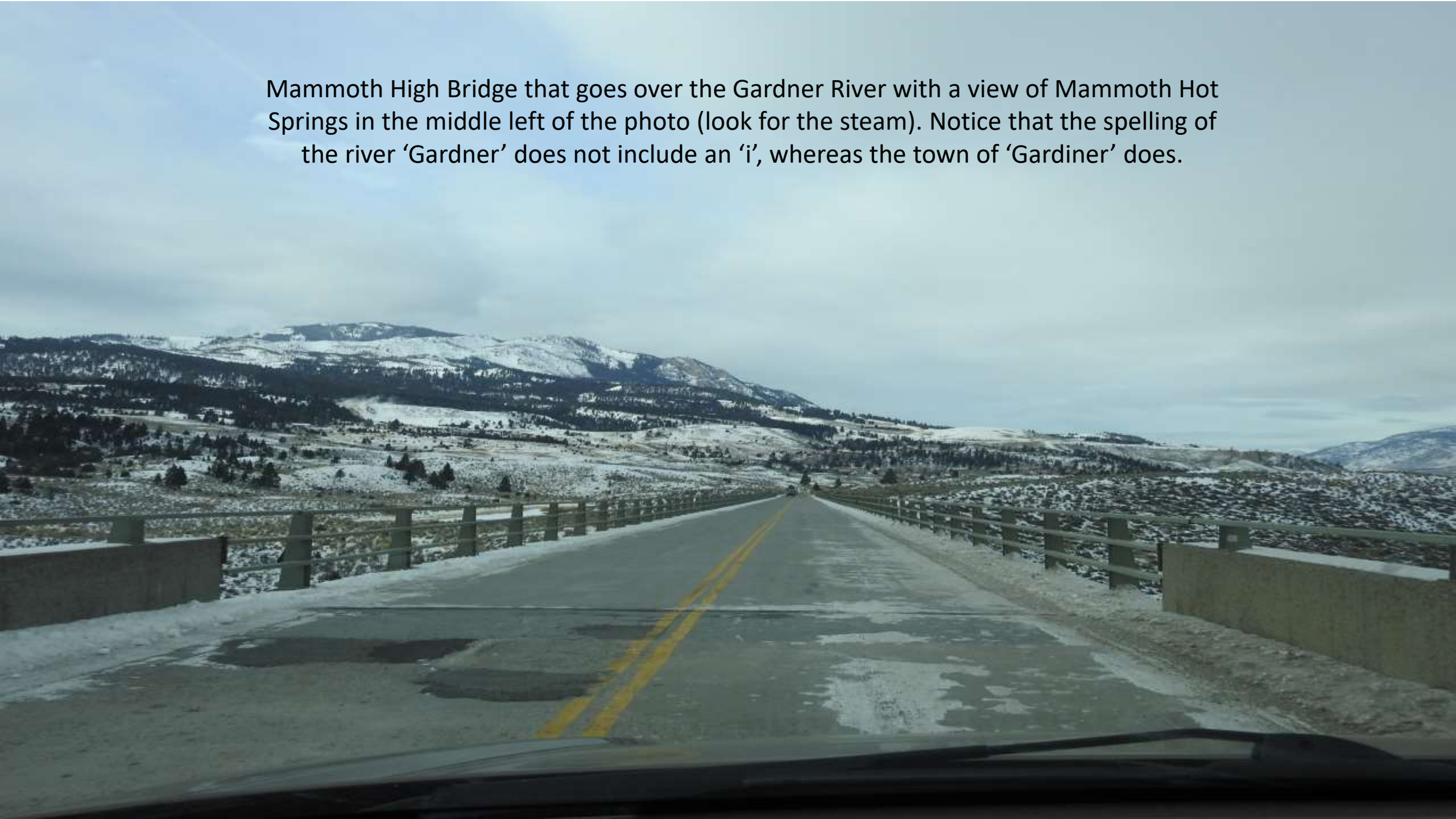
Below: Blacktail Plateau panoramic.





Lava Creek at the picnic area.

Mammoth High Bridge that goes over the Gardner River with a view of Mammoth Hot Springs in the middle left of the photo (look for the steam). Notice that the spelling of the river 'Gardner' does not include an 'i', whereas the town of 'Gardiner' does.



The famous Mammoth Hotel.



