

A Fierce Green Fire

– Dan Styer; 27 June 2024

You can find this essay, and all my other Leopold tracing efforts, at
<http://www.oberlin.edu/physics/dstyer/LeopoldLocations.html>.

The conservationist Aldo Leopold was a great thinker, an intense actor, and an eloquent writer. Perhaps his most influential essay is “Thinking Like a Mountain”, where he encourages all of us to think of the long-term consequences – for ourselves, for our descendants, for animals and plants, and for the land as a whole – of our actions.

“My own conviction on this score dates from the day I saw a wolf die. We were eating lunch on a high rimrock, at the foot of which a turbulent river elbowed its way. We saw what we thought was a doe fording the torrent, her breast awash in white water. When she climbed the bank toward us and shook out her tail, we realized our error: it was a wolf. A half-dozen others, evidently grown pups, sprang from the willows and all joined in a welcoming mêlée of wagging tails and playful maulings. What was literally a pile of wolves writhed and tumbled in the center of an open flat at the foot of our rimrock.

In those days we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf. In a second we were pumping lead into the pack When our rifles were empty, the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impassible slide-rocks.

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes – something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters’ paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.”

A powerful story, but it’s strong on evocative prose and weak on specifics. It was published in Leopold’s 1949 *Sand County Almanac*, and for sixty years no one could answer basic questions: Which river was the wolf crossing? When and where did the killing occur? Who accompanied Leopold (“we were eating lunch”)? Then, in 2009, detective work by Don Hoffman, Susan Flader, and Curt Meine, equal parts luck and prowess, uncovered the answers to all these questions. [I won’t describe this fascinating story. You will enjoy Flader’s essay “Searching for Aldo Leopold’s Green Fire” (*Forest History Today*, Fall 2012, pages 26–36).] It was on Sunday, 19 September 1909, Leopold’s fellow-hunter was Wheatley, and they were eating lunch near the Pete Slaughter Ranch on the rimrock northwest of Arizona’s Black River.

I wanted to see the site for myself.

Late in the day on 30 May 2024 I parked my rental car at the Bear Creek Trailhead in Arizona's Apache National Forest. I hiked the Bear Creek Trail down to the Black River, then abandoned trail, forded the Black River, and set up camp on the far (northwest) side of the river, near a big Ponderosa Pine. Starting off sleeping outside, I saw a satellite, the Big Dipper, Arcturus, Scorpio, and the Northern Crown, but I got cold and moved inside my tent.



The next morning I started walking up (still no trail) to the canyon rim. There were three Abert's Squirrels, and Rocky Mountain Iris, then I rimmed out onto beautiful flat open woods. It was dry up on the plateau, and I found Cockscomb Hedgehog Cactus, with a hummingbird hovering nearby!



I walked on along the rim and found a possible “Green Fire Wolf” site. The air swirled with Violet-green Swallows. I howled like a wolf, ate breakfast (whereas Leopold had eaten lunch), and then read to myself “Thinking Like a Mountain”. Upon reading I realized that my site couldn’t be the right place: the river elbow was upstream, there were no willows, no slide-rock talus for wolves to hide in, and the slope went right down to the river so there was no flat place for them to cavort.

After more walking upstream, rejecting one or two other candidates, I found a place that cured all these defects.



My best candidate for the lunch and shooting site at latitude/longitude 33.7286, -109.3626.

Furthermore, few sites on the rim afford a route for scampering down to the river. But very near my best candidate lunch and shooting site the cliff opens up in a chute (at latitude/longitude 33.7295, -109.3620) that provides exactly that opportunity.

I walked down to the Black River, picked up the Black River Mainstream Trail, and followed it downriver. Here's a photo of the riverside site where Leopold killed the Green Fire Wolf:



My best candidate for the kill site at latitude/longitude 33.7281, -109.3605.

You can see that from most places on the rim, there is no possible scramble route down to the river.

But here's another photo from the same location, looking up toward the chute opening (at latitude/longitude 33.7295, -109.3620, between two trees) that I mentioned earlier:



And here's an aerial view, courtesy of Google Maps (imagery © 2024 Airbus, Landsat/Copernicus, Maxar Technologies), showing how all the pieces fit together:



I walked back to my rental car, then drove south to Blue River country, hence east to the Gila in New Mexico, two more locations beloved by Aldo Leopold.