

# Wolf song

HIKERS WERE SERENADED ON A CRYSTAL-COLD  
MOONLIT NIGHT MORE THAN A HALF-CENTURY AGO.

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*Stephen Lars Kalmon*

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His ancestors' howls echoed from the glittering faces of glaciers; their packs prowled the vast grasslands reborn in this area after glaciation and before forestation. Their daily cry, like now, claimed territory and prey; their possessive howls troubled the sleep of natives in their thin-skinned homes. It was his ancestors who put fear of darkness in early white settlers. We heard their descendant one night, and it was certain this was a wolf, *Canis lupus*, whose howl we heard.

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The song of a wolf has no equal for haunting the soul. Heard in a natural setting, the emotional impact of such song will last until memory itself is lost.

We heard such a song one night in late 1954 in north central Wisconsin. It could have been one of the last wolves to roam that section of the state.

This wolf and others like him disappeared entirely from the state about that time. Now, 62 years later, there are packs inhabiting several areas of northern Wisconsin.

Moonlight flooded the earth the night of the howl. Winter had come early that year and by December the snow was knee-deep in the woods, and banks along the roads already were high.

It was late on a Saturday. The evening stars were in the western sky and to the east the moon, red and large, brushed tops of maples, basswood and popple whose boughs earlier laden with greenery, this night were bony fingers reaching skyward in the little woods.

Supper was over. A quiet time came

upon us sitting at table. Our voices mixed comfortably with cello and oboe music from the radio. Inside, we were warm, snug and secure. Outside was moonlight and crystal cold.

Someone said, "I'm getting drowsy, how about a walk?" The answer from three of us was to jump up and begin donning winter wear.

Out of doors there was winter music. As we walked the trees cracked, and the frozen snow tinkled to ground glass under our boots as we headed north. A snowshoe hare, white on white, went to a hiding place under a dark pine limb. Far off, a great horned owl hooted triumphantly. Nearer, two barred owls discussed the rabbit population.

Between night sounds there were vast stretches of silence that were large and hollow under the deep blue sky overhead, which paled to pearl blue at horizon. The warm kitchen seemed far away and almost alien as we traveled north without thought of destination.

Talk was infrequent and quiet. A tree or bush would hold our collective atten-



tion momentarily; we saw its strange shape in the moonlight. A curved limb of elm in daylight became this night the curved neck of a swan admiring itself in some placid pool. Bushes seemed as bird wings, or as exotic animals seen only in a faraway space or time.

We saw shadows deep and dark enough in which to take refuge; others only graced the snow like the footprint of some small winter bird. Finally, a curious trancelike feeling of peace and silence struck us and we were standing still on a small rise in the road.

As we stood there totally taken with the silence and moonlight, we heard the first howl. It was not the nattering political comment of the coyote or the baying of some farm dog, but the deep-bodied sound of a timber wolf. A sound as unmistakable as that of a giant organ played in some volcanic cavern with broad winds from earth's center flowing through its mighty reeds and out the fiery mouth. We could almost hear the rush of air into the wolf's lungs as it prepared for a second howl.

When the compelling song began, it was deep and stayed deep, climbed only slightly in intensity, then slowly dropped a note or two and ended suddenly.

As we listened, in my mind's eye I could see this great and shaggy beast on some seldom-visited forest ridge, his mighty muzzle to the sky, singing the millennia-old song. I could see him sucking gusts of broad north winds into the red forge of his lungs and pumping out great waves of sound. Winds which gathered tone as they brushed against frost-cracking trees, granite cliffs, snow-covered hills and licked up icy coldness from meandering rivers frozen to stillness, changed into great bellowing organ notes that echoed from the hillsides, the sky.

Those notes, which wolves have sung forever, sang of hot steaming kills on frigid nights, and sang perhaps of puzzlement at the recurring moon. They sang of great power and ability to beget and nurture young in this land and the desire to do so. Tonight that song secured all prey in the knowl-

edge that one of them would feed this wolf this night. And then that age-old song — which seems to mean more to humans when it opens to the full moon and bright purity of the stars — was suddenly finished.

The world was silent as if the wolf had never been there, never howled. Yet he had been there, and we were richer in experience and wonder at the workings of the world — and even our universe — for the song. That great song sung in confluence of our time, his time, his space, our space, made us still. Words were useless, further walking futile and pointless, symphonies anticlimactic.

The cry did not come again. Slowly we walked home with our minds spiritually broadened from God and his universe to our universe and that of the wolf. 

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