

# Some Questions and Answers About Wolves – Red AND Gray!

- 1. Are wolves dangerous to people?** Wolves are wild animals, and most wildlife poses some degree of potential hazard to humans. That said, wild wolves avoid people. The myths about wolves attacking and eating people are often exaggerations of events in the past that may have occurred in centuries past in some places when wolves were enduring a starvation period. However, many of these stories distort the truth about the elusive nature of wolves. In places where wolves are protected or where humans maintain a presence in remote areas (lumber and mining camps, for example), wolves may become less fearful of humans, especially if they learn to associate people with food sources. Wolves should, therefore, be treated like any wild animal – with respect. In wolf country, very small children should be under adult supervision at all times when camping and hiking. That is common sense.
- 2. Why are people afraid of wolves?** It's easy to put the blame on children's stories and fairy tales. But that is an over-simplification. Wolves, with their close-set golden eyes, penetrating stare and big teeth can look scary, especially when book illustrators exaggerate these features. Also, wolves live in families called packs. People associate packs with gang attacks. Combine these things with the wolf's notorious and haunting howl, and you have some ingredients to inspire fear in some people.
- 3. What's a predator?** A predator is any animal that hunts and kills another animal for food. Prey is the term used for the animal that is hunted and killed for food.
- 4. What is a TOP predator?** A top predator is any animal that has no natural enemies within its food web and is not hunted by other animals. A wolf is a top predator. So is a bear, and so is a mountain lion (or cougar). These top predators generally avoid competing with one another because to do so is a waste of precious energy. However, bears and wolves will sometimes get into scraps over a carcass, and bears may wander too

close to a den for a wolf family's comfort. But both are usually careful to avoid incapacitating injury to themselves.

5. **Why do wolves kill other animals?** They have to. They are carnivores. The food on which they depend for growth, health, endurance and reproduction is meat, although they may snack on fruits and other non-meat foods. Wolves prey primarily on wild hooved animals called ungulates. These include deer, elk, caribou, moose, musk oxen and bison. Secondary food sources are beavers, hares and rodents. Red wolves eat nutria (large rodents brought to the U.S. from South America), feral pigs, raccoons and squirrels.
  
6. **How much do wolves eat?** A mature wolf can survive on about 2 pounds of meat a day. They need about 5 pounds to reproduce. However, most wolves do not eat every day unless they have a carcass they are returning to for meals. Sometimes they go for days and even weeks without eating if food is scarce. Sometimes they depend on food they have buried (cached). They remember where the caches are located – amazing!
  
7. **How many species of wolves are there?** Two, the red wolf (*Canis rufus*) and the gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) are universally accepted. The red wolf lives only in North America, and its present range is limited to northeastern North Carolina. It is critically endangered. Most scientists accept the Ethiopian wolf (*Canis simensis*), a rare wolf that lives in the Bale Mountains of Ethiopia. The eastern wolf (*Canis lupus lycaon*) has been proposed as a separate species (*Canis lycaon*) in North America and is regarded by some scientists as a wolf that is, like the red wolf, related to the coyote. Scientists in India claim to have found a new species of wolf in northeastern India in the Himalayan Mountains.
  
8. **Is it hard for wolves to kill large animals?** Yes. Very. Wolves get kicked and trampled and outrun. Even white-tail deer are dangerous with their sharp hooves. Wild wolves are often injured by prey animals. Catching food is a tough job.

