Cappelen Damm Agency *Fall 2023*

Tracking the Wolverine: A Journey through Mountains and Time

One day in February 1972 Dag O. Hessen is on a ski trip with his father in the mountains when they come across a wolverine track in the snow. The young Dag convinces his father to follow the trail, but after half an hour of searching the imprints of the predator disappear down a steep passage and they have to give up on their hunt.

50 years later he's back at the same place to pick up on the trail of the animal that escaped him. His father is now long gone, but the mountains are still there and somewhere out there is a wolverine.

Tracking the Wolverine is Hessen's most personal book so far. It's a portrait of Norwegian nature's most fascinating and shy animal, so compact in its wildness and power that there is hardly anything like it. An animal with a jaw strong enough to bite through even the thickest thigh bones and enough power to take down an animal many times its own weight, bite its head off and then drag its body up a tree. Seeing the animal in its natural habitat is a rarity only very few people get to experience.

The wolverine, and the desire to meet the wild animal, is the framing of the story taking place in the mountainous nature. But this is also a story about time passing and changes we cannot prevent. About everything that slips through our fingers. The things we cannot completely catch and tame: A childhood long gone, close family members who have passed, the wild nature and a natural diversity which is about to weather away. And at the bottom of all of this lies a deep affection and respect for nature and biology, presented by one of Norway's most respected non-fiction authors.

PRAISE FOR *TRACKING THE WOLVERINE*

In search of lost nature
The poet Hessen now rises to his full height. … this book has been worth waiting for. Hessen renders the vulnerable and soft nuances of life, and in nature. The nature depictions are moving. It's like I'm also looking across the mountains and feeling, in the way of animals, that life is good. (…)
He is our Thoreau, anno 2023.
VÅRT LAND

On the right track
It would surprise me if [this book] isn't at the top when the score is settled for this year's best non-fiction titles. … The book deserves a spot alongside the author's own favorites on the cabin bookshelves: Zappfe, Thoreau and Ingstad.
KLASSEKAMPEN/BOKMAGASINET

... several of the country's non-fiction writers should envy his effortless elegance and ability to write sentences like this one, about the author's fascination for the wolverine as 'a primal force, the wilderness in animal form, everything that is lost in an increasingly tame residual landscape.
MORGENBLADET

If you want to convey something to your fellow humans regarding nature's coherence and beauty, you need to be connected to nature as well as humans, which Dag O. Hessen certainly is.
To me it seems like he has come close to an optimal balance, a bird's eye-perspective on life, and in the knowledge and joy of nature, which deserves to be called wisdom.
NRK

Letter from the author

To the reader...

This is a book I for long have looked forward to write. After exactly fifty years I return to the remote place in the remote Norwegian mountains where my father and I first encountered the tracks of the mythological and mysterious wolverine. Now I return, and finally take some time not only to go out in nature, but into the nature. To spend nights there in silence, far away from everything except starry skies and the wilderness – and I still feel at home there.

As I boy I envisioned that I would spend most of my life outdoor, roaming in the mountains almost like a wolverine. When realizing that life also had other things to offer, I grew into the everyday life, first education, then family and then a busy life as scientist. I still visited nature, but primarily for hastily skiing or running. In rare cases climbing a peak. As the years passed by, my desire to revisit the remote alpine terrain and the areas of our old family cabin to trace the wolverine tracks both literally and metaphysically. This is also a travel through time, wondering about the massive changes in nature and society that has happened over these fifty years. And myself, am I still the same?

During different seasons I spend time in the mountains, sometime also the steep peaks in Jotunheimen where wolverines sometimes climb peaks. Why do they do this. For the same (lack of) rational reasons as we do? What do actually wolverines, or animals in general, feel and think? Clearly their minds are way more sophisticated then the Cartian tradition made us believe. As a biologist I also take an immense pleasure in observing the small wonders of nature, the diversity of birds, insects and a range of small creature – and how evolution has provided the strangest solutions.

Admittedly there is a touch of Thoreau in my book, yet it is quite different from Walden. I also visit other literary references dwelling upon humans in nature – and the nature in humans. It is also a personal book,

my sister who suddenly died young. What is the purpose of life, can nature provide some sort of purpose? If not, it clearly offers pleasure – almost as love - and comfort.

