

Selesnya: Shark Overview

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Mike Flores

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Mark Rosewater says that **Magic** players fall into three broad categories, indicated by the nicknames Timmy, Johnny, and Spike. According to the quiz at the beginning of that original article, I am a Spike, which is appropriate, as *Swimming With Sharks* is "the *constructed* tournament players" column on this site. Now tournament Spikes *also* fall into different categories. Some players only like control decks: they love Blue and want to counter everything. Different players, probably crowned with short cropped and bleached white hair, are pure Spikes: they will sink their teeth into any kind of deck in exchange for the best chance at winning. Still other players espouse a limited flexibility; they will run different decks depending on the cards available in a format... but they never, *ever*, want to feel that tingle in the arms, the hairs rising on the backs of their necks, the forbidden success known as "that icky combo feeling." Some alleged Spikes will inexplicably only play Mono-Green, regardless of if it is good or not, and probably frown on the friendship between White and Green espoused by the Selesnya. For my part, I try to be flexible, trying out board control, pure beatdown, or aggro-control decks depending on the format and what is good.



Despite the fact that I try to be flexible, like every player I have my own preferences and biases. Personally, I love undercosted threat cards, with my favorite class of cards being "the undercosted 4/4." I once qualified for the Pro Tour with a *Flesh Reaver* deck designed by **Magic** Lead Developer (but then-undergraduate) Brian Schneider, and have more-or-less never looked back. Give me a *Werebear* and I won't even bother to cast my *Wild Mongrels*. *Troll Ascetic* is often not good enough for me, not when I can summon *Nimble Mongoose* for one third the mana in the same format. Down the line, I love efficient threats and little tweaks and tricks to make them better: as such, Selesnya is the guild most up my alley.




When you talk about Selesnya in constructed deck, there is only one place to start: the prototype undercosted creature, *Watchwolf*. Zvi Mowshowitz said it best when he previewed the card: *Watchwolf* is the kind of card that automatically makes the cut. 3/3 creatures for two mana are so valuable that some players were willing to play *Raving Oni-Slave* in a format where *Hand of Honor* was even more common. *Watchwolf*, with no "nice Slave, stupid" drawbacks, is so good that leaving him *out* of a deck requires a strong reason. If you are going to play a Selesnya deck, *Watchwolf* is your backbone and your first slot. You drop him in and know that he will connect with the force of the average creature twice his cost. He's great... but even *Watchwolf* can't work alone.


In that vein, the next best card for the Selesnya deck has got to be *Loxodon Hierarch*. Way back when I wrote the preview for *Ravenous Baloth*, I likened THAT card to a bigger and more dangerous Spike Feeder. *Ravenous Baloth* gained just as much

life as Spike Feeder -- and potentially more with additional Beasts in the mix -- but added a huge frame. Ravenous Baloth was a vast improvement over Spike Feeder's Gray Ogre-reminiscent 2/2 body, and his sacrifice for life ability made combat trading unreal in the Beast deck and very good in any deck that wanted a 4/4 creature with no drawbacks for four mana. Now compare the mighty Ravenous Baloth to Loxodon Hierarch. There *is* no comparison. Unlike the *Onslaught* Beast version, Loxodon Hierarch gives you four life *immediately*. Like Ravenous Baloth's 4/4 over Spike Feeder's 2/2, that feature is a huge improvement. While Loxodon Hierarch doesn't give you the added flexibility of dumping your Avaraxes, he also doesn't demand his own doom to give your life total a lift. In protracted games against Red Decks, Green players are often forced to sacrifice a Ravenous Baloth that is holding the ground in order to cushion their life totals against burn spells real or imagined. Loxodon Hierarch will not force you to make that sacrifice. When he comes into play, he is merely a 4/4 for four mana ready to work; you will have already gained four life.

Now if *you* want to sacrifice Loxodon Hierarch for something, though, that is your business. Because Loxodon Hierarch is in Green/White, he is almost necessarily playing for a team that is long on efficient bodies but short on targeted removal. The Selesnya have good creatures... but don't look for them to show up with Flametongue Kavu. As such, when pressed with opposing animals, the Selesnya have to settle it in the ring. When fisticuffs ensue, there are no guarantees. The opponent may have removal to foil a double block. Your Watchwolf may be up against a Samurai of the Pale Curtain, itself sort of a 3/3 for two mana. It is in these situations that Loxodon Hierarch's secondary ability comes into play. You might not *have* to sacrifice him to gain four life... But you might *want* to sacrifice your Hierarch to save your team.

No less valuable is this creature's ability to save your squad from mass removal. Again, Green and White are vulnerable to creature kill. The Selesnya in general are specialists in token generation and their signature keyword ability, Convoke, encourages having lots of creatures in play. Efficient bodies or no, Convoke and swarming in general put the Selesnya in direct opposition with mass removal... and not in a good way. Since the very first Pro Tour, when Bertrand Lestree lost the pivotal last game of the tournament to Mike "Loco" Loconto's topdecked Swords to Plowshares from a position where the eventual champion was dead on board, the battle lines have been clear.

Today, Swords to Plowshares is played in only one relevant format, so you won't have to worry about that particular removal spell; otherwise, Loxodon Hierarch can be a lot of help. The big Elephant might not be able to help against Wrath of God, but it can sure fight other commonly played mass removal. He can defend your swarm from Pernicious Deed or Akroma's Vengeance in Extended, and the ascending Plague Boiler or newly returned Wildfire in Standard. Don't forget: *Ravnica's* own answer to Wrath of God, Hour of Reckoning, misses this four drop's team when Loxodon Hierarch's controller has  open. This will most certainly be a factor in Block Constructed, with the signature four drop making the usually symmetrical Wrath variant considerably less even. *In fact*, the cards might just work together well on the same team. Creatures and Wraths working together? Elephants and elimination lying on the same pallet? Is the end near?