9. **Do wolves always kill old, weak and sick animals?** “Always” and “never” are not as useful as “typically.” Sometimes wolves kill healthy mature animals, but typically, they don’t. It makes sense to select an injured or otherwise compromised animal to kill in order for the wolf to survive. These animals are easier to catch and kill than robust, healthy animals. Wolves also try to kill young animals if they can separate them from their mothers. Getting food is risky. Therefore, wolves typically select the animal that is least likely to get away and least likely to cause them injury. Even so, they are not successful much of the time. The odds are in favor of the prey animal.
10. **Are wolves born knowing how to hunt?** Certainly the basic instinct is there. Domestic dogs, the modern domesticated version of the wolf, will chase rabbits and deer and just about anything else! Wolves raised in captivity and released into the wild (Mexican gray wolves and red wolves) have learned to be successful hunters. But scientists think that wolves born in the wild are “taught” by their parents and older siblings and that the youngsters learn by observation and by trial and error.
11. **How long can a wolf go without eating?** Days, even weeks. Adults, with their large body mass, can go much longer than growing pups and very young wolves. Young pups weaken without food, and there comes a point in slow starvation where they cannot recover, and they weaken and die.
12. **How much can a wolf eat at one time?** A mature wolf can consume as much as 22.5 pounds of food in one bout of feasting. Then, the wolf will sleep, digest the food and get up and eat again if there is more meat on the carcass. Life is often feast and famine.
13. **Why do some people hate wolves?** Fear, for one thing. Competition for resources is another. For instance, if a wolf’s natural prey is eliminated and replaced by livestock, wolves will kill sheep and cattle in order to eat. Also, some people don’t like animals that kill other animals. Most of this particular brand of hatred seems to have been unfairly directed at wolves. Mountain lions and bears and even domestic dogs kill other animals, too. Many small predators kill other animals as well. But

generally, people don't hate bears. Why not? Good question. You should be aware of the illustrations in children's books. Often the wolf's snout is elongated and the eyes placed much closer together than nature intended. The bear's nose, however, is squished (think about teddy bears), and its eyes are shoe-button innocent.

14. **Are wolves dangerous to domestic dogs?** Yes, gray wolves will often attack domestic dogs and kill them. Wild wolves are usually intolerant of other canids. It's a territorial issue. Wolves will often keep coyotes and foxes away from a kill. Wolves in captivity often do not like dogs; however, some are tolerant. Wolves under natural conditions in the wild generally do not mate with dogs, although under some conditions in captivity, gray wolves will mate with dogs to produce hybrid offspring. No data are available on red wolves and their interactions, if any, with domestic dogs. No hunting dogs are known to have been killed by red wolves in northeastern North Carolina, and there are no known red wolf/dog hybrids.
  
15. **A horse and a donkey can breed and produce a mule. But mules are not fertile and cannot produce offspring. Can wolf/dog hybrids produce pups?** Yes. Gray wolves and domestic dogs are closely related. Domestic dogs are the direct descendants of gray wolves. Dogs are, in fact, highly engineered and specialized gray wolves that are accustomed to living with humans. RED wolves, on the other hand, evolved on a separate branch of the evolutionary tree along with coyotes and, it is thought by some scientists, eastern wolves. Thus, there are no data on whether RED wolves and dogs can mate and produce puppies. Since dogs did not descend from red wolves, it is doubtful that such a match, even if it were to occur, would produce pups. Red wolves and coyotes are related, however, and red wolves and coyotes can, therefore, mate and produce fertile offspring.
  
16. **Hunters claim too many wolves will wipe out the big game ungulates (hooved animals) such as elk, moose and deer in an area. Is there truth in this statement or not?** Wolves can reduce the number of prey animals. So can weather, disease and other factors. But predators do not wipe out their food source. That would be self-destructive. Fewer prey animals generally mean fewer wolves. Less food

often means smaller litters of pups and bigger territories for wolf packs. Many factors besides the number of predators influence prey populations. Weather is one. The elimination of wolves from their historical ranges has, in some areas, resulted in the unchecked growth of prey populations. With no top predator in Yellowstone National Park, for instance, the elk population rose to unprecedented numbers. Much of the vegetation such as willow and aspen were severely reduced. Small predators became scarce as the coyote population grew. Much about the population dynamics of animals and the critical role of predators at the top of the food chain has been learned since the gray wolf returned in 1995 to Yellowstone.

17. **Do wolves ever kill other wolves?** Yes. Wolves will defend their territories, often fiercely, especially when food is scarce. They may harass and/or kill other wolves that trespass. This is not because wolves are mean, but because they have to defend their food supply, especially if it is limited. Wolves avoid unnecessary conflict, however. Energy is thus conserved for the hard job of hunting for themselves and their pups.
18. **Do wolves ever kill members of their own pack?** Yes, sometimes they do, although this is not common since wolf packs are families of directly related individuals. Sometimes wolves will drive a member of their own pack out and force it to disperse, especially if food is scarce. Generally, however, a wolf pack is a highly cooperative family with a hierarchy that is constantly reinforced. The parents, the breeding pair, are in charge, and the offspring of various ages support the family by hunting and caring for the pups of the year.
19. **Do wolves ever kill more than they can eat at one time?** Yes, they do, especially if a lot of food is available. They may return several times to a kill to eat, and they will cache food for times when prey is scarce. Feeding growing pups means a lot of food is essential. A wolf kill also feeds coyotes, foxes, eagles, ravens, crows, small predators, scavengers, carrion beetles and the surrounding vegetation that is nourished by decaying flesh and bones.
20. **How big are wolves?** Not as big as most people think. Wild wolves are usually much thinner than the “calendar wolves” which are