To summarize it is a travel to mountains and time. And yes, I did meet the wolverine – and the wolf. Hope you like it.

Best
Dag O. Hessen

P.S.: In addition to my own, old family cabin, much of the story take place in the pretty isolated and remote areas where the small cabin Kluftbua is situated. This is an open herders' and hunters' cabin where everyone can seek shelter when the weather gets tough. And the very place where was standing taking this photo is also where I had a close encounter with the wolverine.

Translated Extract

Tracking the Wolverine

By

Dag O. Hessen

Translation by Lucy Moffatt

Once above the birch line I turn due east, in the direction the wolverine tracks took back then. There's been a steady wind all winter and little snowfall. The snow underfoot is hard-packed so it's easy going on backcountry skis; I float on top of it – just like a wolverine. Here are the last outposts of the mountain forest: a cluster of crooked mountain birches that have managed to eke out an existence on the southern slope of Jammerdalshøgda, somewhat sheltered from the eternal north wind and with maximum exposure to sunlight. There are two sets of tracks by the birches, both raised – a phenomenon you sometimes see when the wind has been blowing for a while. The prints were made on a mild day when the snow was packed hard enough that the tracks remained, like a raised relief, after the wind had blasted away the uppermost layers of snow around them – like a hard granite formation in a landscape of easily weathered, soft limestone. One set of tracks was left by a ptarmigan, the other by a larger animal that *may* have been a wolverine. I ski up a from a dip between two elevations; across the gentle slope rising to the south runs a constant river of restless snowflakes, driven by the wind, seeking a place of rest. The sun shines palely through the blanketing clouds, coaxing a silvery shimmer from the dancing, ever-shifting snow.

This is benign and easily traversed terrain. Over tens of millennia, the ice sent its arms out from Rondane, wearing down all resistance along the way, and leaving sand, gravel and soil behind in the valleys. What remains is a tamed landscape of rounded peaks and valleys, in which only the central massif on this plateau

has retained its wildness and grandeur. Low precipitation and a fairly unforgiving geology provide a foothold for only the most meagre of vegetation. But this barrenness is also what gives the landscape its charm – and light. The plateaus are carpeted white with snow in winter and lichen in summer. And millennia ago, roiling glacial rivers carved out valleys and ravines between the peaks, depositing soil in other places to create green oases of lushness.

At the highest point of the stretch between the peaks of Jammerdal, a plateau surrounded by mountains reveals itself to the southwest. It opens out into a birch forest and endless marshland south of Breistølen. Two gaps in the low clouds let in a little light, which sweeps like slow, dimmed spotlights over all the white. Due south of where I am, I spy two black dots. That's where I'm headed. During my descent, there is nothing to indicate how steep it is in all this whiteness, but I'm familiar with the terrain and know that the slope here is smooth and safe. At one point, I pass a spot scattered with ripped-up lichen and black droplets of reindeer dung: a good sign for anyone on the track of wolverines, since *they* will be looking for reindeer; but this is the track of a solitary animal. Where is the flock?

The two black patches on the horizon expand to form the outline of a cabin and an outhouse . I have been to Kluftbua many times, but not for years now. This little cabin is the centre of my wolverine-tracking efforts, both geographically and in another sense. It is generously left open so people in the mountains can use it.

Once there, I take off my skis and leave them on the lee side of the cabin, brush off the snow and go inside. It's a log cabin with weather-beaten brown-stained cladding, framed by red gable boards, with four solid beams and a ridge piece built to cope with all and any snowfall. The cabin is neat and tidy – the people who pass through are clearly worthy of the confidence extended to them. Apart from a small hallway, which also serves as a woodstore, the cabin consists of a single room, with a wood-burning stove, a table with benches and stools, two candles and a bunkbed with sheepskins. What more could you need? Above the small-paned window hangs a picture of farmhands at work in front of a red cottage and barn. Two women turn the hay and place it in haystacks – this was before the days of hay-drying racks – and in the background

is a man with a horse and cart. Apart from the bunkbeds, the cabin is exactly the same as it was fifty years ago. I've sometimes spent the night here, and will do so again, but this is just a daytime visit. I sit down at the table and look through the small-paned windows, peering up the slope that I will soon be tackling as I think about my colleague, the biologist and author, Edward O. Wilson: "I have never seen a wild wolverine," he writes in his book *The Creation*, published in 2006 –not a book about creation in the biblical sense, but a deeply felt homage to the marvellous diversity of life produced by evolution. The book is subtitled "An Appeal to Save Life on Earth" and is also aimed at those who view this as a work of creation. Before getting to the wolverine, the rational evolutionary biologist Wilson says:

