HUNTING THE WILDLIFE OF YELLOWSTONE: BOB LANDIS

Award-winning cinematographer pursues the perfect scene

Story by Seonaid Campbell Photography by Audrey Hall

At the confluence of the Lamar River and Soda Butte Creek, in the northern range of Yellowstone National Park, a man quickly mounts his Arriflex 16mm camera onto a tripod and begins to film. It's November, and wildlife cinematographer Bob Landis knows he's got something extraordinary as he watches a black male wolf approach a foreign pack.

Normally, the solo wolf, called a disperser, would be killed for such brazen behavior, but the Druid Peak Pack has recently lost its alpha male to a poacher, and this wolf is playing his cards right. He howls, supplicates one moment, then stands firm the next, in a tense pas de deux of body language politics with the alpha female. She chases him. He chases her. The other wolves look on, and Landis films. At last, the lone wolf is accepted into the Druids.

This dramatic scene, in which wolf #21 became the leader of the Druid Peak Pack, was the first of its kind to be filmed in the wild. It subsequently became the prize sequence in National Geographic's 1999 film "Wolves: A Legend Returns to Yellowstone." Landis' second wolf film, National Geographic Explorer's 2003 "Wolf Pack," won him an Emmy.

It was thus no surprise to Landis, a 67-year-old former school teacher, when he got a call from a producer asking him to capture a rare animal interaction: an otter fighting a coyote over its recently caught fish, only to have the trout stolen by a bald eagle. "I've been trying for 15 years to get that shot," Landis said, but he resolved to try again. A snowmobile guide in Yellowstone had recently witnessed the tri-species fish-skirmish, and the producer knew if anyone could get the shot Landis could.

Landis' home is perched above the Yellowstone River, in Gardiner, Mont. It's still dark when I arrive but he's already outside waiting. Landis is a creature of habit. Every day before dawn, he stops at the Sinclair station to buy a newspaper and a dark chocolate candy bar, to go with his travel mug of Lipton black tea. "They make fun of me because I get the same thing every morning," he confesses. And so begins his daily commute to film in Yellowstone National Park.

Our quest to find otters requires snowmobiling deep into the Park, 63 miles each way, to Yellowstone Lake. It's a chill 12 degrees. The sky is brightening from charcoal to dove gray. The fur-lined hood of Landis' parka is collecting frost, and his trifocals are fogging up behind his helmet visor. On his feet are massive boots rated to a ludicrous minus 135 degrees. Landis is eager to get going. He straps a three-foot crate containing his High-Definition Sony camera and gigantic zoom lens to the back of the rented Yamaha snowmobile. On top lies his tripod. Inside are HD tapes, batteries, warm clothes, and lunch. The machine noise is deafening, but the stalwart bison hardly notice as we pass.

Due to Yellowstone National Park's travel plan—a continually revised means of restricting snowmobile travel—Landis, who's spent decades exploring Yellowstone alone, must now follow a guide. He's gracious about this, joking with a different one each morning. In turn, the guides are thrilled to be going out with the man who is a legend.

As a boy, Landis hunted ducks and pheasants along the lakes and fields near his hometown of Appleton, Wis. His physician father was an amateur naturalist, and armed with a Kodak 16mm movie camera Dr. Landis made wildlife documentaries. "Every spring he would go to the refuges in

A one-man crew, Bob Landis hauls his Arriflex 16mm camera through the Lamar Valley in search of wildlife. He scouts the Slough Creek drainage for activity. Most days of the year, in any weather, Landis scouts and shoots footage of wildlife in Yellowstone.

Nebraska or South Dakota to see ducks and geese migrate," says Landis. "That was his release from work." Dr. Landis also shared another passion with his son—trophy hunting. "The hunting I was into was extreme," Landis says. "Three weeks on horseback looking for a trophy animal, usually a big ram." The nearly world-class Stone sheep mounts on the wall of his editing room attest to his skill.

The parallel between hunting and filming is not lost on Landis, and his skills honed as a hunter have made him a crack cameraman. "It's about the search, the place, outsmarting the animal, and the bragging rights," Landis says, but in this instance he's not talking about hunting; he's describing life as a wildlife cinematographer. "I haven't hunted since '71," he says adamantly. "And I haven't fished since '93." Then he qualifies his statement. "I hunt every day, but I don't have the dead animal to show for it." He credits part of this lifestyle change to Adolph Murie. When Landis was 25, he read Adolph Murie's "Naturalist in Alaska."

"Murie was the biggest influence on my life," Landis says. "'Naturalist" was the first book I read in which animals were watched for the fun of observing their behavior, rather than to be killed."

On our expedition into Yellowstone, the first thing Landis shoots is a bald eagle. It's already dead, but the footage might be of use to the producer. Landis lets the snowmobile guide move the stiff carcass so its white head can more clearly be seen through his lens. Landis won't touch it. "What would the crime be?" the guide asks. "Disturbing research," Landis says with a wry smile.

