

Wolves And How They Live

By Dr. Leonard Lee Rue III

The wolves are members of the dog family, CANIDAE, although it really should be said that all dogs are members of the wolf family. All dogs, no matter their size or type, are descended from the wild wolves through selective breeding by humans over thousands of years. The coyote and foxes are also members of the CANIDAE family. Two species of wolves are found in North America, the gray wolf, CANIS LUPUS and the red wolf, CANIS RUFUS. The gray wolf is often called the timber or lobo wolf and, in the far north, the Arctic wolf. Whereas there are actually twenty-four subspecies of the gray wolf, and no matter what they are called, they are still gray wolves. The wolves of Europe are also gray wolves. If the wolves were to be scientifically reclassified today, many of the subspecies would be eliminated because there are not enough actual differences to justify the many subspecies classifications.

Although the basic color of the wolf is a salt and pepper shading of gray, they can be found in different shadings from almost pure white to jet black. Adult male wolves are larger in size than are the females. The adult males average about six feet in length, from nose tip to tail tip, stand up to thirty-eight inches high at the shoulder and weigh between one hundred twenty-five to one hundred seventy-five pounds.

Wolves do not walk on their foot; they walk on their toes and are known as digitigrade animals. They have five toes on their forefeet, but only the four toes and a center pad touch the ground. The fifth toe, corresponding to our thumb, is known as a dewclaw and is found higher on the inside of the foot. The wolves have only four toes on their hind feet. Their claws are blunt and non-retractable.

Wolves walk, trot, lope and gallop. They have a ground-eating trot at about five miles per hour which they can keep up for hours. There are records documenting that wolves have traveled forty to fifty miles in a twenty-four hour period. They can run at a top speed of about forty miles per hour.

We humans have thirty-two teeth; wolves have forty-two. They have twelve incisors, four canines, sixteen premolars and seventeen molars. The fourth upper premolar and the first lower molar are the carnassial teeth that are used for shearing off a piece of meat so it can be swallowed. Wolves do not chew their food. They are carnivores, with the bulk of their diet being meat, but they do occasionally eat vegetation.

The social life of the wolves is highly organized and the pack is based on having an Alpha, or dominant, pair. The Alpha pair is the largest, strongest pair and is the only pair in the pack that will breed. All other wolves in the pack help to feed and to protect the Alpha pair's pups.

Breeding usually takes place in January or February, with the gestation period being sixty-three to sixty-four days. The pups will be born in a den that the female digs in a soft earth bank. The average litter will consist of six pups that are blind and helpless at birth. The pups' eyes open between eleven to fifteen days. The pups are weaned at about five weeks of age and, even before that, they are being fed meat, regurgitated by the parents and other members of the pack.

Wolves will hunt prey, as small as a mouse to as large as a moose, and they even eat insects. Most of their prey will be larger species such as deer, caribou and moose because the wolves are large animals and can eat as much as twenty pounds of meat at a time. After gorging themselves, the wolves do very little, except to lie about and sleep for two to three days until the food they have eaten has been digested. Then, hungry again, they will hunt.

Wolves have a life expectancy from twelve to fourteen years. Wolves in captivity have lived to be seventeen years old.

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Alpha	From the Greek, meaning the first or number one.
Arctic	The polar region found around most of the northern part of the world.
Cache	To save or store.
Canidae	The Latin name for the grouping of the members of the dog-like family.
Canine	Refers to the four, slightly rear-curving teeth used by animals to grasp prey.
Captive	A creature that is not allowed to roam free.
Carcass	The body of a dead animal is often referred to as carcass.
Carnassial	The teeth that carnivores use to shear or scissor off chunks of meat so they can be swallowed.
Carnivores	Meat-eaters.
Characteristic	A typical feature.
Classified	A grouping that has been identified according to specific characteristics.
Coats	The covering of hair is known as the animal's coat.
Courtship Rituals	The pattern of activity that leads up to breeding.
Deference	To acknowledge the superiority of another.
Den	A home, often a burrow in the earth.
Dominant	The largest, strongest animal is usually the leader or boss.
Environment	Your physical surroundings.
Expand	To make larger.
Expend	To put forth energy or activity.
Extinct	To be wiped out forever.
Gorging	Eating far more than usual.
Herbivores	Vegetation eaters.
Hide	The skin covering of an animal.
Incisor	The teeth in the front of the mouth.
Instinctive	An action that can be taken without thinking, learning or being taught.
Intimidate	To cause fear.
Jaw	The bony part of the skull that holds the teeth.
Lap	Using the tongue to draw liquid into the mouth.

Mating	Or breeding. The physical act by which creatures become pregnant.
Muzzle	The front part of an animal's mouth.
Natal	At the time of birth.
Nursing	To suckle milk from the female's nipple.
Nuzzling	To rub against, with the nose or mouth.
Pack	A family group of canidae is known as a pack.
Pant	Very rapid breathing through the open mouth caused by exertion or heat.
Plumage	The covering of feathers of a bird.
Pregnant	Female carrying developing babies within her body.
Preserve	A park or refuge where the wildlife is protected.
Proportion	A scale or size comparison.
Proximity	The immediate surroundings.
Regurgitate	To bring semi-digested food back up the throat into the mouth. This is done by adult wolves to feed the pups.
Reintroduced	To be brought back to its original territory by humans.
Reverting	Going back to.
Rival	An animal which wants the same thing as another animal.
Scavenger	A creature that feeds upon dead creatures.
Shear	To cut off sharply.
Sibling Rivalry	Competition between brothers and sisters.
Sub-adult	A young animal that is almost full grown but has not yet matured.
Subspecies	Slight differences in the physical characteristics within a species, often developed due to a separation from one another by a physical barrier, as a mountain range or a large body of water.
Territorial	Animals that claim an area as their own and often fight to keep others away from it.
Trait	A characteristic.
Tundra	A region too far north for trees to grow; vegetative growth consists of grasses and low bushes.
Wary	Cautiously alert.