> No words and no art can capture the full depth and intricacy of the living world – as biologists have come increasingly to understand it. If a miracle is a phenomenon we cannot understand, then all species are something of a miracle. Each and every kind of organism, by virtue of the exacting conditions that produced it, is profoundly unique and shows its diagnostic traits reluctantly.

To elaborate on this, Wilson turns to the wolverine, one of the two animal species that particularly fascinate him (the other being ants, the group of animals he has devoted most of his life to studying). He continues:

> This weasel-like mammal of the north woods is legendary for its ferocity, cunning, and elusiveness. Chunky in form, three to four feet long and weighing twenty to forty pounds, it is one of Earth's smallest top-tier predators. It feeds on everything from rats to deer. It can chase cougars and wolf packs away from downed prey and drag carcasses three times its own weight. It has fuzzy thick black fur, but this is no animal you'd want to pet. It has sharp teeth, a predator's retractable claws, and the face of a miniature bear. Individuals are both solitary and exceptionally shy of humans. They wander far and wide – here today, over there somewhere tomorrow, and gone for good the day after that.

Fifty years on from my first visit here, I sit in Kluftbua once more, eating my packed lunch and watching the light shift as the clouds sail overhead. Impatient, I finish up quickly, strap on my skis and carry on gently upward and southward. Some way up the hillside, I look back at the cabin, in all its isolation. Far off on the horizon, the white plateau meets a restless sky in constantly shifting shades of grey. It grows more overcast and once more the snow sweeps over the mountainsides, but I continue to advance until everything around me is perfectly white. It's a lovely feeling, this, to stand here enshrouded in white nothingness, no points of reference in the landscape except when I look down and see Fridtjof Nansen – his portrait on my skis. The last hero whose glory is still unfaded.

In this white no-man's-land, surrounded only by the soft soughing of the wind and the whisper of snow crystals, I simply *am.* I'm not due anywhere. Why have I done so little of what, as a youth, I expected to be a central part of my life? Although I constantly walk, or mostly run, *out* in nature, I am much more rarely *in* nature. I've done plenty of cross-country skiing, but at constantly increasing speeds, on increasingly well-groomed tracks. For many years now, I've barely strayed outside the tracks, with the exception of a few summit hikes in spring, but even then it's been a matter of straight up and straight back down again, my eye constantly on the clock. There's always something that needs to be done and my outdoor excursions have simply been a hasty means of relieving pressure in between duties and obligations, dictated by time. There's always been this drive to do *something useful*, to justify my own existence, given that I was lucky enough to be born in the best place in the world during the best era in the world. Perhaps my primary drive hasn't been duty, but rather a quest for meaning, or at least for a *feeling* of meaning, and an acknowledgement that it can only be achieved by making a positive contribution to something greater than oneself, something more enduring, something right, something others can benefit from. I'm referring here to meaning *in* one's own life –the meaning *of* life is something quite different. And the more you get done, the more meaning is created. Indeed one variant of the hedonist's goal of achieving the greatest possible happiness is to be of the

greatest possible use; but since, to a certain extent, usefulness can be converted into happiness by doing or achieving something, hedonism and the ethics of duty are related.

When I truly discovered nature as a young man, I thought I would spend my life out here, or at least a great deal of it. In the forests and mountains. Gradually and imperceptibly, busyness sneaked into my life; one thing led to another. My existence was constantly made more efficient: faster PCs, faster roads, faster everything. More standardization and time-saving routines. But the more efficient I became, the more of a hurry I was in and the less time I had. A five-minute wait at the bus stop became an eternity that was impossible to bear without my mobile phone as a diversion. A ten-second wait in front of a slow PC has become irritating dead time. And all the while, the river of life runs mercilessly faster. Out here in the mountains, time is different. I can stand here and simply be. It's a sanctuary of slowness and analogue time.