At 1:10 PM, I hiked the boardwalks in the actual hot springs. There I had great winter-time views of the travertine terraces that make up the thermal features in this area, as well as views of the town of Mammoth, which is where park headquarters is located, and Mount Everts further to the east. I then walked the 1.5 mile ski trail (it is a paved road and drivable in the summer) to see the 'Upper Terraces' area. I was surprised to find at least a dozen mule deer up on the Upper Terrace Loop feeding on junipers and other short conifer trees. This clearly was a wintering area for the deer. They were in small groups of 2-3 individuals but were concentrated in a relatively small few acres area with many deer height evergreen trees.

Overall, it was another good day, 130 pictures later! I show my top ~40 in this chapter...

Mammoth Hot Springs perspective near Canary Spring with Mount Everts in the background.





Top: Main view of Mammoth Hot Springs from near Canary Spring in the fog. Bottom: Canary Spring at Mammoth Hot Springs.





Canary Spring up close.

Cupid Spring at Mammoth Hot Springs.





Top: Magpie at Mammoth Hot Springs. Magpies are in the crow and raven family.

Bottom: Mammoth Hot Springs main viewing area with Mount Everts in the background.



Mound Spring is a great example of the travertine terrace (limestone building up) characteristic of the Mammoth Hot Springs area.





Left: Frozen tree near Devil's Thumb in Mammoth.

Bottom Right: View of the town of Mammoth where park headquarters is located. View is from the Hot Springs.

