



All About Wolves

Wolves are some of the wild's most amazing animals. They are excellent hunters and can run up to 40 mph (miles per hour). There are a number of wolf species living around the world today, including the red wolf, the arctic wolf, the Mexican wolf, the white wolf and here in Michigan, we have the gray or timber wolf. All wolves are a part of the family canidae, which include coyotes and dingos, too.

Appearance

Wolves are ancestors of companion dogs, which is why they look so much like our family pets. Wolves come in a range of colors from pure, snow white to cinnamon brown, grizzled gray and nightfall black. They also have two layers of fur—an undercoat and a top coat. This “double insulation” helps wolves survive in very cold temperatures.

Female wolves are usually 4.5 to 6 feet in length from the tip of their nose to the tip of their tail and can weigh between 60 to 80 pounds. Males are usually between 5 to 6.5 feet in length and are usually much heavier at 70 to 100 pounds. Both female and male wolves can be between 26 to 32 inches in height (2 to 2.6 feet) and have an average foot size of 5 inches in length --that's almost half a human foot! Full-grown healthy wolves also have around 42 teeth.

Population & Range

Wolves can be found in North America, Europe, Asia and a small portion of Africa. In the U.S., wolves live in Idaho, Michigan, Wisconsin, Alaska, Montana, Minnesota, Arizona, Wyoming, New Mexico and Yellowstone National Park. There are about 200,000 wolves world-wide. Here in Michigan, wildlife biologists estimate that we have about 658 wolves.

Diet

Wolves are called **keystone** or **apex predators**. This means that they are top-level predators and help keep ecosystems balanced and healthy.

Wolves hunt and eat large hooved mammals called **ungulates** like elk, deer, moose and caribou. Sometimes they also eat smaller mammals like beavers and rabbits. Wolves are beneficial to an ecosystem. They keep ungulate populations healthy and help to keep the ecosystem balanced.

Life

Wolves can live up to 13 years in the wild and up to 16 years in captivity (like in sanctuaries). Most wolves live and hunt for food in family communities called **packs**. In one pack, there are usually three to eleven wolves. Packs are guided by leaders called **alpha wolves**. There is an **alpha male** and an **alpha female** in every pack, and act as kind of the head mom and dad. They track and hunt prey, choose **den** sites, teach younger wolves what to do, and make sure that everyone behaves. Wolves are very social animals and so they develop very close bonds and friendships with their pack members.

Growth

All wolves start as **pups**, or young wolves. Pups are usually born in late April. Pups are born defenseless, which means they cannot hear or see when they are born and weigh no more than a can of soda. Pups must stay close to their mothers at this time to become healthy and strong.

After a month, pups can hear and see and are able to explore and play at their den site with their brothers and sisters. By 6 or 7 months of age, pups are almost full-grown wolves and they travel with their pack to hunt and watch over their **territory** or homeland. After 12 months old, many wolves will remain with the pack they were born into, while others go out to find mates and stay with a new pack. Once wolves find a mate they stay with them for life.

Communication

Because of stories, many of us have been taught that wolves just howl at the moon. They do not actually howl at the moon, though. They do howl when it's lighter at night, which happens when there is a full moon.

Wolves make many sounds to talk to each other about how they feel and what is happening in the world around them. Wolves **growl**, **bark**, **whine**, and **howl** for many different reasons. If wolves bark or howl at around 12:00 p.m., they might be saying something completely different when they bark or howl at 4:00 p.m. or some other time of day. We humans can only dream of what they are talking about!

Wolves also communicate in another way—by using their bodies. If a wolf feels confident, he or she will walk up to another wolf with his or her head and tail held high. If a younger wolf is walking toward a bigger, alpha wolf, then he or she will hold his or her tail between the legs and ears flat. When wolves want to play, they prance around and bow down with their tail wagging.

Threats

Wolves have no natural predators. Unfortunately, wolves are in danger in many places around the world because of humans. Wolf habitat areas have been destroyed by **deforestation** (cutting down forests) and **development** (the making of houses and buildings). Wolves are also hunted and trapped for **trophies** (for their fur, head, and other body parts) and were once hunted to near extinction. Today, scientists are trying their best to bring back wolf populations in their historic range, but many of these threats still exist.

What You Can Do to Help Wolves

- Teach your friends and family about wolves.
- Give a presentation on wolves at your school.
- Become a member of Kids for Pups.
- Read more about wolves and find out what is happening with them in the news.