My father, who was from a small mountainside farm on an island in Western Norway, was an ethicist of duty and a true-born son of the region's Calvinistic culture of thrift. But he was also a man possessed of great calm, life wisdom – and an extensive poetry collection. As I stand enveloped in the white and feel the enormous contrast between the timelessness here and my daily treadmill, I find myself thinking of "The Busy Man", a poem my father knew by heart. I recall some verses and see just how well Jan Magnus Bruheim captured it:

He has so much ground to cover.

It's vital to travel fast.

There was much for him to do .

Each day brought more tasks than the last.

The end of the day is approaching

He stands bent over his stick

And asks: what has life given me

How did it go by so quick?

Thus he hurried his way through life

Without ever getting a grip

A joy ran behind him on the road

but never caught up with him

But that isn't quite true either, because there's undoubtedly pleasure to be had from doing things, being useful, trying to discover what we're good for; and, on a good day, from savouring the joy of success too. Perhaps it may bring us peace in the long run, but neither meaning nor happiness are achieved by simply lying on our backs in the heather and watching the clouds drift by. And the very same Nansen who gazes up at me from my skis has retained his glory and lustre precisely because he managed to achieve so very many great things, as a humanist, among others. At the same time, his life was a constant tug-of-war between duty and pleasure – the former being science, lecture tours, diplomacy, travels and teeming crowds, while hunting, nature and simplicity were the central sources of happiness in his existence. Nonetheless, his life turned out to be dominated by duty and his moments of solitude and silence beneath the open skies were probably all the more intensely enjoyable for being islands of pleasure in an ocean of its opposite. But the duty was also self-imposed and he betrays the secret motivation for his tremendous life's work in a letter to his sister, Ida. "Also, this fear that one's name will not outlive one's own body… this quest for a single basis for hope." It is the fear that everything is in vain. Death also provides considerable stimuli for personal vanity. We cannot underestimate posterity as motivation – indeed some people seem to conduct their lives with an eye to their future obituaries and eulogies, even though both tend to be larded with vacuous flattery these days. Being remembered as a good person and one who did something for others is the closest we get to achieving even an iota of immortality. And this doesn't just apply to good Samaritans or empire-builders –

anyone can feel this motivation. But the vast majority of us face the prosaic limitation that we actually have to earn a living. Yet here I stand in all this white and know that the cumulative contribution of my entire life is at best a ripple on the ocean – so why haven't I lived a slow life out in nature instead?

I don't know quite how long I stand here, sunk in my own thoughts; but in the end, the wind nips and the cold pierces my clothing. I had no greater goal that day than to see again the place where my father and I had found wolverine tracks, to revisit Kluftbua and, beyond that, just to experience absolute silence and absolute whiteness. If it had been a windless, clear day, I would have carried on for a while, perhaps well into the twilight, then switched on my headlamp to light my way back; but current weather conditions are hardly inviting. The day draws to a close as I ski down into the river valley that starts by Kluftbua, where the Breia meanders down towards Gudbrandsdalen. This valley is a good place when it's windy: I've sought shelter here before after being surprised by bad weather. It's one of those lovely valleys that are easy to cross, where willows and small birch trees offer ideal grazing for ptarmigans and hares. The wind eases off and the sun comes out again. Down here, there are still plenty of animal tracks, and open holes in the ice where the river lives and bears witness to the imminence of spring. I follow it almost all the way down to Breistulen. Some years back, a bear was observed here, sitting out on the marshland for an hour, devouring a sheep. Not by me, sadly. I've never seen a bear in the wild on the Norwegian mainland either.

