

Gray Wolf

Canis lupus

The wolf is the largest member of the canine family. Gray wolves range in color from grizzled gray or black to all-white. As the ancestor of the domestic dog, the gray wolf resembles German shepherds or malamutes. Wolves are making a comeback in the Great Lakes, Northern Rockies and Southwestern United States.

Height 26-38 inches at the shoulder

Length 4.5-6.5 feet from nose to tip of tail

Weight 55-130 lbs; Males are typically heavier and taller than the females

Lifespan 7-8 years in the wild, but some have lived 10 years or more

Diet

Staples Ungulates (large hoofed mammals) like elk, deer, moose and caribou.

Also known to eat beaver, rabbits and other small prey. Wolves are also scavengers and often eat animals that have died due to other causes like starvation and disease.

Population

There are an estimated 7,000 to 11,200 wolves in Alaska and more than 5,000 in the lower 48 states. Around the world there are an estimated 200,000 in 57 countries, compared to up to 2 million in earlier times.

Range

Wolves were once common throughout all of North America but were killed in most areas of the United States by the mid 1930s. Today their range has been reduced to Canada and the following portions of the United States: Alaska, Idaho, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Wisconsin and Wyoming. Mexican wolves are found in New Mexico and Arizona.

Thanks to the reintroduction of wolves in 1995, Yellowstone National Park is one of the most favored places to see and hear wolves in the native habitat.

Behavior

Wolves live, travel and hunt in packs of 4-7 animals on average. Packs include the mother and father wolves, called the alphas, their pups and several other subordinate or young animals. The alpha female and male are the pack leaders that track and hunt prey, choose den sites and establish the pack's territory. Wolves develop close relationships and strong social bonds. They often demonstrate deep affection for their family and may even sacrifice themselves to protect the family unit.

Wolves have a complex communication system ranging from barks and whines to growls and howls. While they don't howl at the moon, they do howl more when it's lighter at night, which occurs more often when the moon is full.

Reproduction

Mating Season January or February

Gestation 63 days

Litter size 4-7 pups

Pups are born blind and defenseless. The pack cares for the pups until they mature at about 10 months of age.

Threats

The most common cause of death for wolves is conflict with people over livestock losses. While wolf predation on livestock is fairly uncommon, wolves that do prey on them are often killed to protect the livestock. Some livestock owners are developing non-lethal methods to reduce the chances of a wolf attacking their livestock. These methods include fencing livestock, lighting, alarm systems and removing dead or dying livestock that may attract carnivores like wolves.

Another serious threat is human encroachment into wolf territory, which leads to habitat loss for wolves and their prey species.

Overall, the greatest threat to wolves is people's fear and misunderstanding about the species. Many fairy tales and myths tend to misrepresent wolves as villainous, dangerous creatures.

Legal Status/Protection

Under the *Endangered Species Act (ESA), gray wolves are listed as endangered in the lower-48 states, except for Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin and portions of the surrounding Western Great Lakes states where federal protections were recently removed. Wolves in Alaska are not listed under the ESA.

Endangered means a species is considered in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range, and threatened means a species may become endangered in the foreseeable future.

Portions of Yellowstone, central Idaho and the Southwest are designated as non-essential experimental populations, which isolate geographically-described groups from other existing populations and offer special regulations.

* The Endangered Species Act requires the US federal government to identify species threatened with extinction, identify habitat they need to survive, and help protect both. In doing so, the Act works to ensure the basic health of our natural ecosystems and protect the legacy of conservation we leave to our children and grandchildren.