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Howling Success: Indiana's Wolf Park Research Compound Offers A Window To The Past

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BATTLE GROUND, Ind. -- At first glance, this town of 1,300 seems like just another stop in the land of white barns and brown cows, where the strip malls gleam and the farm fields stretch straight to the tree-lined horizon.

And then a siren screeches, or a train roars into town, and the wolves of Battle Ground pick up the cry.

"Ah-ooo! Ah-ooo! Ah, Ah, Ah! Ooo!"

For more than 20 years now, the lanky, yellow-eyed residents of the Wolf Park research facility here have been a low-key tourist attraction, with visitors coming from as far away as Japan to see the elusive predators, hear their distinctive call, and talk back at inter-species "howl nights."

The wolves serve as educators, demonstrating standard behaviors with the aid of human interpreters. They entertain the crowds, with a surprisingly nuanced chorus of deep-throated moans and high-pitched yelps.

Tickets are sold by eager college-age interns, but eager interns with a twist: Hailing from Britain and Germany as well as Connecticut, they are serious wolf-watchers who clean enclosures and butcher roadkill for the privilege of spending time with the resident predators.

An air of serious study pervades the park, where you can hear a lecture featuring four resident foxes, one of whom, Basil, makes a highly excited sound, halfway between a moo and a meow, when he sees a staff member coming.

There's also a herd of bison and an ancient coyote, Wild Bill, who at 16 has exceeded his life expectancy by about 3 three years -- and still emits an impressive howl.

But the main attraction, of course, are the 16 wolves. Housed in a series of fenced enclosures -- the most impressive of which includes a 2-acre pond, towering trees and a dam -- they seem, at first, to be hidden from view.

And then, across the main compound, you spot the outline of what could be a large, pale German shepherd. At first, the sight is less than inspiring, but then the details come into view: the long legs, the massive

shoulders, the way the creature slinks, head held low, through the tall grasses.

This is no dog, no pet. This is a relic of the wilderness, a reminder of what was lost to this orderly patchwork of corn and soybean fields in about 1910, when the last wild wolf is said to have made his final appearance in Indiana.

The wolf belongs to another era in this state's history, when giant oaks, maples and beeches sheltered mountain lion and beaver.

In the 18th century, Indiana was home to Native Americans, including members of the Potawatomi, Shawnee and Delaware tribes, according to Andrew R.L. Cayton, a history professor at Miami University in Ohio. Prairie to the north gave way to the ancient hardwood forest that blanketed most of the state.

A bustling fur trade brought white hunters and trappers, but it wasn't until the 1780s and '90s that thousands of white settlers moved in and began to plant corn and tobacco, Cayton said.

Wolves returned to these grassy fields in west central Indiana, 70 miles northwest of Indianapolis, in 1972. That's when Erich Klinghammer, a Purdue University associate professor of ethnology, founded the non-profit facility with Koko and Cassie, two wolves from the Chicago-area Brookfield Zoo.

Klinghammer, who still lives on the property and attends howl nights, wanted to do research on the wolves, but outsiders had other ideas. They'd stop by at all hours, asking to see the research subjects. By the late '70s, Klinghammer had given in, opening the doors to the public at specific times, according to curator Jessica Willard.

The park's role expanded after that, with Klinghammer saying in a 1987 interview, "These wolves are ambassadors for the wilderness."

Today, the Park has 20,000 visitors a year and a budget of \$420,000, with admissions, gift shop sales, donations and the \$145-a-year adopt-a-wolf program serving as primary sources of funding. Improvements such as covered bleachers for the wolf howl make for a visitor-friendly experience, but the overall effect is still rustic,



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with walking tours taking in 10 acres of wolf, fox and coyote territory.

A recent tour led visitors around the main enclosure, past a dam, to a tree-lined fence. There, intern Carolin Philipp, 21, of Germany, pointed out the slender, well-proportioned villain at the heart of the latest Wolf Park soap opera: Marion, a k a Marion the Barbarian.

Polite and outgoing with her human friends, Marion is a terror with wolves.

The main pack used to consist of six wolves, until another female got pregnant, triggering new concerns about Marion's aggressive behavior.

"I think there would have been a fight, and the fight turning into fatal injuries for either female was a definite possibility," said Wolf Park curator and research associate Pat Goodmann.

The wolf pups also were in danger. Wolves sometimes "steal" other wolves' puppies, apparently for the purpose of "adoring them quietly someplace else," Goodmann said. But, in Marion's case, Goodmann said, "I'd have suspicions about why she was trying to steal them. I don't know that it would necessarily be for benign intent."

In the end, Goodmann said, the staff split the pack of six into two packs of three, an arrangement that allowed the pregnant wolf more freedom and gave her brother Tristan a promotion to alpha, or dominant, male.

The arrangement also allowed the very alpha Marion to stay with her mate, Seneca, the only wolf with whom she is consistently civil. And dividing the pack freed Seneca's brother, Miska, from harassment by Tristan.

Confused? By day, wolf life does take on the aspect of a soap opera, complete with villains, vixens and innocent victims.

But by night, the tone is more elevated, with Marion and her two remaining companions looking cool and majestic as they survey the howl-night crowd from behind a chain-link fence.

"They're watching the human channel," Goodmann observed during a recent visit. And if their tendency to doze off was any indication, they were none too impressed by what they saw.

By 7:30, 120 people had piled into the bleachers overlooking the main enclosure: wolf-crazy kids, couples on dates, families equipped with coats and blankets. In the front row, Bailey Murphy, 5, of Nappanee, Ind.,

gazed intently at the animals she has come two hours to see.

"We go to the library and she'll get 10 books about wolves," said her mother, Shelley, 34, a sales rep. "I think she's gotten every one."

Goodmann told the crowd that the wolves will howl in response to sirens; for a while they responded to a neighbor's high-pitched call of, "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty." Wolves howl, she said, to keep in touch, to mark territory, to assemble the pack and to attract a mate.

Finally, Goodmann emitted a series of resonant howls: "Ooooo! Ooo! Ooo!"

There was silence for a minute or two, and then you could hear a low, mournful reply rising from the wolf retirement compound toward the back of the park: "Ahhhh!" a wolf moaned. "Oooo! Ooooo!"

Marion and her pack, quiet until that point, responded with an operatic flourish. Standing together, facing the crowd, they raised their heads and emitted a series of high-pitched, almost hysterical yelps: "Ah, ah, ah, ah!" "Ah, ah, ah, ah!"

The evening moved quickly after that, and by 8:30 Goodmann was announcing the last howl. "Ah-oooo!" "Ah-oooo!" the humans in the bleachers cried, their final call as loud and uninhibited as their first was timid and hesitant.

"Errr! Ha, ha, ha! Ooooo!" the wolves in the distance howled, until even the coyote joined in: "Ar-Oooo!"

Dismissed from the bleachers, the Wolf Park faithful wandered the gift shop, some of them looking like they weren't quite ready to leave. Two women inspected wolf buttons. Dave, 65, a retired engineer from Kokomo, Ind., offered, some final pro-wolf reflections: "We need a few predators out there; keeps the populations in check."

And then the last stragglers began to exit the gift shop. Before them, their cars loomed in the parking lot, but for a few final seconds the headlights remained dark, the motors silent.

Crickets chirped ecstatically. Fences and farmhouses fell away, swallowed up by the ink-black country night. And somewhere in the thick grasses, perhaps only 50 yards away, the wolves of Battle Ground prowled their ancient homeland.