



## "...the big bad wolf"

In the North Georgia Mountains, there is a species of animal that some who live here, or visit, are lucky enough to see. Known as *Canis lupus*, the gray wolf lives in this area. Believe it or not, there are five subspecies of the gray wolf in North America due to the fact they interbreed with wild dogs and other species of wolves. 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 huskies. I have been told by others who live in this area, along with seeing for myself, one of the probable inbred subspecies, which was black in color. Skull dimensions, overall size, fur color, and the length of their legs and tail are some of the characteristics that differ between subspecies of gray wolf.

### What is a pack of wolves?

Wolves usually live in packs which consist of the adult parents, referred to as the alpha pair, and their offspring of perhaps the last 2 or 3 years. The adult parents are usually unrelated and other unrelated wolves may sometimes join the pack. **How many wolves are in a pack?** Pack size is highly variable because of birth of pups, dispersal, and mortality. Generally, a gray wolf pack has from six to eight wolves, but in Alaska and northwestern Canada some packs have over thirty members. **Wolf litters:** A pack normally has only one litter of pups each spring, but in areas of high prey abundance more than one female will give birth in each pack. An average litter size is four to six, but several may die if natural prey are not readily available. **How much do wolf pups weigh?** Gray wolf pups usually weigh one pound at birth. **Weight of an adult wolf:** Adult, female, gray wolves weigh between fifty and eighty-five pounds, and adult males between seventy and one hundred and ten pounds. **Size:** The average length (tip of nose to tip of tail) of an adult female gray wolf is four and a half to six feet; adult males average five to six and a half feet. The average height (at the shoulder) of a gray wolf is twenty-six to thirty-two inches.

**Their prey:** Gray wolves prey primarily on large, hoofed mammals such as white-tailed deer, mule deer, moose, elk, caribou, bison, and medium sized mammals, such as beaver and rabbits, and occasionally wolves will prey on birds or small mammals. **Life expectancy:** Gray wolves in the wild have an average life span of six to eight years, but have been known to live up to thirteen years in the wild and sixteen years in captivity.

**What do gray wolves die from?** The natural causes of wolf mortality are primarily starvation, which kills mostly pups, and death from other wolves because of territory fights. Disease such as mange and canine parvovirus can also be a concern. Injuries caused by prey result in some deaths. Human-caused mortality including legal hunting, illegal poaching, and roadway, vehicle kills can be high in some populations. Pup mortality rates are highly variable, but approximately forty to sixty per cent of wolf pups die each year. **How fast can gray wolves run?**

Wolves will travel for long distances by trotting at about five miles per hour. They can run at speeds of twenty five to thirty five miles per hour for short bursts while chasing prey, or running from a predator such as a Black Bear. **Do wolves attack humans?** There are a few places, where wolves have either lost their shyness of people or perhaps never developed it. An example of this is high in the Arctic. Examples can be found in several national parks where some wolves, like some coyote and bear, have become accustomed to people. **Why don't these wolves, which have lost their fear of humans, attack people?** The answer may lie in the fact that humans, the "ones who walk upright and carry a gun" (a quote from my upcoming book "*Paw Paths on a Mountain: From the eyes of a Black Bear*"), are one of their predators. As an aside, another wolf predator is the bear, which can sometimes stand upright much like a human. Generally wolves try to avoid bears because the bear can usually catch and kill a wolf. The bear is the faster runner.

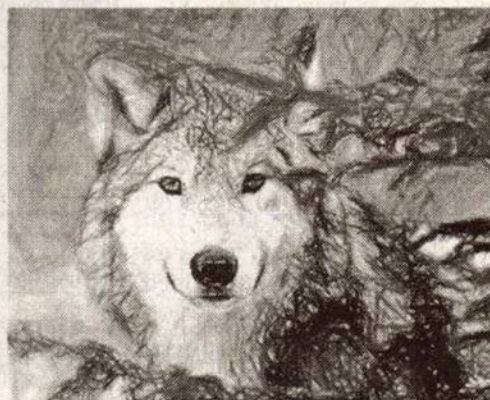
There have many accounts of wolves attacking humans, many of which are unfounded. Most reported attacks have been by rabid wolves which, like rabid dogs, squirrels, skunks, and raccoons will attack people. Many other accounts are clearly fabrications or extreme exaggerations, such as the 1911 newspaper report from Tashkent in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia

which claimed that wolves killed an entire wedding party of one hundred and thirty people. In areas such as Asia, wolves have been confirmed to be the cause of numerous children being killed.

The young children had been left unsupervised, perhaps even neglected, by their parents at the time of their deaths. Because the government of India compensates parents of children killed by wild animals at a rate higher than average annual salaries, Indian biologists believe that there may actually be an incentive for parents not to watch their children as closely as they might otherwise. Like bear, cougars, and domestic dogs, wolves should be regarded as potentially dangerous. This does not mean that wolves should be viewed with an unhealthy fear like that of the black bear. It only means that we should view wolves with the same healthy respect as with any potentially dangerous animal.

There are thirty-five hundred reported wolves in the lower 48 states, whereas there are an estimated two-hundred thousand around the world in some fifty-seven countries, compared to up to two million in earlier times. The illegal killing of wolves has become a leading threat to their survival. Another serious problem is human encroachment into wolf territory, which leads to habitat loss.

As I mentioned last week, my first bear sighting of the year has taken place. A very old, wrinkle-faced, thinning haired bear has visited the bear path next to my cabin several times in the past two weeks. Needless to say, the bird feeders have been put up for the year, and the "Scare-a-bear" kit (air horn, pepper spray, and flashlight), is hanging near my door. A 5"X7" photo of her is now hanging at Sunrise Grocery, and other photos of her are available upon request and on my website. Please let me know when you have seen your first bear of the year, and if you have a photo: email it to me (scottan59@yahoo.com), I will post them on my website for myself and others to enjoy.



Sketch of gray wolf to be included in upcoming book by Scott Anna.