

## Arctic Wolf Attacks Scientist — A Unique Canadian Incident

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**ABSTRACT.** Recent biological studies have concluded that North American wolves are rarely dangerous to humans. To date the scientific literature contains only one well-documented account of a vicious wolf attack on a man, an incident that took place in northwestern Ontario in 1942. A much earlier attack, however, took place in February 1915 on the Coppermine River in Canada's Arctic. Though mentioned in two publications in the 1920s, this incident has escaped the scientists' notice and is reported again now with additional information. In this encounter a large white wolf (*Canis lupus mackenzii* Anderson) entered the campsite of members of the 1913-18 Canadian Arctic Expedition and on discovery attacked one of the scientists. The incident is unique for three reasons: (1) the existence and reliability of eyewitness accounts of the attack in the unpublished diaries of two of the scientific members, one of whom was the wolf's victim; (2) the chance coincidence that the man who shot the wolf was a mammalogist responsible for collecting arctic specimens for the National Museum of Canada in Ottawa; and (3) the existence today, 70 years later, of the wolf mount in the museum's research collection.

**Key words:** Arctic, wolf, Rudolph Anderson, Diamond Jenness, Frits Johansen, Canadian Arctic Expedition

**RÉSUMÉ.** De récentes études biologiques ont conclu que les loups d'Amérique du nord présentent rarement un danger pour l'homme. Jusqu'à maintenant, la documentation scientifique ne présente qu'un seul cas bien documenté d'une attaque violente d'un loup contre un homme; cet accident a eu lieu dans le nord-ouest de l'Ontario en 1942. Une attaque précédente a cependant eu lieu en février 1915 près de la rivière Coppermine dans l'Arctique canadien. Bien qu'elle soit mentionnée dans deux publications des années 20, cet incident a échappé à l'attention des scientifiques et est maintenant signalé à nouveau avec des renseignements supplémentaires. Lors de cette attaque, un grand loup blanc (*Canis lupus mackenzii* Anderson) a pénétré dans le campement des membres d'une expédition arctique canadienne de 1913-1918 et, en le découvrant s'est attaqué à l'un des scientifiques. Trois raisons font que cet événement est unique: (1) l'existence et la fiabilité de comptes rendus de témoins de l'expédition, dont l'un fut la victime du loup; (2) la coincidence heureuse que l'homme qui abattit le loup fut un mammalogiste responsable de la collecte des spécimens arctiques pour le Musée national du Canada à Ottawa; et (3) l'existence aujourd'hui, 70 ans plus tard, du loup naturalisé dans la collection de recherche du musée.

**Mots clés:** Arctique, loup, Rudolph Anderson, Diamond Jenness, Frits Johansen, expédition arctique canadienne

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### INTRODUCTION

For centuries man has regarded the wolf as his enemy, a dangerous creature ever ready to attack livestock and neighbour alike. Stories abound in both European and American literature of the rapacious nature of the animal, and concerted efforts to eradicate wolves have been successful in many European countries (including Britain) and in much of North America. Some years ago it was realized that wolves had become an endangered species, and wildlife specialists in many parts of the world initiated major studies of wolf behaviour, ecology, and conservation to counteract the situation (see, for example, Klinghammer, 1979; Mech, 1981; and Harrington and Paquet, 1982).

These studies have brought about not only a much better understanding of the wolf and its role in the natural world, but also the conclusion that wolves are rarely dangerous to humans. This conclusion, though running contrary to popular beliefs, was arrived at after careful re-examination of the available evidence on wolf-human encounters (a major compilation of such evidence was published by Young and Goldman in 1964). Closer scrutiny of the available scientific evidence of attacks by wolves on humans revealed a marked deficiency in reliable details, leading many researchers to conclude that virtually all such reports were suspect. In consequence, by the 1950s verifiable wolf attacks on humans came

to be regarded as exceptional rather than commonplace incidents. More recently Mech (1981:291-292) stated that he knew of only one well-documented report in the North American scientific literature of a wolf attack on a human. That attack occurred in northwestern Ontario in 1942 (Peterson, 1947) and was deliberate, vicious, and unprovoked. However, the wolf's persistent rapacious behaviour suggested that it was probably rabid (Rutter and Pimlott, 1968).

