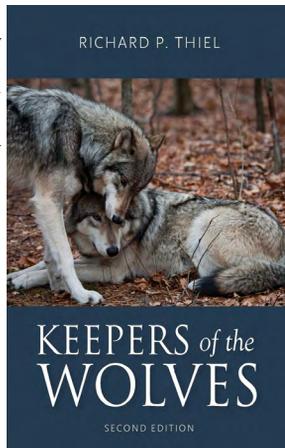


## Keepers of the Wolves. Second Edition

By Richard P. Thiel. 2018. University of Wisconsin Press. 264 pages, 22.95 USD, Cloth.

*Keepers of the Wolves* by Dick Thiel is a very enjoyable read tracing the extirpation of Gray Wolves (*Canis lupus*) in Wisconsin, the early stages of recovery in the late 1970s–1980s, to the current recovered population of over 900 wolves inhabiting the state. This book was written by a wolf biologist, so there are great descriptions of his experiences studying wolves with



numerous anecdotes of his encounters with individual wolves, especially early in the recovery process. While I may be biased because I have written a similar book of my experiences as a wildlife biologist studying Eastern Coyote/Coywolf (*Canis latrans* × *lycaon*) in Massachusetts (Way 2014), I absolutely love these kinds of books because you get to read about an animal from the person who experienced it first-hand. In this case we go back to 1978, when there had been no resident Timber Wolves (as they are called in the book) in Wisconsin for about 20 years. While packs were living nearby in bordering Minnesota, there was only the occasional sighting in Wisconsin which were surely dispersers from Minnesota. Thiel became interested in wolves when he was in high school and was determined to discover if wolves had indeed returned. In his college years, he conducted wolf track surveys in the winter-time and howling surveys over the summer to document their presence.

Thiel worked as a temporary (with no seniority accrued) biologist for the state of Wisconsin for about a decade as he led the wolf recovery team up until 1989. The book details the experiences, awe, aggravation, absurdity, and hardships (such as frigidly low temperatures) encountered as a field biologist and, unfortunately, the politics and associated public relations nightmares that go along with studying a controversial animal. We learn of individual wolves such as Big Al, Deborah, Gimpy, and Mailrunner, which he decided early in the study to name for ease of describing and remembering (pp. 95–98). I really appreciated that section given that he was a state employee at the time and naming animals is often a taboo for biologists, especially those affiliated with wildlife agencies as most would view naming as being biased in their attachment to the animals. As I discuss in Way (2014), however, I do not know how it is possible to be non-biased when you do anything that involves pouring your heart and soul into an endeavour,

and recent research supports that (see Johns and Delasalla 2017). Thiel gave great descriptions of the human-populated Wisconsin landscape when he digressed and added anecdotes on his research subjects such as when he foot-hold trapped, drugged, and then followed via radio-telemetry his study subjects by vehicle and small aircraft, cruising the many fire roads in northern, and eventually central, Wisconsin.

We also learn of humorous events which occurred during his research which is typical of any biologist's experience. While detailed throughout the book, the chapter "Murphy's Law"—which states that anything that can go wrong will go wrong—brings many of these situations to life, such as when his car key fell into a snow-bank (on a Friday afternoon no less). Or when he almost got into a plane crash on a frigid day when the plane went from barely starting to taking off with only the biologist in the plane as the pilot was outside trying to get it moving. Or when he was tracking a wolf and had to floor his vehicle through a flooded stretch of a dirt fire road. But the fun didn't end after he crossed the water, as he soon locked himself out of the car when he stopped to pick up a wolf scat he found. He ended up having to pick the lock to open the door. While these stories are certainly laugh-out-loud-while-reading-moments, they surely were quite aggravating when they were happening.

The chapter "Boy, Would I Love Your Job!" is also a bit comical. Thiel started with the pretense that being a wolf biologist would be an amazing living, but then went on to describe several uncomfortable positions that he found himself in, including more than one experience talking to wolf-hating hunters at local bars. Many times, he pretended to be someone else and never revealed to his counterparts that he was the actual biologist they were complaining about. I chuckled while reading these passages. In addition to the human perspective and many cold days in the field (similar to the "Murphy's Law" chapter), the other take-home from this chapter is the fact that the bureaucracy associated with the job can make one go mad, especially when people are in a political appointment with minimal science background—aka the natural resource old boys (p. 164). I feel for Thiel, as I was not only naïve about departmental politics but also loathed its influence on decision making (p. 165), and so it is perhaps not surprising that both of us lost our research careers over it (see "They Shoot the Messenger, Don't They?" and Way 2016). Thiel's descriptions of his emotions alternating between separation anxiety and intense anger are spot on (pp. 18, 184).

I read the original version of *Keepers* back in 2001 and shared in the excitement as Thiel and his colleagues found wolf tracks in the snow, howled in the forest night and were answered back, learned to safely trap wolves

to attach radio collars, and tracked the packs' ranges by air from a cramped Piper Cub. Following the stories of individual wolves and their packs as pups were born and died, when wolves were shot by accident and by intent, and ravaged by canine parvovirus and hard winters was why I loved the read. So it was with excitement that I had the opportunity to review this second edition which kept the original first 11 chapters and replaced the last three with updated information and a concluding Epilogue. This new version brings Thiel's story into the 21st century, recounting his work monitoring wolves as they spread to central Wisconsin, dealing with conflicts between wolves and landowners and recreationalists, following changes in state and federal policies, the establishment of a state wolf-hunting season in 2012, and Thiel's forecast for the future of wolves in Wisconsin. We learn that Thiel takes his first truly full-time job as an environmental educator in central Wisconsin, near his home, where wolves soon follow by returning to the Central Forest region.

By 1999 (when the first edition went to press), there were an estimated 200 Timber Wolves in 54 packs in Wisconsin. In 2017, there were an incredible 925 wolves living in 232 packs (pp. 221–222), an amazing recovery to the point where various stakeholders are polarizing wolf management. On one side are environmental groups and animal lovers suing to prevent any hunting and on the other a hyper-conservative government that took over in 2010 (pp. 206–207) and removed any semblance of science from a once prestigious wild-

life department and is now closing the door to future opportunities by catering to extreme anti-environmental populism (p. 221). Perhaps Thiel's closing quote correctly summarizes the current situation of wolves in Wisconsin, "Wolves will persevere despite society's ineptitude as custodians of wildlife" (p. 228).

This book is right in my wheelhouse and I highly recommend it. If you ever want to learn about something go straight to the source. In the case of wolf recovery in Wisconsin, there could be no better person than Thiel, because he was there when wolves returned and is still around as wolves have recovered to the point of being the most abundant that they have been on Wisconsin's landscape in well over a century.

#### Literature Cited

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