

Name: _____

Wolves: True Wilderness Animals

By Guy Belleranti



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 can signal the beginning of a hunt, a successful hunt, or an end to a period



of play. The howls also warn other packs to stay out of their territory.

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. Only about 20 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.



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

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

- | | |
|-----------------------|--|
| 1. _____ keen | a. loathe or hate |
| 2. _____ revere | b. hostile or violent behavior |
| 3. _____ despise | c. wild, uncultivated lands |
| 4. _____ domesticated | d. at risk of becoming extinct |
| 5. _____ alpha | e. an animal that eats other animals |
| 6. _____ aggression | f. tamed and kept as a pet |
| 7. _____ endangered | g. sharp or highly developed |
| 8. _____ predator | h. an animal that gets eaten by other animals |
| 9. _____ prey | i. have a lot of respect or admiration for something |
| 10. _____ wilderness | j. dominant animal in a group |

ANSWER KEY

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The U.S. government has made laws protecting wolves and has reintroduced them into the wild, including in national parks like Yellowstone.

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1. g. keen
 2. i. revere
 3. a. despise
 4. f. domesticated
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