**Text: Wolf Reintroduction**

When wolves were reintroduced to parts of Idaho and to Yellowstone National Park in 1995, there was debate about the potential threats to elk populations and concern about impacts to the overall health of the ecosystem. Ten years later, the positive results in Yellowstone exceeded all expectations. Wolf populations are increasing, and the benefits to the ecosystem have been dramatic. (1)

For many decades, the absence of a significant predator allowed the elk populations to inhabit virtually any area in Yellowstone that suited them. They transitioned from feeding in the relative protection of the dense forests to congregating and browsing in river valleys where food sources were easy and plentiful. This led to ravaging young trees, small shrubs, and ground cover. After the wolves returned, elk were forced to move back into the relative protection of the trees and onto the slopes where they could watch out for wolves. No longer able to graze at will, they have had to work a bit harder to find food, with profound results. (2)

Willows and aspen trees, instead of being eaten or trampled, now had a reasonable chance for survival and rebounded along river valleys. The recovered vegetation halted the erosion of soil into the streams. Additional shade cooled the water temperature, resulting in more stable habitat for trout. Migratory birds returned and found food and shelter in the recovered growth. The new vegetation provided building materials and food for beavers, with new dams resulting in wetlands and marshes that attracted ducks and other birds. (3)

Contrary to initial fears, the wolves did not adversely impact the elk populations. Since wolves will almost always hunt game that is least risky to bring down, the old and sick elk were the first choice. Until the top predator returned, old and ailing elk cows had been able to continue breeding, an aberration that actually had a limiting effect on their gene pool. Ultimately, the wolf’s return led to greater health and vitality within the elk herds. When we admire the beauty and grace of a deer or elk, we should remember that, in part, we have the wolf to thank. After ten years of scientific observation, it is now clear that the wolf is a “keystone species” – playing a critical role in keeping ecosystems healthy through natural checks and balances. (4)