I ski onward, up the birch-clad hillside, heading due west; it's steep and I sink deep into the snow. I consider putting skins on my skis, but short-term laziness wins the day. After climbing diagonally for half an hour, I reach a flatter stretch on the upper edge of the birch belt. Although it's outside their normal route, I once stumbled across a reindeer here one winter's day many years ago. Almost literally. I came to an abrupt halt by a large hole in the snow, from which tracks radiated out in all directions: a few fox tracks, but mostly wolverine prints. And down there in the hole lay the reindeer, or what was left of it. Much of it had been eaten and even the larger bones had been chewed over. Whether the animal had been killed by the wolverine or just found by it was impossible to say – probably the latter. And what the reindeer was even doing here, probably far away from its flock, was another matter altogether. The

wolverine had probably managed to pick up the scent, even that of a reindeer deep-frozen beneath the snow, possibly from as far away as Jammerdalen. And then it had dug its way down, gashed open the frozen hide, gnawed through frost-stiffened flesh and devoured the entrails. Afterwards, perhaps, it lay on the shelf up here, full to bursting, and gazed into the mountains, feeling, in its wolverine way, that life was good. It returned again at intervals of several days to eat the meat and then the marrow, enjoying times of plenty. But this was long ago. That wolverine no longer exists, and today there's no trace of anything here – not even a ptarmigan track across the peaks.

I ski down the other side, cross a boggy area, head up a hillside through the birch forest and then I reach *my* place. I haven't spent the night here for many years, but the cabin's in good condition – my father saw to that.

The architecture and interior are what might be described as "typical 1970s", although it's actually from the 1960s, and was mostly built by my father and grandfather. A plaid sofa, plaid curtains, small-paned windows, pine furnishings and paraffin lamps. A cabin with one bedroom divided in two, a stove and a corner sofa that is slightly better equipped than its predecessor – the one-room shack that wasn't originally a holiday cabin but a spartan overnight shelter for people with vital business out in the mountains, lumberjacks or shepherds. My cabin is a luxury in the sense that it was built for leisure and pleasure, albeit with the minimalism and thrift of the 1960s. It was a place to drive to in our VW during the winter and Easter holidays, hauling our baggage half a mile up to the cabin on pulk sleds, lighting the stove, digging out the well to collect water and then waiting until the indoor temperature became bearable. Which could take hours. It was a cabin built for slow time where card and board games were all we needed. We had no idea what cabin life would look like in the 2020s –the constant battles over plug sockets for everyone's chargers, the continuous stream of digital interruptions and notifications of all kinds, or discussions about the choice of TV station and who should have first dibs on which bathroom. Our simple cabin eventually acquired a gas oven – which made my mother happy. Then came solar panels and no one missed the stink of paraffin

lamps. When he was really old, my father also wired the cabin, providing enough electricity for a few lamps, a coffee percolator and a couple of extra plug sockets. By then, the roads were also ploughed in winter.

Eventually the Market itself took charge, altering Norwegian cabin life for good. Landowners sold once-worthless expanses of barren mountain terrain to professional construction companies at a time when purchasing power was on the rise. It wasn't just that there were more cabins, but also *bigger* cabins, with bathrooms and underfloor heating, saunas, washing machines and dishwashers and brushed-steel fridges. Fifty years ago there were 170,000 cabins in Norway, with an average size of fifty square metres. Now there are close to half a million, many of them holiday homes, complete with infrastructure and an average area of nearly 100 square metres. And, as with most other things, the pace of development has accelerated. In this case, it has advanced so rapidly that the effects on highland nature are visible to us, although other changes occur so gradually, even from a fifty-year perspective, that we are able to get used to them: our frames of reference shift. The landscape as it used to be is erased from our memories and we identify the changes only when we see old photos or statistics. But some cabins, like this one, are still cabins.

I put my backpack down beside the outer door and find the key. It's still hanging where it always has – not very well hidden, but there's not much worth stealing here anyway. Then I unlock the door, grab the broom that I know stands in the outer hallway to the right of the door, where it has always stood, brush the snow off my boots, go inside and open the curtains. In the little washroom hangs the cabin's only mirror. It's small and dusty but even in the poor light, I see that the decades have made their mark. It's still me staring back, the resemblance to my confirmation portrait remains, but there's a different cast to my face, I have more wrinkles, a shadow beneath the cheekbones that wasn't there before, some grey along my temples, which will spread implacably. Most of 1973-me has been replaced, cell by cell, many times over, without any break in my history; everything has advanced with infinite slowness. Despite the constant renewal, aging has followed its course and even my innermost me – the recipe itself, my DNA – is not precisely the same. Time has taken a toll on it too and the repair systems have found it increasingly difficult to keep up with the eternal mutations; epigenetic changes cause the message to be read slightly differently, my cell walls are

growing stiffer, wrinkles are emerging, everything is greying. While I see no positives to ageing, the alternative is hardly preferable. Besides, ageing is so wisely arranged that our vision weakens over time, making it more difficult for us to see our own decline. Yet the mirror still shows me much of the boy who stared back at me fifty years ago. Less expectant, but more clued up. Back then, I knew nothing about how my life would turn out. The only thing I knew was that I would grow older. Paradoxically, it bothered me much more then than now.