Now I know that this is Selesnya Week, but that doesn't mean that we examine *only* White *and* Green cards from *only* *Ravnica: City of Guilds*. In Standard, Sakura-Tribe Elder will almost certainly make the cut. You can't have Watchwolf on the second turn *every* game, and Sakura-Tribe Elder is a great turn two play setting up that board-dominating Loxodon Hierarch for turn three. But that's not all. If you're playing acceleration already, why not spend  on... *Gleancrawler*?



Gleancrawler is nominally a member of the Golgari, but thanks to the wonders of Guild Mana, a Selesnya deck can summon the signature 6/6 without ever tapping a single Swamp. Like Loxodon Hierarch, Gleancrawler has power and toughness equal to its converted mana cost, and should be considered an efficient cast. It also has trample, meaning that few opponents will be able to ignore its spectacularly large size... There will be no chump blocking for opposing and ubiquitous Sakura-Tribe Elders, and even opposing six drop Dragons will need a little help when fighting this bug. But more than any of those things, Gleancrawler's special ability "at the end of your turn, return to your hand all creature cards in your graveyard that were put into your graveyard from play this turn" is particularly useful in the Selesnya deck. We already talked about Loxodon Hierarch and his sometimes sacrifice. We know that Sakura-Tribe Elder lives only to die. Gleancrawler gives you your 4/4 lifegain engine or your 1/1 Rampant Growth right back so that you can profit from their continued disappearances turn after turn.



In larger formats like Extended, the Selesnya have closely aligned G/W cards that enhance and build upon the Conclave's core abilities. Anurid Brushhopper for one more mana than Watchwolf is kind of like that poochie's bigger, infinitely more powerful, older brother... if wolves could have frog-like Beasts for older brothers, that is. With Anurid Brushhopper comes a world of possibilities. Perhaps Selesnya can borrow Wild Mongrel to enable many of U/G Madness's best threats. Surely there is a spot for Ray of Revelation, a Selesnya-flavored elimination card if ever there was one in single color. From the world of split cards comes Wax/Wane. Wax/Wane is simply perfect. It has been a maindeck choice in Pro Tour Top 8 decks played by masters as disparate as Anton Jonsson's Three-Deuce, Brian Kibler's The Red Zone, and Kai Budde's PT-winning Rebel deck. For the Selesnya, a card like Wax/Wane has general utility: the efficient creature Guild might need some sort of enchantment removal... but doesn't necessarily want to be stranded with a main-deck Disenchant or

Naturalize against the wrong opponent. That said, it always wants more damage, and the Green half of Wax/Wane is just better than the in-Guild Gather Courage in most situations. Combined with the option of destroying enchantments and giving the bullheaded aggressors a bit of flexibility, Wax/Wane is a *perfect* compromise.

Finally, we have the unsung members of the Selesnya Conclave, the cards that don't cost any mana to play, but produce it instead. The first and foremost is Temple Garden. This land is clearly amazing, better in almost every way than the already playable Elfhome Palace. One of the reasons for that superiority is the option to play Temple Garden untapped... but another is its type of Land - *Forest Plains*. Because Temple Garden is a Forest, the Selesnya can use Wood Elves to search it up and put it directly in play. Wood Elves was already seeing action in some versions of Beacon Green, and the inclusion of two superior Forest cards in *Ravnica* only increases the value of this potential Jitte-bearer.

Next up is Selesnya Sanctuary. While this card is not going to demand quite as many copies in quite as many decks as Temple Garden, Selesnya Sanctuary has got a creature symbiote all its own, paired just as effectively with Selesnya Sanctuary as Wood Elves is to the Garden: Vinelasher Kudzu. Reminiscent of the Miracle Grow threats of the not-so-distant past, Vinelasher Kudzu can get out of hand very quickly. One of the ways a potential opponent will try to weather this new twist on the mighty Quirion Dryad is to cross his fingers and hope you just don't have a land in hand. With Selesnya Sanctuary in your deck, your opponent will have to figure out another prayer. Like Loxodon Hierarch's many layered synergies with combat and elimination, Vinelasher Kudzu works well with Green's signatures, getting bigger and better with every Wood Elves, Sakura-Tribe Elder, and old fashioned land drop.

Last, but certainly not least, we have Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree. I know I talked a little about this card last week, but for Selesnya Week this exciting land deserves a little more time. I predict Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree will be an important card in Ravnica Standard and a defining card of *Ravnica* Block; the City-Tree should even make it to some decks in L.A. at the end of the month. Not only does this card give G/W a weapon against countermagic, not only does it give the color combination action post mass removal, Vitu-Ghazi works under Epic. One of the problems with the Epic threats successfully played is that they are generally all-or-nothing. Usually a card like Enduring Ideal should be good enough to win on its lonesome, but that is hardly a certainty when the opponent can be packing removal and you can't do much about it, much less follow up. With Vitu-Ghazi on the board, you can at least spend your mana on something proactive and worthwhile, setting up extra blocks or adding a few points of damage while the rest of your deck does its automated work. Together with an early game as good as they come and long game threats of incredible size, Vitu-Ghazi gives the Selesnya the staying power they need to win the old fashioned way, marching through the Red Zone.

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