most often captive wolves. Abundant winter fur, fluffed to keep the animal warm, makes a wolf look bigger than it is. Gray wolves vary in size depending on where they live. Size is somewhat related to the size of their prey. Gray wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains (the founders of the present population were brought from Canada) and in Canada and Alaska can sometimes weigh 115 pounds or more for a big male. Females tend to weigh 10 to 15 pounds less. Red wolves are smaller than gray wolves. A robust male can weigh as much as 80 pounds, and females weigh around 60 pounds.

21. **What is a wolf pack?** A wolf pack is a family – Mom, Dad and the kids. Often pups from the previous year’s litter that have lived through the first winter remain with the parents before they leave to find mates and form families of their own. Some siblings may remain with the pack for two or more years. The adult parents are usually not related.
22. **How many wolves are in a pack?** It varies greatly. Sometimes there are just two, a male and a female who have formed a bonded pair. Usually the pack consists of the breeding male and female and their offspring of the present year. Often, pups from the previous year’s litter will not disperse but will stay with the natal pack for 2 or 3 years. The size of a wolf pack varies greatly and is regulated by the amount of food available, pup survival, dispersal and mortality due to disease, injury and human causes.
23. **Wouldn’t it be best for wolves to live in large packs so they could kill more prey?** Not necessarily. The more wolves, the more food needed. Also evidence indicates that most of the killing is done by the breeding pair with the younger wolves participating as part of their own learning process.
24. **How many pups do wolves have each year?** Wolves produce one litter of pups each year, born in the spring. Sometimes there are 1 or 2 pups, usually 4 to 6. Again the size of the litter may depend, among other things, on the amount of food available.

25. **How much does a newborn wolf pup weigh?** About a pound.

26. **Does only the mother wolf take care of the pups?** No. For the first two weeks, the mother remains in the den with the pups to keep them warm since they can't regulate their body temperatures. It is the job of the breeding male and the other pack members to bring the mother wolf food. A wolf pack is not matriarchal the way a lion pride is, for example. All members of the pack care for the growing pups, babysitting while the breeding female hunts (once the pups are old enough for her to leave the den and return for nursing bouts) and regurgitating food to them as they are weaned and begin to eat solid food.

27. **Does the breeding male ever kill the pups?** No. The father wolf and the other members of the wolf family take care of the mother when she is confined to the den nursing the pups. They bring her food and stay by the den when she needs to venture out to drink water. If there are no wolves in the pack other than the breeding pair, the mother wolf would have a tough time raising the pups without the help of her mate. When the pups are old enough to venture out of the den, the father and older siblings help raise the pups. They play with them and bring them food and bones and pieces of hide to play with. Play is important because it increases strength and reinforces survival behavior.

28. **Is regurgitated meat like "throw up?"** That is a good question and one a lot of people don't have the nerve to ask! The answer is no, not really, but sort of – depending on how long it has been in the stomach of the adult bringing it to the pups! The stomach is the grocery cart. If the wolf is bringing food from close by, the regurgitated meat may be served chunk style. If the wolf has had to travel some distance, the food might be partially digested since food in a wolf's stomach breaks down very fast. Also, pups being weaned benefit from partially digested meat. Wolves seem to be able to regurgitate at will. One load of dinner may be regurgitated in several helpings for the pups.

29. **Does the father wolf go into the den?** No, usually not. Some biologists claim to have observed this. Others have not.