Life comes about through random events but within a given framework. The most important components of my cosmic winning ticket in life were, of course, a good childhood with good parents in the best country in the world during the best era in the world. The mere fact of being born is an utterly improbable event, and it is dizzying to realize that we are among the – for now – most recent links in an unbroken chain of life. And the years that have made up my own life: every single one of them, indeed every week, has contained unexpected events, good and bad. Mostly good, but also bad, very bad. Each of these milestones offers an opportunity to consider that the road might have been different.

Although I am demonstrably changed, the cabin is more or less the same. And luckily it is in a location that has not fallen victim to the urbanization of Norway's highlands and mountain pastures via holiday cabin developments; on the whole, the landscape is the way I recall it from my boyhood. The reassurance of recognition: something is unchanged in an accelerating world.

On the whole, emotions are rational. They are dictated by signal substances and signalling pathways in the brain, many of which originated far back in our evolutionary prehistory. The more closely a mammal is related to us, the more of these signal substances – and emotions – we share. Some are fundamental: not just hunger, fear, aggression and sex drive, but also the pleasure, joy, caring and empathy delivered by our reward hormones. Longing is also rational to the extent that it provokes us to action, but nostalgia is a peculiar case: it's hard to say what purpose it serves and it is probably more a mood than a primary emotion. Old cabins are nostalgia, which is why we cling to them and view them as essential components of our identity. Our parents are gone, families are divided, the children have moved out, but at our cabins,

everything is the same as ever. We associate them with happy holiday memories and a carefree childhood existence. But this also makes them a reminder of everything that is no more and will never return. For me: youth, future, a good father. My sister Marit.

I didn't become aware of death until I was eight, when a girl in my class suddenly died. Since our school was beside the cemetery, my class was taken along when the little coffin was lowered into the grave in the presence of the inconsolable parents. After this, the waterfall roar of death lay over the valley and I was often overwhelmed by fear at the thought that this wonderful life would one day irrevocably end; that I would no longer be able to experience springtime out in nature. I look at the tiny mementos left behind by Marit, which are still there in the cabin – painted vases, pieces of embroidery – and feel that death has lost its sting. Perhaps it's resignation or fatalism: we accept our fate and that brings a kind of peace. Yet it is still difficult to reconcile myself to losing the opportunity to experience spring in the mountains forever.

When death broke in on a hitherto safe and predictable world, and my sense of meaning crumbled, nature and the mountains became my fixed points of reference. I still feel that way now, too when faced again with the ancient mountains, with the familiar landscape, with what endures. The cabin is, after all, an ephemeral construction in the grand scheme of things, just like me. Nostalgia is one thing, but at an old cabin, it can tip over into sentimentality – which is nostalgia on steroids: a dysfunctional longing that can only lead to despondency.

The mice have been partying here and played havoc with the contents of one cupboard. But they were unlucky enough to end up in the wrong cupboard, the one without any food. They have, however, chewed pretty much everything in there to bits: the candles, a few wine corks, bars of soap and polystyrene. And they've chewed holes in all the packets of washing detergent, causing the powder to trickle out and blend with enormous amounts of mouse droppings. The pots and pans are filthy. The other cupboard containing packets of cookies, old chocolate and other treats is untouched. If only they'd known. At the very back of the

cupboard I find some cookies marked “Best before 1995” that taste perfectly fine. After sweeping up the mouse droppings, I dig out the well, fetch a couple of buckets of water, wash the floor and boil the utensils I’ll need for cooking. The cold has settled in the walls and after two hours intensive stoking, the wood-burning stove has only pushed the indoor temperature up to precisely freezing point.