I wish to report now a much earlier wolf attack on a human, one that occurred in northern Canada, involved an apparently healthy wolf, and was well documented at the time it happened. Unlike the 1942 attack, which lasted half an hour or more and from which the victim escaped unhurt, this attack lasted only a few seconds, but the victim suffered a serious arm laceration. The attack took place on 10 February 1915, three miles north of Bloody Falls on the Coppermine River, Northwest Territories (Fig. 1). The victim later published two short accounts of the incident (Jenness, 1924, 1928), but both accounts have escaped scientific notice, the 1928 one because it was only one paragraph in a 247-page book on life among the Eskimos, the 1924 one because it was published in the author's college newspaper in New Zealand and was forgotten by him (or possibly he never knew it had been published) when he compiled his bibliography many years later. A photocopy of it was sent to me by chance in June 1984. Fortunately the incident has also been described in some detail in the unpub-

lished diaries (housed in Canadian government archives) of both the victim and the individual who shot the wolf. Because both men were dedicated, serious scientists (later to become well known in their respective scientific fields), their unemotional, descriptive diary accounts are probably the best documentation of a wolf attack on a human in North America.

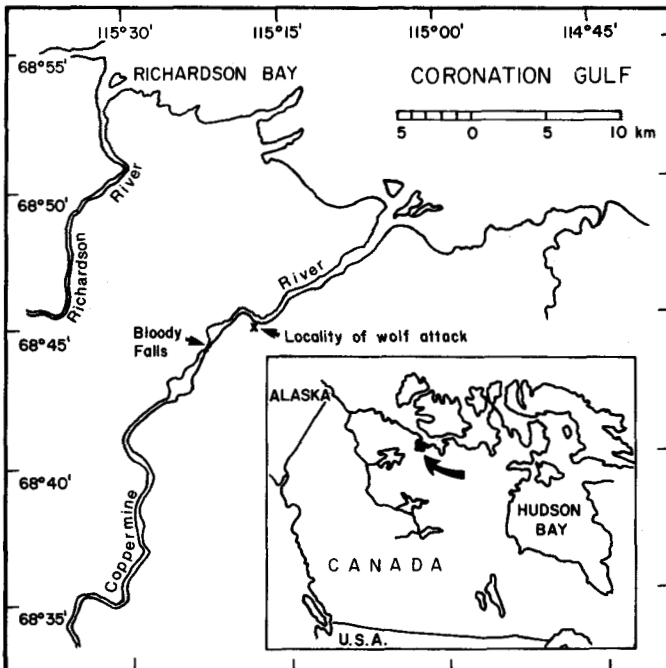


FIG. 1. Map showing locality of wolf attack in northern Canada.

#### THE ATTACK

Early in February 1915 a little party of men belonging to the 1913-18 Canadian Arctic Expedition left the expedition's base camp on Coronation Gulf to travel by dog sled overland to Fort Norman on the Mackenzie River. The leader of the party was Dr. Rudolph Anderson, an American mammalogist (and the leader of the Southern Party of the expedition). With him were two other scientists, Frits Johansen (a botanist and marine biologist from Denmark) and my father, Diamond Jenness (an ethnologist from New Zealand), as well as two non-scientist members, Arnot Castel (a Dutch seaman and aide to Anderson) and Palaiyak (an Eskimo interpreter accompanying my father). Travelling up the Coppermine River, they pitched their tent on the east bank at a site three miles below Bloody Falls as darkness fell on 9 February.

The following morning (Jenness's birthday, which he did not bother to mention in his diary), with the temperature outside the tent about  $-28^{\circ}\text{C}$  and the five men just finishing their breakfast inside the tent, the wilderness quiet was shattered by an outburst of growling and snarling among their tethered sled dogs. Johansen was the first one out of the tent, and he discovered a large wolf snapping at the leader of the dog team. The other four men, in various stages of undress, quickly followed Johansen out of the tent, and all five of them then promptly set about driving the wolf away. The first mention of the incident in Jenness's diary was:

Friday Feb. 12th.

We stayed in camp Wed. A wolf bit my right arm & the Dr. shot it. I have been unable to use the arm since but it is rapidly healing. The temp. has been mild the last 3 days. . . . (Jenness, 1913-16.)

