

SOME THINGS YOUR STUDENTS WILL WANT TO KNOW ABOUT WOLVES - AND WON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK

1. **Are wolves dangerous to people?** Wild wolves avoid people. The myths about wolves attacking and eating people are distortions of the truth about the elusive nature of wolves. In places where wolves are protected, they may become less fearful of humans. They should, therefore, be treated like any wild animal - with respect.
2. **Why are people afraid of wolves?** It's easy to put all the blame on children's stories and fairy tales. But that is over-simplifying it. Wolves, with their big teeth and close-set golden eyes, can look scary, especially when illustrators exaggerate those features. Also, wolves live in packs. People associate "packs" with "gangs." The howl of the wolf is haunting, too.
3. **What is a predator?** Any animal that hunts and kills another animal for food. **Prey** is the term used for the animal that is hunted.
4. **What is a top predator?** Any animal that has no natural enemies within its food web and is not hunted by other animals. The wolf is a top predator.
5. **Why do wolves kill other animals?** They have to. They are carnivores. They prey primarily on large hoofed mammals called ungulates. These include deer, elk, bison, moose, caribou and musk oxen. Secondary food sources are hares and beaver. Red wolves eat nutria, feral pigs and small mammals such as squirrels. Occasionally, they will kill birds.
6. **How much do wolves eat?** A wolf can survive on 2 ½ pounds of food a day. They need about 5 pounds a day to reproduce.
7. **How many species of wolves are there?** Two. The gray wolf and the red wolf. The Ethiopian wolf, an extremely rare wolf, may soon be officially classified as a separate species.
8. **Is it hard for wolves to kill a large animal?** Yes, very. They get kicked and trampled. Even small deer are dangerous with their sharp hoofs. Wild wolves are injured often by prey animals.
9. **Do wolves always kill the old, weak and sick animals?** Usually, they do. They also kill young animals if they can separate them from their mothers. This is because getting food is risky at best. Wolves try to 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 there is the basic instinct to hunt.

Wolves raised in captivity for release into the wild (red wolves and Mexican wolves) have learned to hunt. But wolves born in the wild are almost certainly taught by their parents to hunt. Many biologists believe the young learn by observation and by trial and error.

11. **How long can a wolf go without eating?** Days, weeks even. Sometimes they have no choice if food is scarce or unavailable.
12. **How much can a wolf eat at one time?** A wolf can consume as much as 22.5 pounds of food at a time. 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 the 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 directed at wolves, however. Mountain lions and bears, for example, kill other animals, too. Many small predators do, also. But people don't generally hate bears, for instance. Why not? Good question. Suggestion: Compare the illustrations in children's stories. How is the wolf generally depicted? What about the bear?
14. **Are wolves dangerous to domestic dogs?** Yes, usually wolves will attack dogs if they can. Wild wolves generally don't like dogs or any other canids, for that matter. It's a territorial thing. Wolves will often try to keep coyotes and foxes away from a kill. Wolves in captivity often do not like dogs, either. Yes, there are wolf/dog hybrids. But wolves under natural conditions in the wild generally will not breed with dogs.
15. **A horse and a donkey can breed and produce a mule. But mules are not fertile. Can wolf/dog hybrids produce puppies?** Yes, they can. So can wolf/coyote hybrids.
16. **Hunters claim that too many wolves will wipe out the big game animals such as deer and elk in an area. Will they?** 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 puppies and bigger territories for the wolf packs. Many factors besides the number of predators influence the prey populations. Weather is one, for instance. The elimination of wolves from their original 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 willows and aspen, was nearly wiped out. 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 web has been learned since the wolf returned in 1995 to Yellowstone.
17. **Do wolves ever kill other wolves?** Yes. They will defend their territories, often fiercely 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 conserved

for the hard job of hunting for themselves and for the pups.

18. **Do wolves ever kill members of their own pack?** Yes, sometimes they do. It may be a younger wolf challenging an older alpha. Sometimes wolves will drive a member of their own pack out. This may be competition as well. Generally, however, a wolf pack is a highly cooperative family unit with a hierarchy that is reinforced constantly.
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 often cache food for times when prey are scarce. Feeding growing pups means a lot of food is essential. A wolf kill also feeds coyotes, foxes, golden eagles, bald eagles, magpies, ravens, small predators and 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. Gray wolves vary somewhat in size depending on where they live. Male wolves in Minnesota weigh between 70 and 110 pounds. Females weigh 10 to 15 pounds less. Wolves in the northern Rockies and in Canada and Alaska are larger. Adult males may weigh as much as 115 pounds and sometimes more. Some reach 130 pounds. Females are somewhat lighter than males. Red wolves are smaller than gray wolves. Abundant fur in winter can give wolves the appearance of being much heavier than they are.
21. **What is a wolf pack?** A family - mother, father and puppies. Often, pups from the previous year’s litter that have lived through the first winter remain with the parents before they leave to form families of their own. 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. Sometimes there are just two, a male and a female. Usually the pack consists of the breeding pair and their offspring of the present year. Often, pups from the previous year’s litter will remain with the parents. Sometimes, older siblings 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 puppies do wolves have?** Sometimes 1 or 2, usually 4 to 6,

occasionally more. Again, the size of the litter may depend, among other things, on the amount of food available.