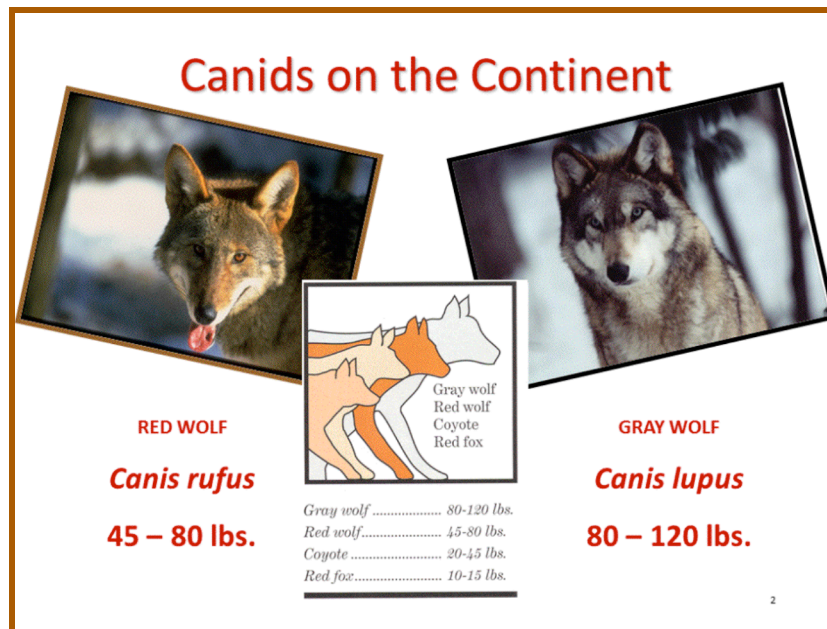
30. **How long do the pups stay with the pack?** Most stay at least a year. They need to mature, and yearlings are still learning from their parents how to catch and kill prey. Some young wolves disperse (leave home) between their first and second years. Others stay well into their second year before leaving. Occasionally a wolf will stay with the natal pack for 3 or 4 years or even longer. Sometimes wolves leave the pack, travel long distances for even months and then return to their family.
31. **Why do wolves leave the pack?** Why do human children leave home? To be independent, to find a mate and raise a family of their own!
32. **Do the kids ever leave and then come back to visit?** Yes, they do. An “outsider” who is accepted into a pack may actually be a returning offspring. If the wolf is wearing a functioning radio collar, the family tie can be confirmed by researchers monitoring the pack.
33. **Do wolves allow outsiders to join the pack?** Sometimes they do. Sometimes a new breeder will join the pack if the mother or father wolf dies or is killed.
34. **Do wolves mate for life?** The important thing to remember is that a wolf pack is a family. The parents are the head of the family, and they are the glue that bonds the family members. As long as the father and mother can reproduce, the family remains intact, hunting and raising pups. Sometimes because of advanced age or weakness, one of the breeding pair will “step down” and another breeder will replace him or her. If the mother or father wolf dies, the remaining breeder may take another mate from outside the pack. That is not uncommon. There are documented wolf packs where the same pair has headed the family for a number of years. Wild wolves usually live about 7 years. Sometimes, though, they live to be older than that.
35. **Are wolves in the same litter always the same color?** The short answer is no. There can be black and gray pups in the same litter.



- 36. Why do wolves howl at the moon?** They don't. They may howl on moonlit nights, but it's a stretch to say it's the moon that makes them howl. Wolves howl when they are rallying for a hunt, to announce their presence to strangers, to locate other members of the pack and to warn intruders away. Sometimes, it appears they have a group howl for no apparent reason. Maybe it just feels good!
- 37. If humans howl, will wolves answer?** Often they will. They will also howl when they hear sirens.
- 38. Do wolves ever bark like dogs do?** Sort of. They give a short huffing bark to warn the pups or others in the pack of danger. When wolves are alarmed or stressed, they will "bark/howl."
- 39. How long does a wolf live?** In the wild, not much longer than 7 years – that is, if they manage to survive their first winter. Sixty percent of wolf pups die before they are a year old. Wolves get kicked by their prey, they succumb to parasites and diseases like distemper and canine parvo-virus, they die of starvation, or they may be killed by other wolves or by humans. In captivity, wolves can live to be 15 or occasionally even older – just like dogs.
- 40. How fast can a wolf run?** Wolves travel at a steady, tireless trot, averaging about 5 miles an hour. When chasing prey, they can print at 25 to 35 miles an hour. Their big feet and spreading toes support them on snow and help them climb rocky terrain.
- 41. How far do wolves travel?** An old Russian proverb says that the wolf lives by his feet. Wolves are long-distance travelers. They easily travel 10 to 30 miles in a day to hunt, and often they put even more mileage on the wolf odometer. Wolves that have left the family in search of a mate and unoccupied territory travel huge distances, hundreds of miles from their home territories. GPS tracking collars have allowed researchers to document their travels.