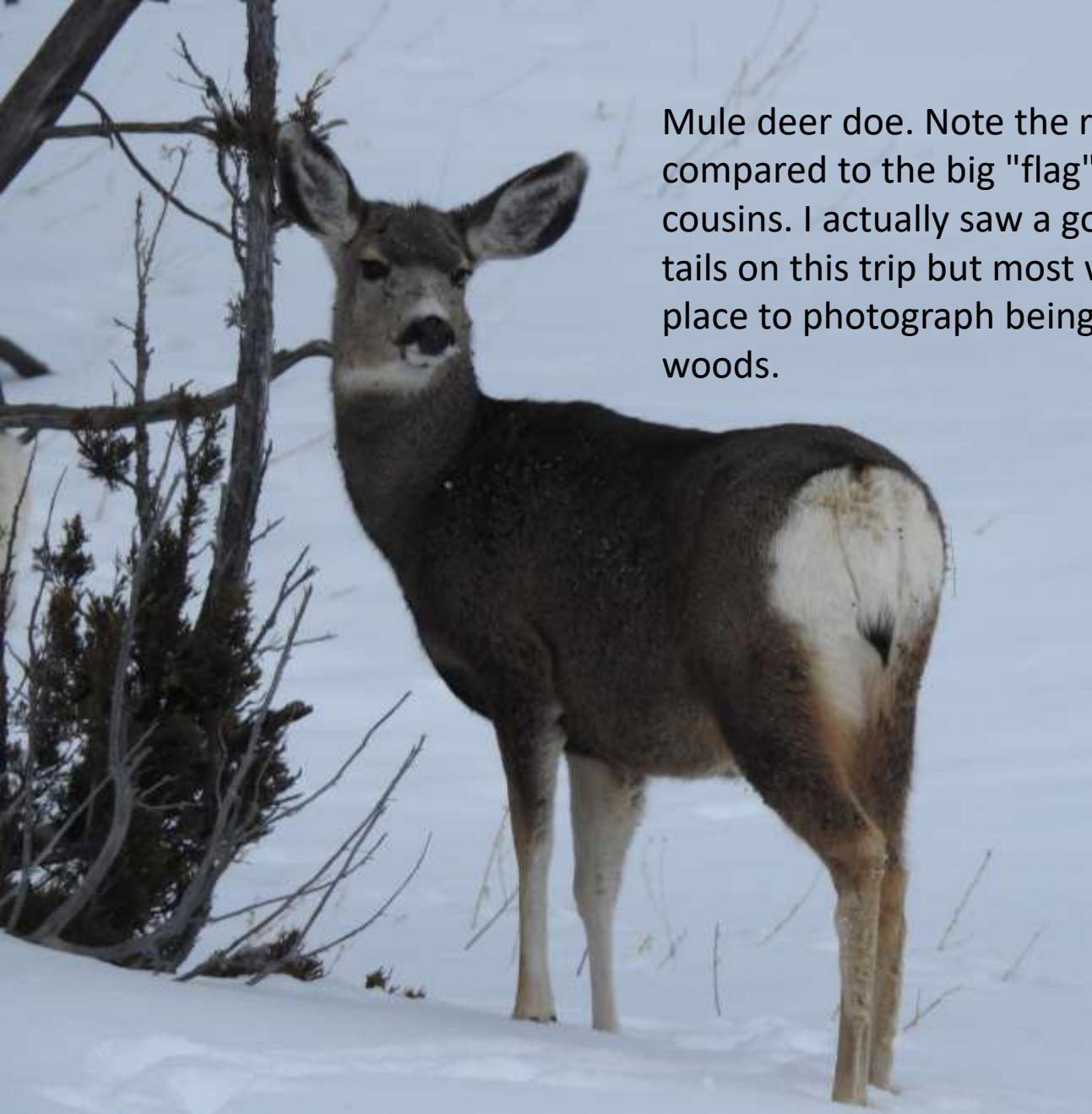


Orange Spring Mound on the Upper Terrace loop.



Orange Spring Mound perspective.





Mule deer doe. Note the rope-like tail compared to the big "flag" of their white-tail cousins. I actually saw a good amount of white-tails on this trip but most were never in a good place to photograph being far off and in the woods.

Close up of mule deer.





Mule deer family (doe and two fawns) getting nutrients near Mammoth Hot Springs.



Mule deer doe on alert while her fawns lick up the minerals.



Mule deer buck up in Mammoth area.



Perspective of where the mule deer were grazing with a deer in view in the middle right of the picture.

