Our tour bus rattles around a bend on the bumpy dirt road in Alaska’s magnificent Denali National Park. Suddenly, we see wolves off to our left! “The large black one is the alpha male,” our guide says. “The one next to it is the alpha female.”

Wolves are the largest members of the canidae family, but have you noticed how similar they look to domesticated dogs? It’s because dogs are members of the canidae family too! Wolves and dogs are closely-related species. Wolves, however, are carnivores with jaws that are twice as strong as a dog’s.

Wolves live in groups called packs. The pack has a hierarchy, or pecking order. The alpha male and female produce the offspring. They are in charge. When pups are born, they are sheltered in a burrow, cave, or other type of den. All pack members care for them. At six months of age, the pups begin joining in the hunt for prey. By two years they are fully mature.

The wolves use teamwork to hunt for food. Hunting in a pack helps wolves catch large animals like caribou, elk, and moose. When large prey isn’t available, wolves will eat small animals like rabbits and mice.

Packs grow and change over time. Large, younger members move into alpha positions. Others leave to find a mate and start a new pack.

Like domesticated dogs, wolves communicate with their faces, body postures, various sounds, and scent markings. They communicate aggression by showing their teeth and growling. They indicate submission by rolling on their back.

Wolves’ famous howls may sound sad, but they’re often songs of celebration. Howls
Wolves have keen senses. They’re also very strong, and they can run in short bursts of 40 miles an hour. They live in many climates and habitats, including hot deserts and the cold arctic tundra.

Gray wolves are the most common species of wolves. There are various subspecies of gray wolves, and their populations are widespread across North America. Wolves that live in the northern tundra and arctic sometimes weigh over 130 pounds. A second, smaller species, the red wolf, is a critically endangered species. Fewer than 150 remain in the wild.

Throughout history, people have had strong opinions about wolves. Some people revere them as symbols of the wilderness. Others despise them. When areas became populated with people, and farms and towns began to replace wilderness, wolves had fewer places to live and fewer animals to hunt. This meant wolves would sometimes attack people’s sheep and cattle for food.

Governments around the world began paying hunters to kill wolves. In the United States, this continued for over 100 years until they were almost gone. Then, at last, the U.S. government made laws protecting them. Wolves were reintroduced into wild places and brought back into national parks like Yellowstone. Scientists learned that wolves create a balance between predator and prey. This balance creates healthier ecosystems for both plants and animals.

Wolves are wild animals, but there’s no need to fear them. They want to avoid people and are true wilderness animals.

About the Author

Guy Belleranti is an author of fiction, poetry, articles, puzzles, and humor for children and adults. He also works as a docent at the Reid Park Zoo in Tucson, Arizona. The information in this article comes from his experiences teaching children about the wild animals at the zoo. Predators include tarantulas, centipedes, lizards, owls, bats, shrews and mice.
Wolves: True Wilderness Animals
By Guy Belleranti

1. Based on the information you read in the article, which of the following choices best describes the alpha male and alpha female in a wolf pack?
   a. The alpha pair do all the hunting for the pack.
   b. The alpha pair produce the offspring and are in charge of the pack.
   c. The alpha male and female are the most aggressive wolves in the pack.
   d. The alpha male and female are the oldest wolves in the pack.

2. Which of the following statements about wolves and domesticated dogs is NOT true?
   a. Both wolves and dogs are members of the same family.
   b. Both wolves and dogs use body language, facial expressions, sounds, and scents to communicate.
   c. Wolves and dogs have the same amount of strength in their jaws.
   d. Wolves and dogs look very similar to each other.

3. Over the years, people have had strong opinions about wolves. Based on the information you read in the article, describe one reason someone might not like wolves.

_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________

4. Which of the following statements best describes red wolf populations?
   a. Red wolves are the most common species of wolves.
   b. A red wolf can grow up to 130 pounds.
   c. Red wolves can be found in the northern tundra regions.
   d. Red wolves are a critically endangered species.

5. What has the U.S. government done to help wolf populations since their decline?

_________________________________________________________________________________
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Wolves: True Wilderness Animals

By Guy Belleranti

Match each vocabulary word from the reading passage with the correct definition.

1. keen
2. revere
3. despise
4. domesticated
5. alpha
6. aggression
7. endangered
8. predator
9. prey
10. wilderness

a. loathe or hate
b. hostile or violent behavior
c. wild, uncultivated lands
d. at risk of becoming extinct
e. an animal that eats other animals
f. tamed and kept as a pet
g. sharp or highly developed
h. an animal that gets eaten by other animals
i. have a lot of respect or admiration for something
j. dominant animal in a group
In the article, "Wolves: True Wilderness Animals," you learned that wolves live in groups called packs. The wolves benefit from living in packs by using teamwork to hunt, taking turns watching over the pups, and providing one another with socialization, such as when they play together.

Choose another animal that lives in a group. Describe three benefits that animal receives from living in the group. If you use the Internet with a teacher or parent's permission, be sure to write the web address of the site you used to gather information at the bottom of this page.

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Website I used: ____________________________________________
1. Based on the information you read in the article, which of the following choices best describes the alpha male and alpha female in a wolf pack?  
   a. The alpha pair do all the hunting for the pack.  
   b. The alpha pair produce the offspring and are in charge of the pack.

2. Which of the following statements about wolves and domesticated dogs is NOT true?  
   a. Both wolves and dogs are members of the same family.  
   b. Both wolves and dogs use body language, facial expressions, sounds, and scents to communicate.  
   c. Wolves and dogs have the same amount of strength in their jaws.  
   d. Wolves and dogs look very similar to each other.

3. Over the years, people have had strong opinions about wolves. Based on the information you read in the article, describe one reason someone might not like wolves.  
   Answers may vary. Some people may have had their livestock eaten by wolves. Others might be afraid of them.

4. Which of the following statements best describes red wolf populations?  
   a. Red wolves are the most common species of wolves.  
   b. A red wolf can grow up to 130 pounds.  
   c. Red wolves can be found in the northern tundra regions.  
   d. Red wolves are a critically endangered species.

5. What has the U.S. government done to help wolf populations since their decline?  
   The U.S. government has made laws protecting wolves and has reintroduced them into the wild, including national parks like Yellowstone.
ANSWER KEY

Wolves: True Wilderness Animals
By Guy Belleranti

Match each vocabulary word from the reading passage with the correct definition.

1. keen  a. loathe or hate

10. wilderness  j. dominant animal in a group

Preview
Please log in to download the printable version of this worksheet.