The fist-sized, yellow feet of the once-vital bird are frozen in a perpetual grab at nothing. Landis identifies the eagle as an immature three-year-old, which likely died at the talons of the mature eagles perched in a snag 200 yards away. Territorial disputes between individuals, as well as between species, define the drama of survival in Yellowstone's unforgiving landscape, and Landis' talent at catching the drama on film comes from an unrivaled dedication to getting out in the field nearly every day of the year. "I basically live here," he says, and top producers in the natural history documentary world respect his devotion. "If you want to know what's going on in Yellowstone, you ask Bob," explains Janet Hess, NATURE series editor. "He's like an oracle."

Landis' wisdom was hard earned. For 29 years he taught math in Billings, Mont., where he and his wife, Connie, moved in 1968. Landis filmed on weekends and spent innumerable summers in Alaska. Then, in 1993, with the acquisition of a fat contract from National Geographic

Clockwise from bottom: In 2003, Landis was awarded an Emmy for his documentary, "Wolf Pack." • Landis Keeps copious editing notes and recordings of his daily filming in Yellowstone. • In the vault Landis catalogs hundreds of HD tapes and film reels in his Gardiner home studio.

for "Yellowstone: Realm of the Coyote," Landis retired and went pro. He was 53. He immediately invested in an HD camera and has been ahead of the pack ever since.

In the heart of the park we reach the Yellowstone River and Landis spots blood on the riverbank, perhaps from an otter's breakfast. He points out telltale otter "troughs" in the snow, where the animals' low-slung bodies have carved a trail to their day-den. Cruising the river are Common Golden Eye ducks, Buffleheads, and Trumpeter swans.

Upriver, in the Hayden Valley, Landis scopes the land through binoculars. "If we're lucky, we might see the Hayden Pack," he says. While wolves elude us, Landis spots a fox hunting mice along the periphery of a bison herd. The bison are many—hundreds of wooly bodies lumbering down the road. Fully at home in the wildlife community, Landis visits an eagle perch here, an otter den there, as if he were calling on neighbors.

We finally come to Fishing Bridge, the scene of the crime, where the trout contest took place. But there are no otters. Here the Yellowstone River slips out of Yellowstone Lake and embarks on a 650 mile journey to the Missouri. At Fishing Bridge cabin, the snowmobiles are refueled and so, too, are its riders. A likable park volunteer feeds us brownies while we soak up the heat from the wood stove. She kindly radios the ranger at West Thumb who saw otters a few days before, but Thumb is too far west and we're going east to known otter haunts.

In thanks, Landis gives the woman his self-produced film "Seasons of the Otter." This exchange is indicative of his role as advocate for the park's wild creatures. "He's such a nice guy, the people in Yellowstone love him," explains National Geographic producer Kathy Pasternak. "So they tell him when something's going on." The favor works both ways. Landis feels honor-bound to tell his colleagues when he finds something special. "That's a hard thing to do in this competitive business," Pasternak continues. Landis' target is wildlife, but he's a key participant in the human coalition of the curious in Yellowstone.

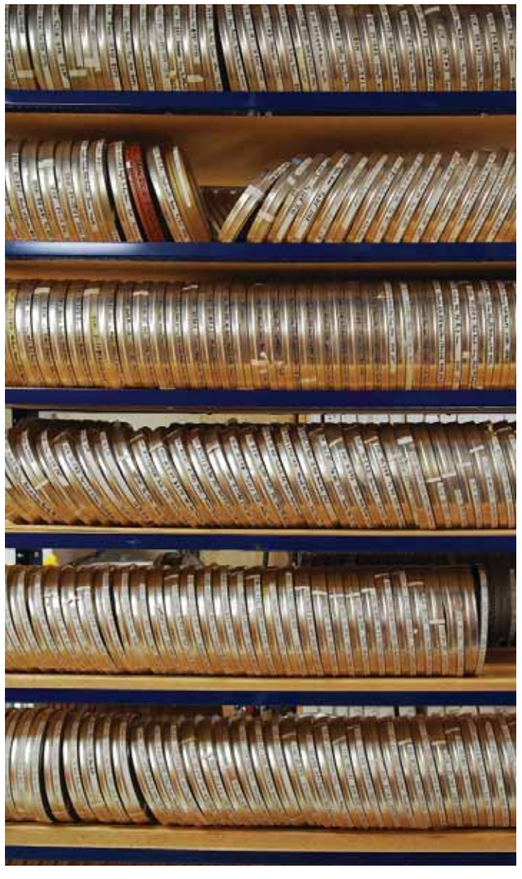
As our snowmobiles coast to a stop, ubiquitous ravens play in the wind-whipped vapor from the fumaroles of Steamboat Point. Below us, Yellowstone Lake is pure ice interrupted occasionally by random circles of ice-free water, created by thermal vents below. Two coyotes, their coats winter-thick, pass by while we scan the open water for otter sign. There is none. "Otters have a disgusting habit of sleeping in the middle of the day," Landis chuckles.