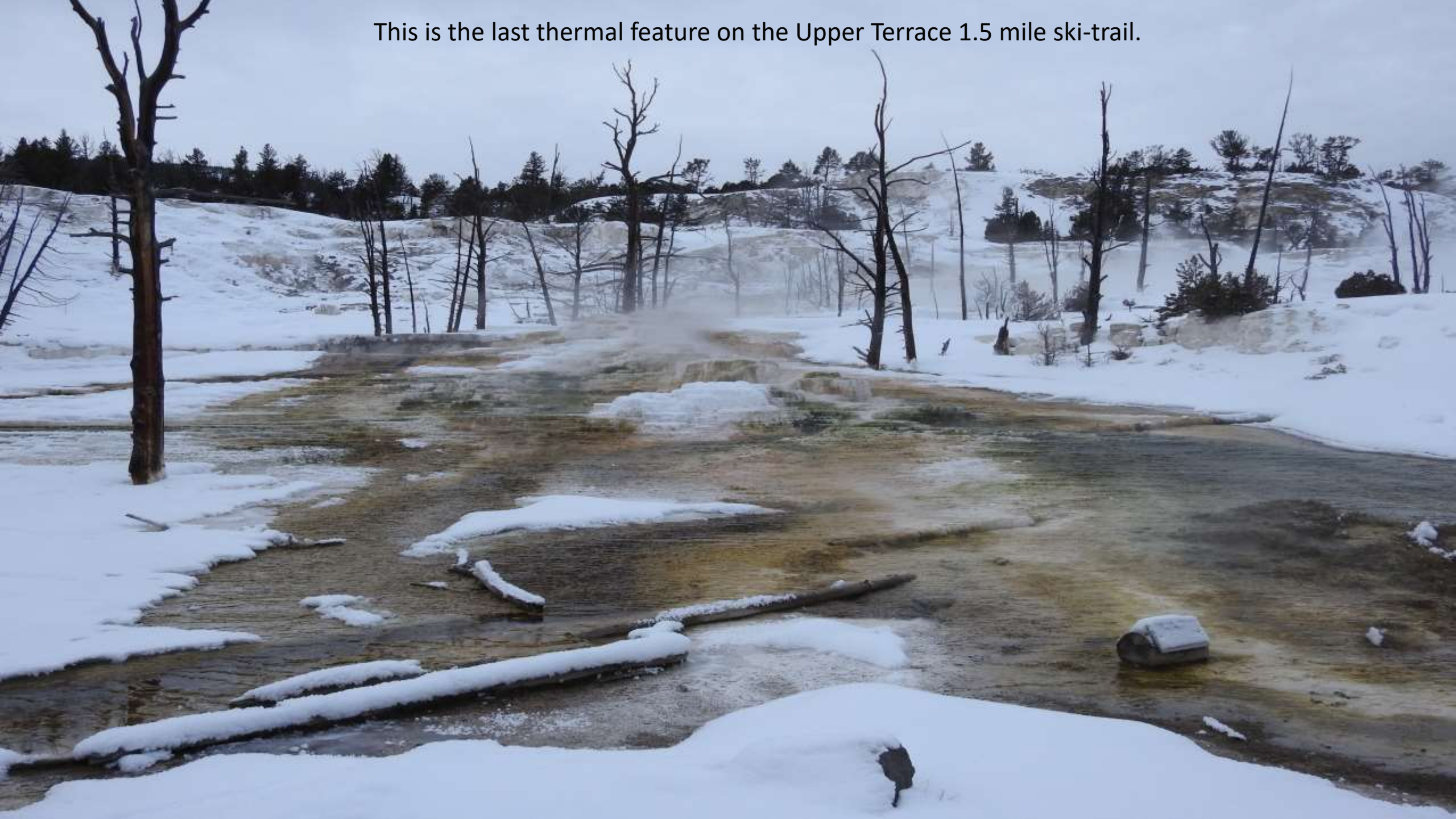


Mule deer eating the smaller conifers around Mammoth.



Very large mule deer buck with huge antlers up in the Mammoth wintering area.

This is the last thermal feature on the Upper Terrace 1.5 mile ski-trail.





Above: Devil's Thumb in the steam.

Below Right: Close-up of Devils Thumb Near Liberty Cap at Mammoth Hot Springs.





My last 99 cent buzz of the trip!

The Never-Ending Journey

On my Facebook account, I noted on January 1, 2021 that “This was my last Yellowstone post from my trip. I appreciate all who have reached out with appreciation for showing you all of these images. This last round of pictures will be a rather short one”.

Of course, all great things must come to an end someday and I knew ahead of time that that was going to be New Year’s Eve, the date I flew back east, for this vacation. However, that “day” ended up turning into two days.

December 31st started out warm, relatively speaking, with 27°F in Gardiner and 20° in the park. I knew it was going to be another marathon day as I was going to drive an hour into the park before dawn just to have enough time and light for about a half hour of wildlife watching, before having to depart the park to head to the airport in Bozeman, Montana, and then to fly home.

My trip into the park was worth the two hours of roundtrip driving as I was able to hear a wolf howl twice in the Little America area east of Tower Junction. I also saw some elk and bison herds including one bison group right on the side of the road by the Yellowstone River Bridge! Also, a large cow elk was standing right on the road at ‘Chinese Gardens’, a spot a couple of miles south of Gardiner on the drive up to Mammoth. It is impressive how big they are, especially when considering that males are sizably larger than females.

It was snowing in the park again which made me a bit nervous of possibly getting delayed, or worse, stuck, since I needed to be in Bozeman by (or before) 11:30 AM for my 12:40 PM flight. I parked at Slough and walked out to Bob’s Knob where Bob himself was standing on his namesake. We scanned the area thoroughly and saw some bison but no wolves. Then, at 7:40 AM, we heard a lone wolf howl to the west out of our view. I stayed for about five more minutes searching for the animal but I couldn’t find it. I then drove to the western part of Little America to see if I could find the howler from a pullout called ‘Boulder’ which provides a sweeping view of this open area.

I took some early light pictures of about 50 bison to the northeast and again heard a lone howl toward the northeast but couldn't find it over there either. This was probably the same area that I was looking toward when I was at Bob's Knob. I spent about 10 minutes searching for it knowing that I had to, sadly, depart. I never did observe it.

On my way back to Gardiner I saw about 25 additional bison right by the Specimen Ridge Trail in the very western part of Little America. They were bedded in the snow south of the road looking like they were just surviving and waiting out the winter. I then observed about 50 more crossing the Yellowstone River Bridge to the west. They were right next to the car which was an awesome way to finish up the trip. I also saw that usual group of bison hanging out in Tower flats, which were no doubt the same group that caused me to go way off trail when I hiked the Garnett Loop Trail a few days earlier. Lastly, I viewed the same ~50 bison at the western part of the Blacktail. They had been there for just about all week and it was like some of these bison were making an appearance to 'say goodbye to me'!

