

2. Vital Statistics

With childhood notions of “the big bad wolf” firmly in place, many people believe wolves are enormous. In reality, wolves are not nearly as large as they loom in our imaginations. For example, the Arabian wolf may weigh only 45 pounds. The average mature gray wolf of North America weighs between 75 and 125 pounds. Wolves in mid-latitude Canada and Siberia weigh more, some as much as 175 pounds. In general, females weigh 15 to 20 percent less than males.

The average wolf stands approximately 30 inches at the shoulder and is about five to six feet long from the nose to the tip of the tail. Some females are smaller, some males larger.

Wolves reach adult size quickly and do not grow appreciably after their first year. By the age of six months, it is often difficult to tell the juveniles from the adults. This is critical to their survival since winter and snow come early to the northern latitudes where most wolves live. Traveling with the pack is impossible if the young are not large enough and strong enough to keep up.

“Gray” wolves are actually a blend of colors (gray, white, tan, buff, red), an adaptation that provides camouflage in different habitats. A typical “gray” wolf may have a grizzled gray head and back, fading to a creamy tan on the belly and legs. Coat colors can, however, range from inky black to pure white, a color phase most common in the snowy far north. Brothers and sisters in the same litter can vary in color from black to gray to white.

Nature has provided wolves with highly specialized adaptations that enable them to survive in hostile environments under difficult conditions. Their acute hearing and exceptional sense of smell (up to 100 times more sensitive than ours) keep wolves well attuned to their surroundings and enable them to find food. Although they are quick to perceive movement, wolves do not see detail clearly much beyond a distance of 75 feet, leading most biologists to believe wolves rely far less on vision than on sound and smell.

Long legs and masterfully adapted feet give the wolf endurance over long distances and agility in challenging terrain. Wolves walk on toes equipped with pads that, although calloused to prevent cuts, are soft nonetheless. The toes spread and extend to allow the wolf to grip the surface as it scales rocky embankments and climbs over slippery boulders. The claws are blunt and do not retract like the claws of mountain lions and other cats.

The wolf’s huge, flexible foot acts like a shock absorber over long distances and like a snowshoe in deep snow. For added mobility in snow, the wolf’s chest is narrow, allowing the animal to plow trails through deep snow like the blade of a snowplow.

Wolves have been clocked at top speeds of 35 to 45 miles per hour when sprinting and can bound and leap as far as 16 feet. Even more impressive than their speed and athleticism, however, is their stamina. Wolves have been known to travel as far as 120 miles in a single day and to

disperse up to 500 miles or more from their natal territory (place of their birth). Pack members average 10 to 20 miles a day, depending largely on the availability of food and whether or not there are pups to feed.

The wolf's fur or "pelage" is made up of two coats. A top layer of guard hairs, some as long as five inches, repels rain. "Capes" of guard hairs cover the neck, shoulders and loins to direct rain off the coat so it does not penetrate the dense second layer of downy underfur. This second layer must stay dry and lofted to retain body heat. This dual coat is so efficient at keeping body heat in that snow does not melt on a wolf's coat.

Individual wolves have unique and distinct personalities according to people who have raised wolves in captivity and researchers who have studied them in the wild. Personalities and dominant or submissive tendencies begin to emerge in early puppyhood as the pups engage in games and compete for food the adults bring to the den and rendezvous sites.

Some wolves are assertive and bold; others are timid and shy. Some are playful and sociable; some aloof and independent. Some are easy-going and relaxed; others are nervous and high-strung. Noted wolf expert L. David Mech speculates that the wide variation in personalities may be critical to the stability of the pack. If each wolf is to some degree different from the other family members, competition among pack members is reduced.

Mech also suggests that differences in personality are advantageous when it comes to securing food. Getting enough to eat for themselves and their pups is risky, difficult and relentless work for wolves. Less aggressive wolves might be successful hunters of smaller prey, while the more assertive pack members are skilled at the more dangerous task of taking larger prey such as elk, moose and musk oxen. Personality might also determine which individuals stay with the pack and which leave. Some pups remain with the pack into their second, third and fourth years. Others disperse to hunt and live alone on the fringes of the pack or to find mates and establish new packs in unoccupied territories.

Wolves and Other Canids

The gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) is the largest member of the Canidae (dog) family in North America. The table below compares the size and appearance of the gray wolf to the other canid species in the United States.

	GRAY WOLF (<i>Canis lupus</i>)	RED WOLF (<i>Canis rufus</i>)	COYOTE (<i>Canis latrans</i>)	FOX (<i>Vulpes</i> or <i>Urocyon</i>)
SIZE	5 to 6 feet long from nose to tail	3 to 4 feet long from nose to tail	3 to 4 feet long from nose to tail	3 to 3.5 feet long from nose to tail
WEIGHT	80 to 120 pounds	40 to 80 pounds	30 to 40 pounds	12 pounds
COLOR	gray, tan, brown, black or white	reddish brown, black or gray	reddish brown, tan or gray	red-brown (red fox), grizzled- gray (gray fox)
EYE COLOR	yellow, green or brownish	yellow, green or brownish	yellow to green	yellow to brown

Check Your Reading Skills
Vital Statistics

1. The weight of the average mature gray wolf of North America is (a) 45-60 pounds, (b) 50-75 pounds, (c) 85-100 pounds, (d) 100-125 pounds.
2. Why is it so important for pups to reach adult size quickly?
3. On what senses do wolves rely most?
4. How are the following parts of the wolf adapted for survival?
 - \$ Feet-
 - \$ Legs-
 - \$ Toes-
 - \$ Chest-
5. How fast can a wolf sprint?
How far can a wolf bound and leap?
How far have wolves been known to travel in a day?
How far might a wolf disperse from its natal territory?
What is the average distance a wolf travels in a single day?
6. Describe a wolf's coat or pelage.
7. Wolves have separate and distinct "personalities." Why might this be advantageous?