I eat, throw a few logs on the fire and even manage to find a slug of cognac left over from Dad’s days. Then I take Mikkjel Fønhus’s book *Wolverine* out of my pack. From the end of the 1950s until his death in 1973, Fønhus published a new book every year and when I was a child, I would always get the latest one for Christmas. Early on Christmas Eve, I would sneak off and vanish into Fønhus’s world. By Christmas Day, the book would be finished – the story often ending in death for both the animal and its nemesis, the hunter. The unusual thing about Fønhus was that his sympathies lay with the animal, but it was more than that: he also saw the world through the prism of the animal’s emotions. *Wolverine* was among the Fønhus books I didn’t own and it took some effort to track it down in a second-hand bookshop. In 1959, it had cost 20 kroner; now I happily paid 300. “In the depths of dusk that same evening,” Fønhus writes, “an animal as big as a medium-sized dog came creeping out of a talus”.

> [...] He started to head east, walking on big, broad paws and somewhat bowed legs, following a path that was slightly crooked, yet steadily aiming for a broad, high peak deep in the mountains –Ørneflag. [...] He roamed in the mountains in the manner typical of his kind: if he came to a fair-sized rock, he would jump up onto it, stand there looking around, and scent the air; this made it easier for him to detect whether there were any animals nearby that he could try and sneak up on. […] At midnight, he slid like a shadow across a ridge just below Ørneflag – his form visible against the starlight-sprinkled vault of the heavens.

The wolverine hunter, Heine Juvet, isn’t a bad man; he too must scratch out a livelihood on his barren mountain farm, and the bounty on wolverines helps him make ends meet. Besides, the wolverine has been

helping itself to Heine's cattle. Heine isn't burdened by any deep ecological notions about the wolverine's capacity for suffering, and this is a war whose ends justify all the means – including poison and wolverine traps. Fønhus expresses the point through the words of a local reindeer herder: "These animals were placed in the mountains by the Devil and not Our Lord!" In the end, the animal is caught in the snare. "The wolverine lay there with the trap up-ended before him; his paw protruded from between the clamped steel jaws, and he lay there gazing at this paw, which prevented him from freeing his leg, escaping from this bind…." In the end, the wolverine gnaws off the lifeless paw – and becomes known as Threefeet.

I put a big birch root on the fire and walk over to the outhouse to fetch more wood. From the outer door, it's about ten steps through the snow. In just a couple of hours, February will be over but the darkness is in full command. It's a cold winter night, there's not a light to be seen, and twinkling stars are everywhere. When was the last time I saw such a starry sky? I'd forgotten how overwhelming it is. To the left of the door is the privy, concealed by a curtain, and on the floor stand paint cans whose bottoms are coated with dried wood stain; there are tools and saws, a chopping block and axe, some folding chairs leaned up against the walls and two rows of firewood that line the transverse wall from floor to ceiling. Dad was a man of impeccable order, but also a collector. No one who grew up on a smallholding in Sunnmøre during the tough 1930s has ever thrown anything out, and Dad had his own way of straightening out crooked nails and bashing the bristles of old paintbrushes until they were soft. He was thrifty but never mean. He has left me a substantial legacy of firewood here in the outhouse, while more is also stacked outside along the cabin's lee wall– and it's had many years to dry out. Mouse droppings are scattered everywhere inside here, the floor is covered with them. The mice have gnawed away at tarbrushes and leather straps, but that's meagre fare even for them.

I find the broom and sweep out the worst of it before going into the cabin and fetching a lump of cheese that I nail down close to the outer door. A couple of metres away, I set down a candle. Then I put on a woolly hat, a warm sheepskin coat and sit down on the polystyrene seat of the privy. That insulating polystyrene was the true herald of a new era at the cabin. It is absolutely silent for ten minutes. I've decided to give the