A real treat was when I left the park via the historic Roosevelt Arch and saw 12–15 elk grazing right in the middle of the Gardiner High Football Field. I was able to get a few good pictures of them there as I hustled back to the apartment to collect my belongings and clean the place. As I left to head to the airport, I saw my first cottontail rabbit of the trip just a street away from Bob's house. "This is kind of funny," I thought, since I see rabbits in my neighborhood all the time. They aren't that common in the park, partly because of all of the grazing by the large ungulates which reduces cover for them. Back east they are food for many animals from hawks and owls to foxes, eastern coyotes, and fishers. Out west, the open landscape is not as good habitat for the small lagomorphs so other animals like ungulates (deer and elk) and rodents are more common prey for predators.

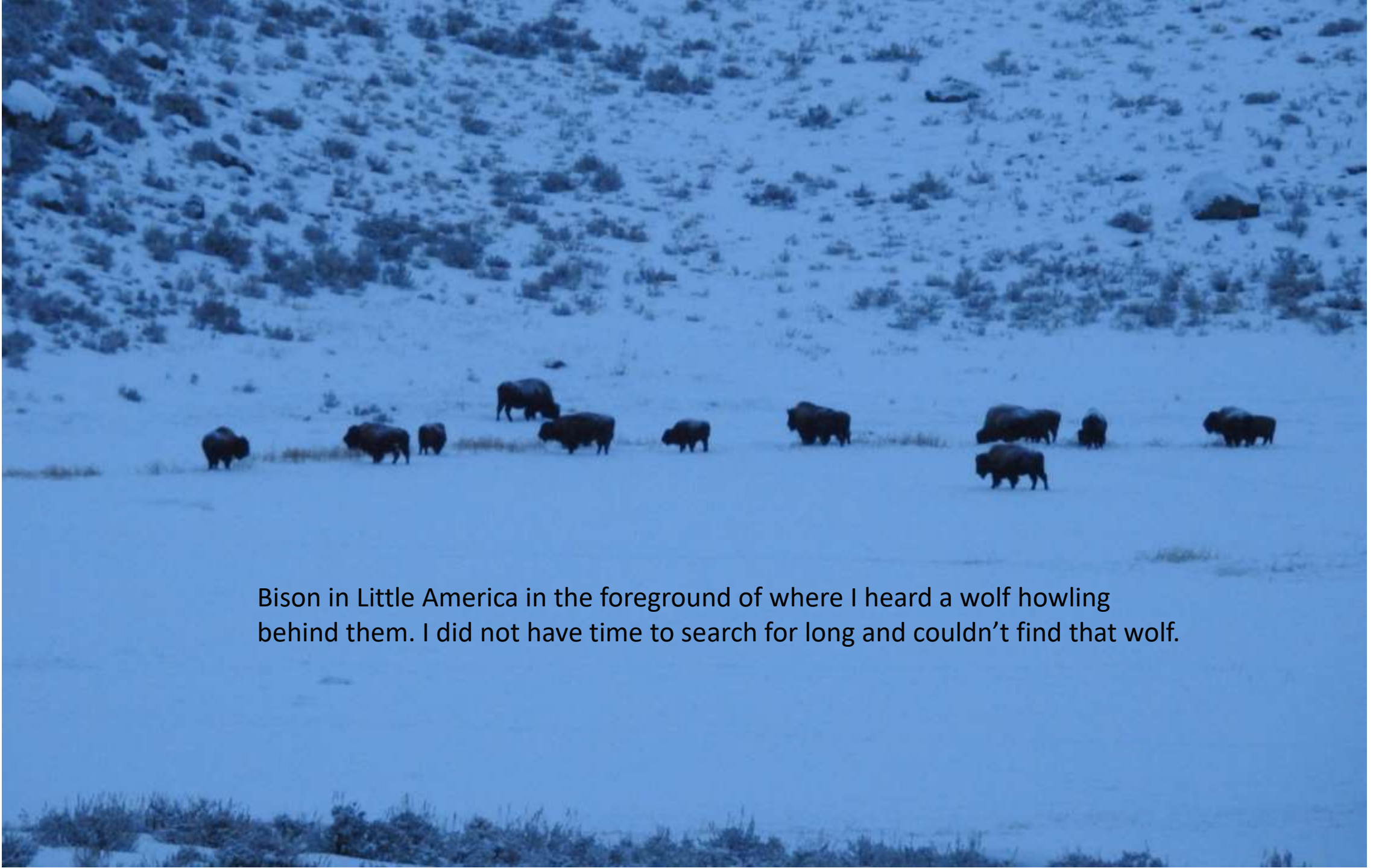
After having a hectic early morning, I drove north to Bozeman from about 9:30–11:15 AM. When I arrived at the airport and boarded the flight, everything was on time and on schedule. But just as I said that to myself, there were mechanical issues which caused the plane to be delayed for three hours. All the passengers just sat in their seats for about two long hours, waiting. And then we de-boarded and had to get onto a new plane.

