

Time Machine in Yellowstone

By Joan Mish

Thanks to Pete who sits next to me frequently and inspired me to write about the time machine in Yellowstone National Park! He said: "Everything has its time in nature."

As many of you know, I have so enjoyed volunteering at the National Parks and Yellowstone was one of them. I had gone out to protect the rutting elk during the mating season from the visitors in the fall. We were told to keep the visitors away from the elk for they could harm us and we could harm them.

Now this is a story of an ecosystem time machine. The wolves in Yellowstone disappeared 70 years before 1995. Scientists noticed that the elk population had increased a great deal and the nature environment was suffering from the loss of many things: beavers, birds, rabbits, cottonwoods and aspen trees. The elk were eating and destroying much of nature.

In 1995 fourteen wolves were brought in. By 2004 the population had grown to 104 wolves. This dramatically changed the park's forests, river and landscape. When the wolves were brought in there was only one beaver colony. Today there are nine beaver colonies with the promise of more to come. Elks and beavers compete for the same food. The elks won and they ate all the young willow trees, so the beaver disappeared. Finally, with fewer elk because of the wolves, the birds returned when the forests started to grow again. And the trees stabilized the soil erosion around the lakes so they grew bigger.

The wolves actually are managing the ecosystem in Yellowstone. The Time Machine has changed.