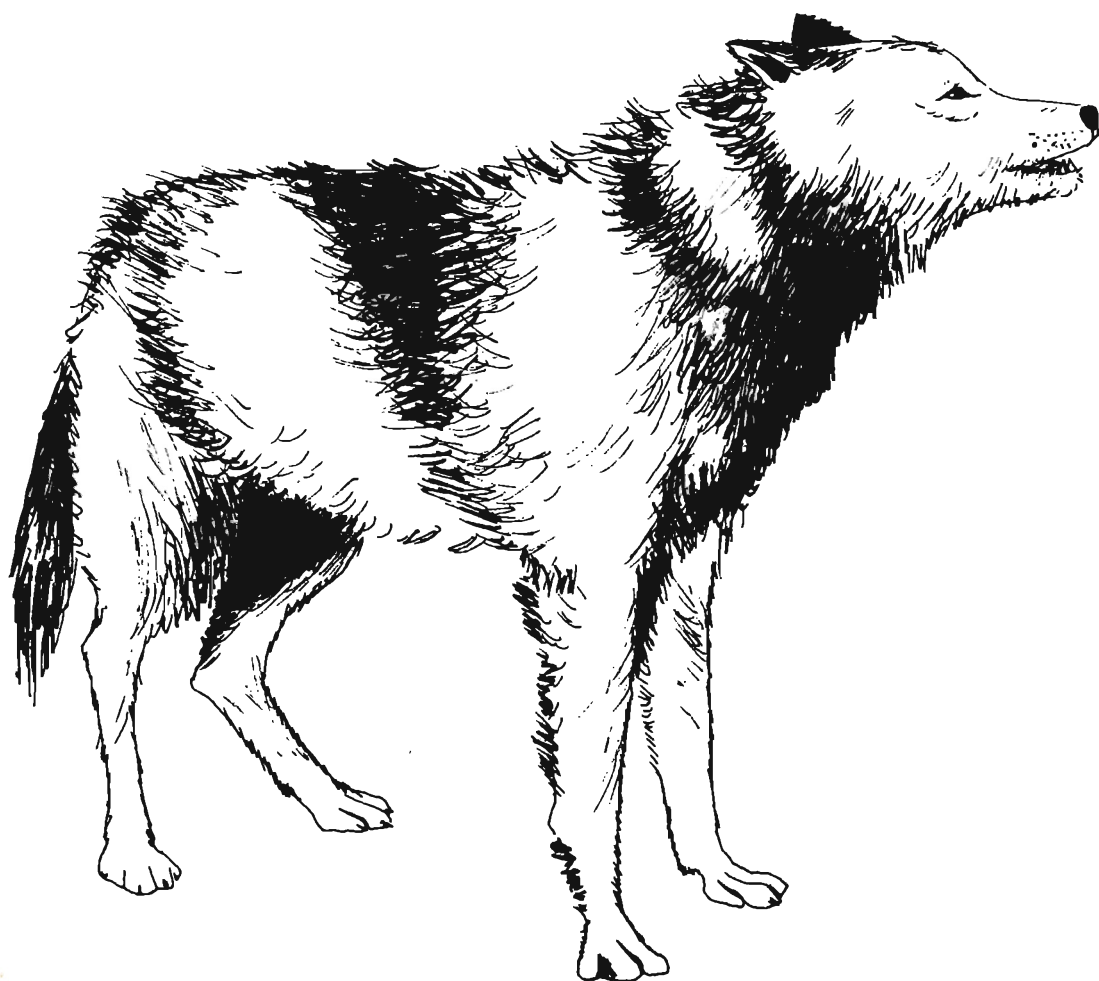


The Wolf



The Wolf

THE WOLF FAMILY

Wolves live in families. The family members are an adult male, an adult female, and their recent young. Sometimes there are a few extra adults in the group -- there may be an adult offspring of the pair, a litter mate of either the male or the female, or even a completely unrelated wolf. A male and female usually mate for the first time when the male is about three years old and the female about two. They stay together for the rest of their adult lives, perhaps for ten years.

THE NEWBORN PUPS

Each spring the female wolf gives birth to a litter of pups. There are usually six or seven in the litter. They live with their parents until they are at least two years old, so that one-year-olds and two-year-olds all tagging along after their parents are not unusual.

The birth of the litter takes place in a den, which may be a cave or a hollow log, or a hole the mother digs in the ground. The den usually has a narrow entrance less than two feet high, and the adults must squeeze through to get to the larger area inside. The small entrance makes it difficult for larger animals to enter, and it makes the den less likely to be noticed.

A birth is a big event for all the wolves in the family pack. Even the young wolves born the year before appear to be excited, though they are not allowed in the den until the newborn have grown stronger. The pups at birth are helpless one-pounders who do little more than sleep and nurse. Their eyes do not open for a week or so, but the mother watches closely over them in the safety of the den. For two weeks she does not allow any wolf, even her mate, inside the den.

THE WOLF FATHER

In most species of mammals, the male leaves the mother before the young are born. The mother raises the young alone, and the infants never know their father. But wolf fathers help care for their young and appear to enjoy playing with them.