By the time that plane departed and I arrived in Chicago, it was too late to catch my connecting flight to Boston. I ended up spending New Year's Eve in a hotel in Chicago before leaving early Friday morning, January 1, for a flight to Washington, D.C. That was the quickest way for me to return to Boston just after noon as I was able to get on a connecting flight around 45 minutes after I arrived at Dulles Airport.

It was quite an ordeal, but I managed to get back in one, exhausted piece and resume my other, non-Yellowstone life. I was even able to coach youth basketball super early the following morning, January 2nd, similar to what I did before going to Yellowstone. I hope you enjoy the last round of pictures from this incredible trip...

View from Boulder Pullout in Little America including Junction Butte (on the left), the namesake of the Junction Butte Wolf Pack on my last morning during a light snowstorm.





Bison in Little America in the foreground of where I heard a wolf howling behind them. I did not have time to search for long and couldn't find that wolf.



Bison surviving the winter by the Specimen Ridge Trail after a fresh snowfall.



This page: Bison after crossing the Yellowstone River Bridge and in a steep section of terrain next to the road.

Next page: Bison right next to the car by the Yellowstone River Bridge.







Left: Blacktail Plateau 'drive-by' on my way back to Gardiner to pack for my departure.

Bottom Right: Western part of the Blacktail Plateau. Blacktail Ponds is at the middle right with some "bison dots" on top of the frozen water bodies. Sadly, every year bison fall in these ponds and drown.



The Yellowstone River just before the Gardiner entrance station.





Bottom: Roosevelt Arch and the town of Gardiner.

Left: Elk at the Gardiner High football field. It is actually a K-12 school.



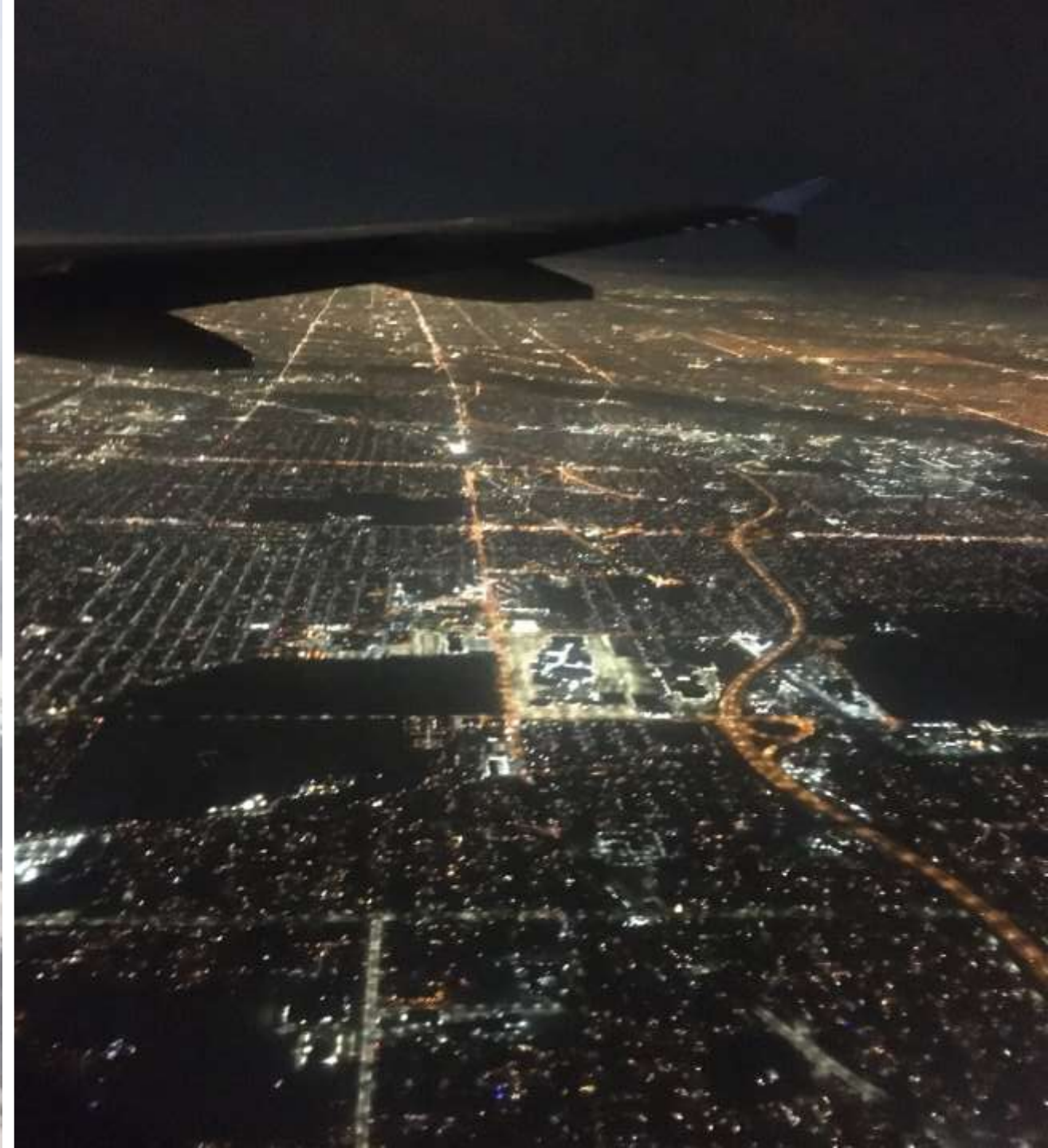
Devil's slide just outside of Gardiner on my way to the airport.