- 42. How strong are a wolf's jaws?** The wolf's jaws can crush big bones with a biting capacity of 1 500 pounds per square inch. Compare that to a big dog. A German shepherd dog's biting capacity is about 750 pounds per square inch. What about a human? About 300 pounds per square inch!
- 43. Should I consider having a wolf as a pet?** Wolves should not be kept as pets. They can be socialized if they are hand-raised, but although they are "tame" and friendly to humans, they are not domesticated. Domesticated animals are animals like dogs and horses that have lived with humans for centuries and that have adapted to being cared for and to being companions to humans. Wolves cannot be dominated by humans in the way a dog can or taught to consistently accept a human's will the way a dog can. In most states, it is illegal to own a wolf without obtaining a special permit. It is, therefore, illegal for a veterinarian to vaccinate a wolf against rabies and issue a certificate. The rabies vaccine probably works on a wolf, but that has not been verified. Best guideline to follow: If you want a wolf, get a dog.
- 44. What about hybrids? There are ads everywhere.** The question of whether or not to own a wolf/dog hybrid is very controversial. Some hybrids make successful pets. Many do not. The key is to consider the question: When you cross a shy predator (wolf) with an aggressive animal like a dog (most dogs are, to a degree, aggressive or protective), what will you get? One possibility is that you will end up with an aggressive predator. Some people think wolf/dog hybrids make good guard dogs. Most do not. Sadly, most wolf/dog hybrids end up in shelters where they are euthanized. Or the owners turn them loose to fend for themselves.
- 45. Where can I see a wolf?** Wild wolves are elusive and shy. They avoid people. The exception is Yellowstone National Park where they can often be viewed in the Lamar Valley.

## Red Wolves and Gray Wolves What's the difference?



Actually, red wolves and gray wolves are more similar to one another than they are different. Like gray wolves, red wolves live in families called packs with Mom and Dad in charge, and they howl to communicate with one another and perhaps for reasons we will never know. They are top predators, hunting and killing other animals to survive. Like gray wolves, red wolves enthrall and terrify humans with their penetrating, golden-eyed stare, and like gray wolves, humans regard them with devotion and reverence as well as hatred and fear.

But some things do distinguish red wolves from gray wolves. For one thing, red wolves are smaller. Adults weigh in at about 80 pounds for a big male and 60 pounds for a robust female. Despite arguments to the contrary, they *are* red – not a flaming auburn like an Irish setter, but a dark autumn red, a rich russet that is splashed behind their long ears and on the backs of their legs and streaked through the gray and black mantles on their shoulders. Tall and lean as marathon runners, their avoidance of contact with people means they remain,

despite recent intensive research, something of a mystery. Their diet includes eastern white-tail deer, but a large portion of their menu consists of raccoons and nutria. The nutria, a huge rodent brought to the U.S. from South America, is an invasive species that wreaks havoc on aquatic plants in the eastern wetlands. Red wolves love nutria for lunch and dinner. Some local residents claim wild turkey and quail numbers have increased since red wolves are keeping the nest-raiding raccoon population in check.

The origin of the red wolf has long been debated, and the subject continues to be discussed among scientists. The conventional wisdom holds that red wolves, gray wolves and coyotes all derived from a common ancestor. Gray wolves are believed to have migrated eons ago to Europe and Asia, disappearing from North America, perhaps by crossing over the land bridge between what is now Alaska and the frozen tundra of Siberia. Gray wolves thus evolved in Eurasia and much later returned to the North American continent over the same land bridge. However, red wolves and coyotes evolved in North America on separate branches of the dog family (Canidae) tree, and the two species are, therefore, related. This may explain why gray wolves do not mate with coyotes and red wolves do if they cannot find red wolf mates.

Whatever its origin, the red wolf has been around for a very long time. Before ferocious persecution and habitat loss drove it to the brink of extinction, it was the top predator in the eastern United States and perhaps southeastern Canada. The red wolf is the legitimate wolf of the Southeast and thus deserves protection and the effort to restore it.