

Amazing Adventures : Brazos Valley residents share stories of land, sea & sky

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By Megan Bevers

Dr. Jane Packard sat alone in a secluded piece of wilderness in the Arctic, resting in a meadow of heather. She had driven the all-terrain vehicle to the spot where she could observe the pack of wolves she had been studying for the last six weeks. This particular day, the four white wolves were resting, enjoying the sudden onset of abnormally beautiful summer weather. After observing the group for a bit, Packard herself decided to follow suit and slipped off the ATV to stretch out on the warm earth. Soon she was daydreaming and peacefully admiring the beauty of the clouds passing overhead.

Suddenly, she felt the unmistakable gaze of a set of keen eyes, observing her from a distance. Slowly, she turned her head and found herself face to face with a large, shaggy white wolf standing a mere 10 feet away. He was eyeing her uneasily, but he looked familiar. Packard decided that this was the one they had named "Alpha Male", one of the four wolves who knew and were known by the researchers. The wolves would often come up to visit the researchers, who in turn would toss them morsels of food in a sign of friendship; only members of a pack share food with each other.

The shaggy wolf approached her cautiously and sniffed her boot. Suddenly, he made a skittish jump, a juvenile action unusual for a wolf of Alpha Male's age. Suspicion began to creep into Packard's mind as she slowly turned to look down at the area where the wolves had been resting. She still counted four wolves in the meadow. The wolf who stood before her, as she lay vulnerable on the ground, was a stranger.

Packard would escape the meeting with the stranger wolf with skills learned from interacting with other wolves in previous studies. As he circled her, she maintained eye contact (*"That's how they learn that you are another being and not prey."*), stayed still and calm, and talked to him (*"I told him who I was and that he didn't need to be afraid."*). After a few moments, the wolf took one last look at her then trotted off to the ridge line, where he was spotted by a member of the pack and chased away. Packard and the other researchers never saw the lone wolf again.

Dr. Jane Packard's eyes mist over fondly as she gazes at the framed poster that hangs in her office on the

campus of Texas A&M University. It features a pair of white wolves frolicking on gray boulders, and the smaller wolf seems to be playfully pulling on the tail of the larger white wolf who is turning back in surprise. Printed beneath the scene are the words, "Arctic Wolf by L. David Mech". And scrawled on the border of the poster is a note from the photographer: "Jane, Remember this? David".



It's true that Packard has lived out what most have only seen as beautiful nature posters or in pages of a science book. This particular poster is a photo from her six-week research project on Ellesmere Island, on the tundra of the Arctic. The purpose of the study was to learn more about how parent wolves and their older offspring care for a new litter of pups.

"The experience was tremendous," explains Packard, who, to this day, views the trip as the fulfillment of a life-long dream. "The wolves taught us so much more than we could ever observe in captivity. We learned so much about how the pups learn from each other as they play and discover for hours and hours. We also saw how they learned to respect the adults."

Packard recalls watching four little pups playing in the meadow, not far from where Alpha Male was resting after bringing food back to the pack. Packard explains that it seemed obvious what was about to happen. "The pups seemed to look at their dad, then at each other and their little tails began to wag," she recalls with a smile.

The pups slowly approached Alpha Male, nudging him insistently in the way they did when they were hungry. Having already fed the pack, Alpha Male had nothing more to give the playful pups and was not in the mood for games. Packard explains that each time a pup would

nudge him, Alpha Male would gently but firmly hold their muzzle in his mouth, over and over, consistently, until the pups learned to stop. They soon were frolicking just beyond Alpha Male's reach, and were no longer bothering the older wolf.

"It was the essence of appropriate dog training," explains Packard. "You have to be firm, consistent."

As an ethologist, or a scientist who studies animals in their natural environments, Packard has learned to see things from the perspective of the animals she is observing. She has worked with all types, including manatees, seals, sea otters, dolphins, Amazon parrots, javelinas and deer. She tracks her inspiration back to a time as a sophomore in college when she first read Jane Goodall's book, *In the Shadow of Man*, chronicling Goodall's extensive first-hand observations and work with chimps in Gombe. Little did Packard know that she would one day not only meet Goodall, but would share a stage with her at a symposium in London.

"Jane Goodall is my heroine," explains Packard. "I was able to thank her and tell what an inspiration she has been and continues to be in my life."

As a young college student, Packard sought out any opportunity to learn more about hands-on science, and eventually found her way to a volunteer internship at the Ethology Field Laboratory at Purdue University where her brother was enrolled in college. The lab's director later helped Packard apply for a unique assistantship at the Max Plank Institute for Behavioral Studies in Seewiesen, Germany, an opportunity that proved to be life-changing.

Packard traveled to Germany to attend school and work under the direction of Dr. Konrad Lorenz, one of the grandfathers of ethology, who would later go on to share a Nobel Prize for his work with Dr. Niko Tinbergen and Dr. Karl von Frisch. Packard recalls her role as a "goose girl" as the starting point of her lifelong pursuit to understand the lives of the creatures around her.

"Our job was to raise a group of wild goslings, imprint them to ourselves as their parents and to follow them as they grew, studying their actions," explains Packard. "It was so amazing to watch the goslings and see what they were attentive to. They have a whole different sensory world since they sense everything through their bills."

Packard explains that as the goslings grew, personalities could be seen and daily routines were established. The goslings would nestle under her

sweater as if nestling under the feathers of a mother goose. She and the other goose girls learned to communicate with the goslings by using their hands as their own type of bill.

"Most people never have the chance to learn that language," Packard says. "We were given the amazing opportunity to see the world from the perspective of another creature. She adds with a laugh, "I often tell people I have 13 children."

An important component of ethology is studying other creatures in the hopes of learning new questions to ask about the human race. And while Packard cautions about drawing cross-species conclusions, she has found the rewards of learning from other creatures in her own life. Packard points out that while studying the Arctic wolves, it took some time for her to leave the human-centered world behind.

"It took about two weeks for all those mental tapes from home to stop playing. But once they finally did, it was like entering the world of the wolves," Packard says. "You would begin to be aware of all the things that the wolves were aware of, all the smaller things in life that need to be appreciated. You would see the tiny jewels of blossoms appear. You would take a second look and see a tiny nest with a mother bird and chicks. It was such a sense of clarity."

Since her time with the wolves, Packard has continued to participate in studies and research, but a major focus has turned toward educating and helping other young scientists achieve their dreams. She currently serves as an associate professor in the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences at Texas A&M, where she lectures and works with graduate students.

"I truly believe that my dreams were fulfilled when I spent that time with the wolves," Packard says. "Now my mission is to help each student find and fulfill his or her own dream."

And while Packard has traveled across the world in search of greater understanding of other creatures, she points out that for the everyday citizen living in the Brazos Valley, numerous opportunities to observe and learn from the "silent neighbors" abound.

"Learn to appreciate the gifts of nature and the lessons in your own backyard", Packard says. "Nature has so much to teach us. It has always been here and will always be here."