Next page:

Left: Leaving Montana's mountains on the journey back east.

Right: Chicago upon my arrival and "stranding" until the next morning.





Epilogue

I hope you enjoyed this picture e-book. I was fortunate to have observed wild foxes, coyotes, and wolves repeatedly during the trip as well as 6 of the 8 ungulates that live in the park, including bison, elk, bighorn sheep, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose. I did not observe or spend much time looking for mountain goats, who live in high elevation areas, often on craggy peaks. Nor did I observe any pronghorns (often called pronghorn antelope or just antelope, even though they are not true antelopes), who inhabit low elevation areas around the north part of and outside the park during the winter. I also saw many birds, such as ravens and magpies, that are quite common in the area.

It is important to note the importance of having national parks. There is no possible way that I would have seen all the wildlife that I did without having a large area protected from human interference, including human hunting. The [National Park \(NP\) Service's mission](#) of preserving 'unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations' is a model that the rest of the world has replicated. It has been extremely effective in protecting core wildlife populations and ecosystems as well as being an important boost to local economies as people vacation in these areas.

National park status for an area means something to many people. It is the best of the best. I was so inspired with this message and the wildlife within parks like Yellowstone that I wrote a book pleading to create more national parks in the Northeast United States where there currently aren't many.

[*Northeastern U.S. National Parks: What is and What Could Be*](#) is an Open Access, free e-book that anyone in the world can download. It is 268 pages, with over 500 pictures, and makes the case to expand the NP System in the Northeast, beyond just having Acadia National Park as its only large "natural" park, by adding 3 units: Cape Cod NP in MA, Kancamagus NP in NH, and Maine Woods NP and Preserve. These three areas are already existing federal land and could immediately be added to the NP Service by an Act of Congress. Giving national park status to these areas would provide an important, higher level of protection to better safeguard these areas, and its resources, especially during politically volatile times. I strongly believe that NPs are "[America's Best Idea](#)", as Ken Burns eloquently noted, and creating these parks in the urbanized Northeast is important.

If you enjoyed *Christmas in Yellowstone*, I urge readers to peruse [Northeastern U.S. National Parks](#) and contact the legislators and other decision-makers listed on the last page of the read to make that dream a reality in the Northeastern United States.

Northeastern U.S. National Parks: What is and What Could Be

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www.EasternCoyoteResearch.com

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Moose in proposed 'Kancamagus National Park'