While the mother remains in the den with the newborn pups, the father and any other wolves in the group go hunting and bring back meat for the mother. The hunting pack usually stays out several hours and returns as soon as an animal has been killed. If there is more meat than can be eaten immediately, it may be buried near the den for the future. Sometimes the pack may hunt all day or all night and come back without making a kill.

During the day the father usually sits on a hill or high piece of ground near the den. He watches for animals that might attack the young wolves, such as a hungry bear who smells the meat buried near the den. Now and then the father

dozes off, but he awakens immediately to any unusual noise and howls an alarm. If the mother and young wolves are outside the den, they run back inside. The father tries to lead the enemy away from the den. He makes sure the predator notices him, and then runs, maybe for miles, howling often to make sure the enemy can follow him.

GROWING UP

At about three weeks of age, the pups go outside the den for the first time. They are still unsteady on their feet and the adult wolves do not let them stray far.

Soon the young are romping and playing like puppy dogs. (In fact, wolves are closely related to dogs, and the adults resemble German shepherds.) The pups' keen senses of sight, smell and hearing develop rapidly. They are soon alert and noticing everything around them. And the pups scamper quickly back to the safety of the den if anything unusual happens, just as adult wolves escape from danger by running away.

The pups nurse for about two months. From then on they eat meat. When the father first brings them meat, they are interested only in playing with it, but in a short time, they bite into it and like what they taste. The father then regularly brings meat to the pups as well as for the mother.

If the animal he kills is miles and miles from the den, the father swallows large chunks of meat without chewing them and

carries them in his stomach. When he reaches the den, he coughs the meat pieces up in front of the female and the pups. There are times when food is scarce and the hunting is bad: then the father brings back little food. When this happens, the pups fight for the food among themselves. The strongest gets the most and the weakest may die of starvation.

Once the pups are no longer dependent on their mother for milk, she also goes hunting. But she never leaves them unless another adult is there. While she is gone, the adult in the den takes care of them. The two-year-olds, who are almost ready to start families of their own, show great interest in caring for the pups. If anything should happen to the female, the male takes over the care of the young, and if both parents die, pups may even be cared for by the other wolves in the group.

When summer comes, the family leaves the den. The group moves to an outdoor spot where it rests and feeds until the fall. While the adults take turns hunting, the pups play. Play grows rougher as they get older. They give up chasing their own tails for fighting and charging each other, just as they will later charge a deer to knock it down.

LEARNING TO HUNT

By late summer, the pups are old enough to go on hunting trips with their parents. When the parents make a kill, the young wolves watch from a safe distance. Then in the early fall the pups lose their first teeth and their adult teeth grow in,

sharp as needles. Their jaws are now powerful enough to crush the leg bones of a deer. Now they are ready to hunt, for it is the teeth and jaws that make the kill.

All winter long, and through the following summer, the pups learn the ways of hunting, first with small animals and birds, and then with large caribou, moose and deer. But hunting is dangerous. A swift kick from a moose can end the young wolf's life.

Now that all wolves in the family travel and hunt together, the members of the pack do not need to return to the same spot to eat and rest. They simply stop wherever they happen to be. The pack is constantly moving in search of food. The wolves travel along a circular path from 60 to 90 miles all the way around. The path may cut through forests and go over grass, across highways and over frozen rivers. Of course, it takes many days for a pack to travel the whole path and return to where it started.

INDEPENDENCE

By the time the wolves have reached their second year, they have become skilled hunters and travelers and can take care of themselves. They may stay on with the family group, but a two-year-old female usually mates with a three-year-old male and the pair goes to their own den, soon to become parents.

HUNTING BEHAVIOR

A hunting pack of wolves generally has two to ten members.

Sometimes these may be members of one family, but during hard winter months, or any time food is scarce, two family packs may join together in a larger pack. They travel and hunt together and share their kills.

Most often wolves hunt caribou, deer and moose. All of these animals are bigger than wolves and at least as fast. But wolves often come up on them and catch them off guard. And once the prey is caught, the wolf can try to put its sharp teeth and powerful jaws to work. Caribou, deer and moose cannot defend themselves with their dull teeth and weak jaws, built for chewing grass rather than for fighting off predators. But many a hunt has ended with a trampled wolf.

Though a lone wolf could kill a deer or caribou, it is only because several wolves hunt together that they are a match for their largest prey, the moose -- who can stand six feet high and weigh 1,200 pounds. A few wolves will charge an adult moose and chase it straight into the rest of the pack waiting nearby to make the kill. At other times some may attack from one side and the rest from the other. Wolves often choose a weak, sick adult for their prey, or a newborn infant. But an infant moose, for example, is protected by its mother, and the wolves here try to separate the two. Some wolves wait near the infant while others attack the mother. When the mother charges her attackers, the other wolves close in on the infant.

Even with this much cooperation in hunting, a wolf pack may

have to try many times before completing a successful hunt. One scientist found that a pack of wolves made a kill only once out of every thirteen times it hunted moose. Sometimes the pack traveled as far as 60 miles just to find an animal to attack.

When they do make a kill, wolves may stuff themselves. An average male weighing 100 pounds may manage to gulp down 20 pounds of meat at once. (A person weighing 100 pounds would be very full indeed on 2 pounds.) After wolfing that much food down, the wolf may be "meat drunk." The wolf feels so dazed and unsteady on its feet that it must lie down for a few days to sleep it off.

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