



## The Wolf

Although, historically, wolves ranged over most of the entire northern hemisphere, this article will focus on those of North America. *Canus lupus* is clearly an adaptable animal, as they once ranged from the tundra of Alaska to forested mountains to the great plains to the desert regions of the southwest and Mexico. They vary in color from pure white to a mottled combination of colors to coal black.

Today, there are natural populations of wolves in Alaska, Canada, parts of the northern-most Rockies (i.e., northern Montana, Idaho, and Washington), and in northern Minnesota. To some extent, wolves have been reintroduced in Yellowstone and in small areas within the southeast and southwest.

Most of us, whether we perceive it to be a beautiful song or a sign of danger, are familiar with the howl of wolves. Howling is just one form of wolves' vocalizations. They also bark, whine, squeak, and growl. Their language also includes gestures, postures, scenting, and facial expressions.

This extensive use of language is necessary because wolves live and hunt together in a cooperative society called a pack, which usually includes 2 to 20 wolves. Each pack has an alpha male and alpha female who are dominant. The pack may also include the alpha pair's pups, adult pups from a previous season, and adults that have dispersed from other packs.

Although wolves are mature and females ready to breed at about 22 months, only the alpha pair will conceive pups. The alpha pair is relatively monogamous, and will stay together until one of them dies or is displaced by a stronger challenger. Pups are born in dens in April or May after 62-63 days of gestation. Litters usually consist of 5-13 pups. Den sites may be quite simple, such as hollow trees, or more complex, such as extensive underground tunnels.

The female will nurse the pups for about 34-51 days. During this time they do not leave the den and are cared for by both parents and the entire pack. Pups may be left alone in the den while the pack hunts, but usually one parent or other caretaker will stay behind with the pups. Upon returning from a hunt, the hunters will regurgitate food for the pups and the caretaker. After the pups exit the den at about two months of age, they will stay behind in an area known as a rendezvous site while the pack hunts and returns with food. By the end

of the summer, however, the pups will begin to hunt with the pack. Pups may stay with the pack after reaching maturity, disperse to other existing packs, or disperse to form their own packs.

Territories are defended in an effort to protect den sites and conserve hunting areas and opportunities. They are marked by scenting, the depositing of urine and feces. The size of a pack's territory is determined by the abundance of prey and may vary from 50-100 square miles to 400 square miles or more. Prey consists primarily of large ungulates: deer, elk, and moose. However, grouse, rabbits, and mice may also be on the menu.

The size of wolves is also dependent upon the prey population. Large, more densely populated prey animals can support wolves of larger size. Prey populations that are sparse and consist of smaller animals will only support smaller wolves. Most wolves weigh 80-100 pounds and, generally, males are larger than females. Males in Alaska may weigh up to 125 pounds. The Mexican gray wolf, which must subsist upon prey that is smaller and more scarce, is a smaller wolf, usually weighing 50-60 pounds.

Even those who study wolves in the wild don't often see them, as wolves seem to be both curious about and shy of man. Although wolves may live 10-12 years in the wild, their lives are often cut short as a result of being trapped, shot, or poisoned.