25. **How much does a newborn wolf weigh?** About a pound.
24. **Does only the mother take care of the pups?** No. A wolf pack is not matriarchal the way a lion pride is, for example. All members of the pack care for the puppies, babysitting and regurgitating food for them once they are weaned.
26. **Is regurgitated food like “throw-up?”** This is a good question and one most people don't have the nerve to ask! The answer is no, not really. If you have to bring food back miles and miles to the growing puppies, what is the most efficient way of carrying it? In your mouth? No, definitely not. The stomach is the grocery cart. The food may be partially digested, however, since food in a wolf's stomach breaks down very fast. Also, pups being weaned need 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.
27. **Does the alpha male kill the pups if he can?** No. The alpha male and the other members of the wolf family take care of the mother while she is confined to the den nursing the pups. They bring her food and stay by the den when she needs to venture outside to drink water. If there are no other wolves in the pack except the breeding pair, a mother wolf would have a very difficult time raising the pups alone without the help of her mate. When the pups emerge from the den, the father and the older siblings help to raise the pups. They play with them and bring them food and bones and pieces of hide to play with. Play is important. It increases strength and reinforces survival behavior.
28. **Does the father go into the den?** No, not usually. Some biologists claim to have observed this behavior. Others have not.
29. **How long do pups stay with the pack?** Most stay a year at least. They need to mature, and yearlings are still learning from their parents how to catch and kill prey. Some leave home, or disperse, between their first and second year. 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, but this seems to be the exception.
30. **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!
29. **Do dispersers ever come back and visit the pack?** Sometimes. At least, biologists think so. An “outsider” who is accepted into a pack may be a returning offspring.
30. **Do wolves allow outsiders to join the pack?** Sometimes they do. The outsider may be a youngster returning to the natal pack. Sometimes a new breeder will join the pack if the alpha male or female dies.

31. **Is there ever more than one litter of pups in a pack?** The answer used to be no. That has been modified, at least from some observations in Yellowstone and other areas as well. There are now confirmed data of some packs with more than one breeding female, but this seems to be the exception. The pack must be able to feed the pups, keep them safe, maintain their health and vigor and teach them to hunt. In the pack hierarchy, there is a dominant female and a dominant male traditionally referred to as the alpha female and the alpha male. These wolves are the pack leaders.
32. **Are wolves in the same litter always the same color?** No. Wolves in a pack are not always the same color. Sometimes a wolf pack will have white wolves, gray wolves and black wolves!
33. **Why do wolves howl at the moon?** They don't. They often howl before they go out hunting, they howl to announce their presence to strangers and to warn them away, they howl to locate one another and sometimes they howl for no apparent reason. Maybe it just feels good.
34. **If humans howl, will wolves answer?** Yes, often they will.
35. **Do wolves bark like dogs?** 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."
36. **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. An average of 60 percent of wolf pups die before they are a year old. Wolves get kicked by their prey, they succumb to parasites, they die of starvation or they may be killed by other wolves. In captivity, wolves can live to be 15 or even older - just like dogs.
37. **How fast can a wolf run? How far do they travel?** Wolves are long-distance travelers. They may travel 10 to 30 miles in one day to hunt. They often maintain a steady trot, averaging about 5 miles an hour. When chasing prey, they can sprint at 25 to 35 miles an hour. Wolves leaving the pack and dispersing in search of mates have been known to travel huge distances, sometimes over 500 miles from their home territories.
38. **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's biting capacity? About 300 pounds per square inch!
39. **Should I consider a wolf as a pet? Can they be domesticated?** Wolves should not be kept as pets. They can be socialized but not domesticated. They cannot be dominated or taught to accept a human's will the way a dog can. In many states, it is illegal to own a wolf without obtaining a special permit. It is, therefore, illegal for a veterinarian to

give routine vaccinations to a wolf. Best guideline: If you want a wolf, get a dog.

40. **What about hybrids? There are ads everywhere.** The hybrid issue is very controversial. Some hybrids make successful pets. Many do not. The key is to consider the question: What do you get when you combine a shy predator with an aggressive animal like a dog? Most dogs are, at least to some degree, either protective or aggressive. Buying a hybrid is risky. Many people buy them because they think they will be acquiring a good guard animal. Sadly, however, many hybrids wind up in shelters where they are euthanized.

41. **Where can I go to see a wolf?** Wolves in the wild are elusive. While you can often hear them howl in “wolf country,” seeing them is rare and often only for a fleeting moment. The exception is Yellowstone National Park. Many visitors have been thrilled by viewing three of the packs that live in the Lamar Valley.