This terse description was written in shaky handwriting because of the damage inflicted by the wolf on his writing arm. He had been unable to write in his diary on the day of the attack or on the following day. His condition, however, did not prevent him and the four others from renewing their journey upriver on the day after the wolf incident, as he reported in his diary on the 12th and 13th, and by the 14th, in a much more normal handwriting, he described the incident in more detail:

The wolf which bit my arm came into the camp just as we were finishing breakfast. It was a female, white in colour, & was snapping at the dogs, who came near. We all ran out  $\frac{1}{2}$  naked. Johansen [sic] went out first & discovered its presence — it was biting Snap. He tried to shoo it off with the flapping front of his woollen shirt. The Dr. & Arnot ran for the rifles, Palaiyak was looking around to see where the wolf was. I saw it running behind the sled & picking up a big boulder heaved it at its head. It dodged then ran at me & tried to seize my bare leg (I had on only a pair of trousers & a pair of sealskin slippers). I gripped it by the back of the neck & it screwed its head round & fastened its teeth in my arm. I tried to choke it with the left hand — unsuccessfully — but after a moment it let go & moved away a little when the Dr. immediately shot it. (Jenness, 1913-16.)

Jenness said little about the severity of the injury inflicted on him by the wolf's teeth. Indeed, he treated the injury matter-of-factly in his diary and later described it as merely "a small flesh wound" (Jenness, 1928:67). However, the 10 February entry in Anderson's diary indicates that the wound was much more serious:

Jenness's arm was badly bitten and bled profusely, some muscle fibres protruding from the wound, and he was unable to move some of his fingers or turn his hand over, leading me to think that the supinator longus muscle was badly cut. Treated it with potassium permanganate and remained in camp for the day. (Anderson, 1913-16.)

Fortunately the wound healed almost entirely within a week, thanks to the germ-free atmosphere of the North (Jenness, 1928:67).

Jenness's 1924 description of the encounter reveals that the wolf attacked Johansen ("the Viking") before attacking him, a fact unrecorded in the other known accounts of the incident:

Meantime the great yellow wolf was snapping and snarling among the dogs. The Viking rushed forward to save his team-leader. Even he was attacked by the reckless foe, but dauntlessly he shooed his enemy away with the flap of his sleeping-jacket. Cowed by the perilous weapon, the wolf ran behind a sled. . . . (Jenness, 1924:30.)

Johansen undoubtedly described the incident in his diary (he must have kept one, because all of the scientific members of the expedition had been instructed to do so), but I have been unable to locate it, in spite of extensive enquiries, and have reason to suspect that it was discarded years ago.

According to the 10 February 1915 entry in Anderson's diary, the wolf was a large female (61½ inches long), nearly

pure white, in good flesh and condition, and not fat. Years later he identified it as belonging to a new subspecies to which he gave the name *Canis lupus mackenzii* (Anderson, 1943: 388).

#### THE WOLF'S DESTINY

Because one of Anderson's responsibilities during the 1913-18 Canadian Arctic Expedition was the collection of mammal specimens for the National Museum in Ottawa, the wolf skin and skeleton were not left to rot when the five-man party continued up the Coppermine River the day following the attack on Jenness; rather, they were added to the provisions and equipment on one of the sleds and in due course were shipped back to Ottawa. There the skin was processed and mounted and put on display in the halls of the Victoria Memorial Museum building. During the 1920s and 1930s it was on open display in the front hall, near the site of the museum bookstore today. Later, protected by a glass casing, it was moved to the western hall on the second floor, where it stayed until the museum was closed for renovations in the late 1960s. During those many years the specimen was always well identified biologically, but no mention was made of the unusual events that led to its inclusion in the museum collection. The specimen, no longer on public display, now resides as Specimen No. 2551 (Fig. 2) in the permanent research collection of the National Museum of Natural Sciences in Ottawa.

