



GRAY WOLF

Phylum: Chordata; Class: Mammalia; Order: Carnivora; Family: Canidae
Canis lupus

Timber wolves, also called gray wolves, are the largest wild members of the dog family. Timber wolves have silvery gray-brown backs, light tan and cream under-parts, and bushy tails. In winter, their fur becomes darker on the neck, shoulders, and rump.

Gray wolves have evoked a variety of responses from humans throughout history. Most Native Americans revered gray wolves, trying to emulate their cunning hunting abilities. However, wolves became nearly extinct in the lower 48 states in the early part of the 20th Century because settlers believed wolves caused widespread livestock losses. Constantly persecuted and targeted by predator eradication programs sponsored by the Federal government, wolves have been pursued with more passion and determination than any other animal in U.S. history. By the time wolves were finally protected by the Endangered Species Act of 1973, they had been exterminated from the lower 48 states except for a few hundred inhabiting extreme northeastern Minnesota and a small number on Isle Royale, Michigan.

Size of average adult:

Height: 2.5 feet high

Weight: 50-100 pounds/adult males is 75 pounds, adult females is 60 pounds.

Length: 5.0-5.5 feet long (including 15-19 inch tail)

Lifespan: 15 years in the wild

Habitat: mountainous and forested areas

Range: Naturally occurring, wild gray wolf populations are found in the Great Lakes states of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, and also in northwestern Montana and Northern Idaho. There are three reintroduced experimental populations: one in central Idaho; a second in the Greater Yellowstone National Park area and northwest Wyoming; and a third in New Mexico and Arizona. Gray wolves occupy only 1% of their former range.

Status: Gray wolves are listed under the Endangered Species Act as endangered in the southwest and as threatened elsewhere in the lower 48 states within their historical range.

Threats to survival: Man and habitat loss

Diet in the wild: white-tailed deer, beavers, snowshoe hares, mice, squirrels, muskrats and other small mammals.

Behavior:

- Wolves are social; wolf groups, or packs, usually consist of a set of parents (alpha pair), their offspring, and other non-breeding adults.
- Wolf packs usually live within a specific territory. Territories range in size from 50 square miles to more than 1000 square miles depending on how much prey is available and seasonal prey movements.
- Wolves may travel as far as 30 miles in a day.
- Wolves are noted for their distinctive howl, which they use as a form of communication. Biologists have identified a few of the reasons wolves howl: before and after a hunt, to sound an alarm, and to locate other members of the pack when separated. It's long distance communication that can be heard by other wolves 6 - 10 miles away (although we may not hear it for more than a mile). Wolves may howl to rally the pack together before a hunt, to locate pack members or to locate a mate. They howl perhaps as a way to "mark" territory, when the moon is full and when it is not).
- Body language communicates as much or more than vocalizations. An adult gray wolf exhibiting a submissive grin with ears laid back, and lowered head position indicates submission to a higher ranking adult. Gray wolf showing dominance with body language may position their body over a lower ranking pack member.



Breeding & Care of Young:

- Wolves begin mating when they are 2 to 3 years old, sometimes establishing lifelong mates.
- Dens are often used year after year, but wolves may also dig new dens or use some other type of shelter, such as a cave.
- An average of five pups are born in early spring and are cared for by the entire pack. They depend on their mother's milk for the first month, then they are gradually weaned and fed regurgitated meat brought by other pack members. By 7 to 8 months of age, when they are almost fully grown, the pups begin traveling with the adults.
- After 1 or 2 years of age, a young wolf leaves and tries to find a mate and form its own pack.
- Lone dispersing wolves have traveled as far as 500 miles in search of a new home.

Special features:

- Wolves can attain speeds as high as 45 m.p.h. for short distances.
- Wolves support a wide variety of other animals. Ravens, foxes, wolverines, vultures and even bears feed on the carcasses of animals killed by wolves. In some areas, bald eagles routinely feed on the carcasses of animals killed by wolves during the winter. Wolves help regulate the balance between ungulates (hoofed animals) and their food supply, making room for smaller plant-eaters such as beavers and small rodents. They often go after sick, young, or old animals.
- An adult wolf can eat 20 pounds of meat at once. That's like eating 80 "Quarter Pounders" at one time! If some of the meat remains wolves will cache it by tearing off large chunks and dropping the meat down holes they have dug in the dirt or snow, to be eaten later
- An acute sense of smell for investigation. Some scientists believe that a wolf's sense of smell is 100 times better than ours!

Efforts to save Timber wolves:

Wolf recovery under the Endangered Species Act has been so successful that in 2003, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reclassified wolves from endangered to threatened throughout a large portion of their historical range in the United States. The wolf's comeback has been attributed to a combination of scientific research, increased protection, reintroduction and management programs, and education efforts that helped increase public understanding of wolves.

Successful reintroduction and management programs have accelerated wolf recovery in the Rocky Mountains. Gray wolves have expanded their numbers thanks to science-based wolf management; restoration of wolf prey species such as deer, elk, and moose; and legal protection.

Wolf recovery and management are very polarized, controversial, and emotional issues stemming from people's attitudes, fears, and misunderstandings more than from wolves themselves. Attitudes are often based on inaccurate information, making wolf management perhaps more difficult than any other wildlife management program.

For the past 22 years, Yellowstone National Park has been at the center of debate over the wolf. By about 1930, wolves had been deliberately extirpated from the western United States, including Yellowstone. After years of comprehensive study and planning, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reintroduced gray wolves into Yellowstone and U.S. Forest Service lands in central Idaho. In 1995 and 1996, 31 wolves from Canada were released in Yellowstone National Park. At the same time, 35 wolves were released on remote Forest Service lands in Idaho. All of the reintroduced wolves were fitted with radio collars and monitored by biologists from the Fish and Wildlife Service and other cooperating agencies. The reintroduction has been very successful, and by December 2002 there were about 560 wolves in the Yellowstone area and Idaho.

Wolf recovery efforts represent an opportunity to redress past mistakes in wildlife management and enhance our understanding not only of wolves, but also the complex interactions among species in their natural environments.