mice twenty minutes before going back inside, to the warmth of the wood-burning stove. Then a rustling comes from within the woodpile, followed by more rustling, and a solitary mouse creeps over to the cheese, planning to snatch it to safety; but as I said, the cheese is nailed down. Hunger and fear battle in the tiny creature, but hunger wins out. And in that same instant, I see a small triangular head through a crack in the door – a least weasel, which hurls itself at the mouse. A feeble shriek, a brief struggle and the weasel scurries out, effortlessly carrying the mouse in its jaws – although the body probably weighs the same as its own. It all happens so fast that I barely have time to register the drama before it's over. I'm left perplexed after the brief but intense scene. I had no intention of contributing to the mouse's death but now I think about it, I recall having seen weasel tracks leading to a hole in the snow outside. It strikes me there's a certain irony in the fact that, on my quest for the wolverine, I've met its smaller relative instead. Second cousin to the pine marten and smaller cousin to the stoat, it's the world's smallest predator and a dangerous little devil for mice, even though it usually weighs well below 100 grams. A mustelid with the compressed strength and wildness of the wolverine, scaled down to half a percent of the size of its larger relative. Incidentally, a pine marten once came down the chimney of the cabin and exited via the stove. It had the cabin to itself and after sweeping its way down through the flue, it inspected all the beds, scattering unfeasible amounts of soot over them before abandoning its search for food and going out the same way it had come.

Back in front of the stove with Fønhus: Heine has been tracking Threefeet for hours. The wolverine now leaves a characteristic trail behind it: three paw marks and a fourth, lighter print. Towards evening, the track leads Heine to a rough talus. After make a provisional torch Heine creeps in after the wolverine, shotgun at the ready. He manages to fire one shot inside before the torch goes out, and after a tremendous struggle in the darkness, he manages to catch the wolverine. But outside, above the talus, tracks appear: three paw prints, and a lighter impression from the fourth. Threefeet is not the animal a scratched-up Heine skins some hours later.

> The tip of the knife blade cut and cut carefully beneath the skin and as it came loose from the body, he saw how it veritably bulged with muscles, making it clear why this not-so-large animal was capable of the feats it sometimes performed; Heine once saw how a wolverine dragged away an entire reindeer buck after killing it.

A friend of mine witnessed just such an episode. During a winter hunt in the north, he noticed a reindeer grazing on the very edge of a wind-blasted ledge on the other side of the valley. He took out his binoculars and saw a compact black hunter sneaking upwards concealed by a projection – immediately beneath the deer yet outside its field of vision. It climbed all the way up and then, in one explosive movement, leapt over the edge and clamped its jaws on the reindeer's throat. The struggle didn't last long. This was an upgraded version of the weasel's lightning-fast and fatal attack on the mouse.

There is an almost endless supply of literature about people in nature and nature in people. I've read my share of it and much of it revolves around this familiar theme: life is simplest, best and most authentic out there. Some of the writing is mawkish and naïve, but almost all of it conveys something that is difficult to put in words: the way nature enriches us, both through what it is and what it is *not*. Many side with the animals against us humans, the attackers, and some point out the similarities between concentration camps and modern livestock farming. Others seek to understand us humans against the backdrop of "the others" – animals, that is – interpreting humankind through the prism of animals, while others again take the opposite approach, writing anthropomorphic literature that seeks to understand animals using us humans as a starting-point. This is the approach Fønhus takes, without seeming naïve or phony. And no one ever learns what the wolverine thinks, although it clearly has its views about hunting, the need to hide away from people and the incomprehensible iron jaws of the animal trap. Ever since Darwin established the interrelatedness of all life, our ability to describe reality through the animal's senses – to the extent that it is even possible – has undergone a continual process of maturation. It also makes a pleasant change from the kind of writing that expresses hatred of predators, from the days when they were strong and we were weak. Now the situation has been reversed, yet the hatred smoulders on.

Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that we humans are animal too. We have an almost horrified fascination with the bestial, perhaps especially within ourselves – an aspect we see as the antithesis of the continuous self-domestication that has been a central component of our species' humanisation project. From biology to philosophy, high literature to crime fiction, we see the appeal of the bestial everywhere: savagery, desire, blood lust, the dark and the dangerous. Therein lies the appeal of the wolverine, too, and in the myths of its savagery and bloodthirstiness. Admittedly no species can compete with the mythologisation of and focus on the wolf, but it has also been so thoroughly monitored, described and managed that it has lost some of the mystique that the wolverine still possesses. I have, by the way, never met a wolf out in nature, although I would dearly love to have that experience.