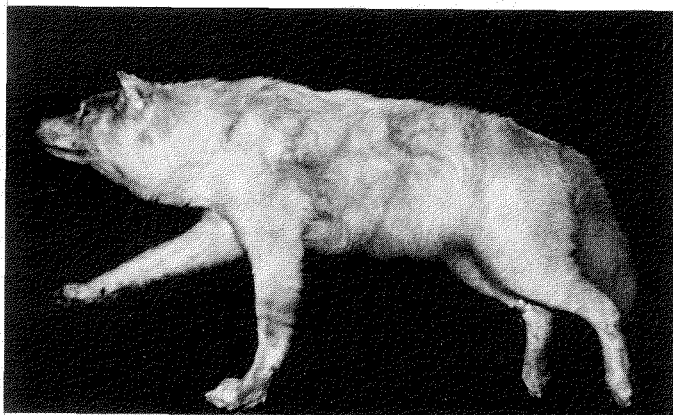


FIG. 2. Mounted wolf specimen No. 2551 (*Canis lupus mackenzii* Anderson) in the permanent collection of the National Museum of Natural Sciences, Ottawa. (Photo by Jean M.S. Jenness, October 1983)

#### DISCUSSION

While this is probably the best-documented example of a wolf attack on a human on record in North America, there remain several unanswered questions about the incident that deserve brief discussion: (1) Why did the wolf invade the men's campsite alone? Was it starving or rabid, or was there some other reason? (2) Why did the wolf attack Johansen and Jenness instead of running away? and (3) Were the wolf's attacks provoked by the actions of Johansen and Jenness? Goodwin (1961:431) has claimed that there was no verified report of a wolf ever making an unprovoked attack on man anywhere in North America.

In the Coppermine River incident the wolf was not starving, for it was in good physical condition and made no attempt to raid the men's food supplies. Nor could it have been rabid, because Jenness's arm wound healed speedily after only minor medical treatment; as well, neither Jenness nor Anderson mentioned in his diary the possibility that the animal was rabid (a condition Anderson, a mammalogist, would certainly have recognized). Some other explanation must therefore be sought to account for the wolf's presence and behaviour.

I believe that the correct explanation is that the wolf was seeking a mate among the sled dogs. I base this on a chance remark made to me by Jenness nearly half a century later that the wolf was "in heat." This explanation renders understandable why the wolf was in the campsite alone, why it did not dash away to safety when suddenly confronted by the five men, and probably why it attacked Jenness. If "in heat" the wolf would react differently than at other times, and the attempts of Johansen and Jenness to drive it away may well have provoked its attacks.

If we accept that the wolf was sexually aroused, we are confronted by yet another question: why was such a significant piece of information not mentioned in the diary of either Jenness or Anderson? One of the following suggestions may answer this: (1) both men may have seen nothing unusual about the attack (in view of the prevailing attitudes about wolves at that time) and simply neglected to include the unstated observation in their accounts of the incident; or (2) they did not regard sexual matters to be suitable for discussion or even mention in their scientific accounts in those post-Victorian days. The scarcity of discussions of sexual topics throughout Jenness's diary, in spite of his now-classic detailed anthropological studies of the Eskimos during his arctic experience, gives credence to the second suggestion.

The Coppermine River wolf incident is unique (1) because of the eye-witness accounts by the two well-trained scientists, one of whom was fortuitously a mammalogist; (2) because the wolf specimen was sent to the National Museum in Canada's capital city for preservation; and (3) because the skin was mounted and displayed publicly in that museum for almost 50 years, its unusual story untold. Still strikingly handsome after 70 years, it is probably the only preserved specimen in existence of a wolf known to have attacked a human.

#### NOTES ADDED IN PROOF

1. The Assistant Director of the National Museum of Natural Sciences in Ottawa recently informed the author that consideration is being given to restoring wolf specimen No. 2551 for an exhibit on Wolves and Humans at the museum in 1988.

2. Dr. Anderson's diary entry for 10 February 1915 contains a curious error of observation, for he stated that the wolf attacked Jenness's left forearm. We know, however, that it was the right forearm, as Jenness stated in his diary, because he was right-handed and could not write about the attack for several days because of the injury.

3. The Toronto *Globe and Mail* and Ottawa *Citizen* on 9 May 1985 reported an attack on a 5-year-old girl by a male timber wolf at Thompson, Manitoba. This was an unnatural incident, however, for the wolf was in a cage at the local zoo and attacked the girl when she put her arm into the cage to pet a 12-year-old white female wolf alongside the male. Interestingly, the female wolf attacked the male wolf when it sank its teeth into the girl's arm.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my appreciation to the Director of the National Museum of Natural Sciences and to several members of his Vertebrate Zoology Division in Ottawa for permitting me to examine and photograph wolf specimen No. 2551, to quote from Dr. Anderson's diary, and to examine and reproduce documents that confirm that this specimen is the same animal that attacked my father 70 years ago.

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