The coyotes move westward and we follow along the road. Ahead, on a desolate beach, a bison calf lies alone. Landis springs into action. He sets up his tripod and camera with lightning speed. "I want to see what the coyotes are going to do," he says. It's obvious that the bison is waiting to die, and in a cruel testament to the paradox of Yellowstone, a picnic bench stands nearby. We're about to witness a dance of death in which the coyotes may gain another day at the bison's expense. Surely this will be a dramatic sequence in a future documentary.

We wait. And wait. And wait. Nothing happens. The coyotes have vanished. Were he alone, Landis might spend hours watching this calf. "What I want to do, and what I think we should do, are two different things," he says. We move on.

In Yellowstone they call Landis "Fresh Tracks," because he's always first on the scene. When renowned wildlife cinematographer Wolfgang Bayer saw "The Otters of Yellowstone," a 1998 co-production of Partridge Films and Thirteen / WNET New York, he asked, "Whose otters is he using?" He assumed that Landis must have shot captive otters, because the footage was too rare. Landis is modest. He knows he was lucky to see what he filmed in the wild. "Other people could physically do what I do," he says. "But you have to have the patience and persistence."

Only extreme patience and persistence could enable a person to capture such unique moments as an elk calf standing on its hind legs in an attempt to catch a redwing blackbird in its mouth; or a grizzly bear gorging on Whitebark pine



nuts (behavior never before filmed); or a great blue heron plucking a vole out of the riverbank instead of fish from the river. "There's an awful lot going on in his work," says Hess, who has worked on NATURE for 20 years. "Bob captures animals doing things you never imagined." Not only can Landis' footage reveal behavior unknown to biologists, his day-after-day pursuit enables him to film individual animals over the course of years. "You see animals making individual choices," Hess explains. Consequently, Landis offers producers a wealth of animal behavior from which to craft more scientifically truthful stories.

The following day we return. The sun is shining, and there's good news—the bison calf is still alive, for now. But at Steamboat Point, there is only a solitary coyote curled up on the lake. He, too, is waiting for the otters, and the meal of trout they can provide. So we skirt the lake 21 miles to West Thumb, where Landis has fond memories of filming otters.

We don rented snowshoes, which Landis eyes skeptically, and set out for the lakeshore. At 5'10" and weighing 200 pounds, Landis, who nimbly hefts the 40-pound camera and tripod over his shoulder, sinks through the snow like a stone. His two hip replacements ease the burden, but he has to assist his snowshoe-hampered feet by lifting each knee with his hand. In frustration, he leaves the camera in the woods and we go scouting.

The frozen expanse of Yellowstone Lake recedes to an unseen shoreline. In a palette of white, blue, and black-green, the landscape simplifies itself into abstraction. Cloud shadows create the illusion of open water, like a desert mirage, and along the gravelly shore open ponds erupt with bubbles. The motion can make a person hopeful, but Landis is in a reflective mood. "I'm just thinking about how it used to be," he says wistfully. "There haven't been otters around much," he adds, explaining that invasive lake trout have decimated Yellowstone cutthroat trout populations. Otter numbers have declined as a result.

"I don't look with great optimism to the future," Landis reveals matter-of-factly while he polishes water droplets off his green-tinted trifocals. The sun is shining as snowflakes dust our clothes. Occasionally, a raven caws and the trees creak with the breeze. "I certainly do enjoy making films," he explains. "But I don't think of them as environmental tools like I did at one time." When he was young, he was out to save the world, but now he feels jaded. "I saw the whole environmental movement come about," he says, "and I've seen it fade away."

As the sun fades away we snowmobile northward. Finally, at the mouth of Otter Creek, we see them—two lithe otters romping on the ice. We watch as they make their way downstream. "They're heading home after a day's hunting," Landis explains. It is too dark to film, but at least the otters exist.

Landis is undaunted by his failure to capture the otter sequence. He keeps the rights to all his footage, so only takes payment if he gets the shot. Plus, he has a new wolf film in production with NATURE and National Geographic, entitled "In the Valley of the Wolves." The story continues the saga of the Druid Peak Pack, the family of canines responsible for Landis' filmmaking success. "The return of the wolf to Yellowstone made his career," Pasternak says.

Those same wolves are now subject to delisting from the Endangered Species Act, yet Landis expresses a surprisingly utilitarian point of view. "The wolf has made me a lot of money," he says. "Without it I'd be in the classroom." His casual tone masks concern. Like his hero, Adolph Murie, the pioneering naturalist whose wolf studies proved that predators live in balance with their prey, Landis believes that wolves are integral to the greater Yellowstone ecosystem. He acknowledges that if delisted, wolves may still find refuge in the park.

The wolves, meanwhile, are busy mating. It's now spring. Soon Landis will be able to film yet another generation of the Druids. He shoots from the road (a shocking fact considering the quality of his footage) and this time of year he can focus on his favorite subject—baby animals playing. They kick and wrestle, practicing behavior that will ensure their survival. Landis practices a different survival tactic—hope. Despite his realist attitude, he claims, "Hope should be my middle name." Like the seasons, Landis will return again and again to Yellowstone, hunting wildlife with only his camera. His career in its heyday, and with a potential grizzly bear film in his future, Landis is in the summer of his life. BSJ