

Wolves

Canis Lupus: the wolf, largest member of the dog family. Wolves can be found all over the world but are predominantly located in colder regions such as Alaska, Canada and Russia. There are many sub-species including the European, Red, Grey, Timber, and Artic Wolf, all of whom have adaptations for the environment they inhabit. Often viewed as a threatening species or with negative connotations, the wolf is maligned and somewhat misunderstood, preferring to avoid human interactions and rarely attacking unless threatened. Of the species that currently sit on the IUCN Red list, wolves are listed as being of least concern.

Apex Predators

Wolves are relatively large carnivorous mammals, with fully grown adults weighing around 45kg (although anything between 18-70kg is possible) and growing up to 2m in length. Within their environments, they are apex predators, meaning they sit at the top of the food chain. In fact, the biggest threat to wolves is human action: hunting them and destroying their habitats and food sources. As a lone hunter, a wolf's diet mainly consists of small mammals, birds, fish and fruit. When hunting in a pack, wolves have been known to bring down much larger prey such as elk (the second largest species in the deer family) and even moose. Wolves are mostly nocturnal hunters, using their excellent eyesight, smell and hearing to track their prey. They eat when food is available and can consume up to 9kg of food in one sitting!

Wolf Packs

Wolves tend to live in packs. Each pack has an 'alpha', the strongest male wolf who is its leader. Alphas mate for life and they and their mate will lead each pack together. Each pack consists of this couple, plus their offspring and possibly a few other wolves, bringing pack size to between 6 and 10, though larger populations have been recorded. Wolves are very protective of their group and will defend their territory fiercely. They can travel up to 50km a day, so territories can be large and are marked by scent and well-established wolf trails. Wolves can communicate over large distances using their characteristic howls, so when one wolf howls, there is often a response howl.

Life cycle

Wolves mate for life and a litter of cubs is usually born once a year in a den. There may be up to 6 pups in a litter, each weighing around 0.5kg. As they are born deaf and blind, the pups stay with the mother in the den for the first 10 weeks or so, where they feed on their



mother's milk. After that she will begin to bring them regurgitated food until they are ready to be taught to hunt. At this point, they join the pack and all adult wolves in the pack help protect them and teach them. By the age of 6 months, they can hunt for themselves and are considered fully grown at around age 2. They will stay with their parent's pack until they choose a mate for themselves, at which point they separate and start a new pack. Sometimes male wolves will leave the pack early to move into a different area in search of a mate and territory. Wolves live for up to 8 years in the wild.

Communication

Much like our domestic dogs and cats, much of wolf communication comes from their body language. Ears up is a sign of interest, ears down can signal the animal feels threatened. Heads down and tail between legs is a submissive gesture; tails up or wagging is a sign of friendliness and interest. Baring of teeth is a warning, along with a tensed body position ready to spring to attack if threatened. There is a strict social hierarchy in wolf packs, with wolves demonstrating their lower status to the alpha or a higher-ranking wolf by exposing their necks or baring their bellies to them (their most vulnerable areas). Wolves mark areas with their scent to tell other wolves where their territory boundaries are.

Wolves are often viewed as dangerous creatures, but are in fact animals who build strong social connections. The absence or the death of one of the pack has been documented as affecting the wolves wellbeing, with signs of depression and grief being noted in studies. Attacks on humans are rare and wolves favour areas where the human population is lower. In some parts of the world, the presence of wolves has been seen as a vital component of ensuring biodiversity. Studies into this led to the re-introduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park in America, where their presence created a trophic cascade re-invigorating areas of the park and benefiting the local area in numerous ways. It is clear wolves are vital to the wellbeing of areas of our planet and so deserve to be treated with respect.

Glossary

IUCN – the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

Red list – a list of endangered species across the world, rated using a traffic light system.

Connotations – feelings or associations linked to a word.

National Park – an area of outstanding natural beauty or environmental significance. These areas are protected by law and development is carefully controlled to protect their unique characteristics. In the USA, these were set up by President Ulysses Grant in 1872, who created the first National Park - Yellowstone in Wyoming. In the UK the Lake District, Peak District and the Norfolk Broads are called national parks and have a similar protected status.

Trophic Cascade – A scientific term to describe how a change to the apex predator in a food chain can lead to changes in other populations within a food chain and subsequently that habitat.

RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. Name three sub-species of wolf.
2. Which wolf leads a pack?
3. How large can a wolf's territory be?
4. At roughly what age do the cubs get taught how to hunt?
5. How would body language help you decide if a wolf was a threat?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

- I** Why is it advantageous to hunt in a pack?
- E** What is a social hierarchy?
- E** What might affect wolf wellbeing?
- I** In what ways do wolves not fit the stereotype of aggressive lone hunters who are a threat to humans?
- E** Why has the author produced a glossary?