This book began with a decapitation. Actually, it began with the aftermath of a decapitation. In teaching Ælfric’s hagiography of the East Anglian King Edmund, I was taken not with the miraculous fact that the king’s head, severed by Viking invaders, survives to call to his subjects, nor that a savage wolf sits to guard it, but rather that the wolf’s actions seemed so familiar. The hiding and protecting of its prize seemed so utterly canine, I couldn’t help but wonder if it had an analogue in the wolf’s natural behaviour. As you may see below, it certainly does.

This revelation led to numerous conference papers and articles exploring the relationship between the representations of animals in early medieval vernacular literature and the ecological and behavioural realities of the actual creatures. The more research I did into the biological, ecological, and archaeological literature, the more I came to see actual beasts swimming and flying, creeping, and stalking, between the lines of Old English poetry and prose. My own life-long fascination with, and connection to, animals found purchase in my scholarly practice.

Along the way, I have received much encouragement and support, both informal and formal. Conference sessions mounted or presided over by enthusiastic scholars like Michael Bintley, Megan Cavell, Heide Estes, Richard Hoffmann, Johanna Kramer, Jennifer Neville, Robin Norris, and Michael Warren started me on this path. Formative publications of mine shepherded by Olivia Holmes and Thomas Willard, and refined by anonymous peer-reviewers, honed my approach to the dizzying confluence of biological, ecological, archaeological, and theoretical literatures. Conversations with fellow scholars such as John Black, Cullen Chandler, and Alf Siewers helped me clarify and contextualize my ideas. A sabbatical provided by Lycoming College gave me the initial time and freedom to build the core of this text. My colleagues at the college provided no end of good cheer and support throughout the process. The acquisitions editors Ilse Schweitzer-VanDonkelaar and Danna Messer at Arc Humanities Press helped to shape and guide the formation of the text at each step of its development, and the anonymous peer-review process provided invaluable suggestions for greater clarity and depth. Most importantly, of course, my family endured long days of little contact and both parental and spousal distraction, but nonetheless succoured me with love and patience and sustenance both material and immaterial. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in the following text are my own, which fairly may be faulted for sacrificing grace in favour of fidelity. In the end, any errors found herein are most surely mine alone.

To Susan, Michael, and Jack,
for their constant inspiration, support, and love.

To Pete, for the pike.