

4. Pack Life and Communication

Wolves live, travel and hunt in packs of four to seven animals, consisting of an alpha (dominant) pair, their pups, often several subadults from the previous year's litter and sometimes some older siblings as well.

The alpha female and male are in charge, leading the pack in hunting and tracking prey, choosing den sites and establishing and maintaining the pack's territory. The alpha pair mate in January or February, and the female gives birth in spring after a gestation period of between 62 and 65 days. Litters can run from one to nine pups, but four to six is the norm.

Pups are born blind and deaf and weigh about a pound. Their eyes open when they are about two weeks old, and a week later they begin to walk and explore the area around the den. They romp and wrestle with one another from a very young age. Scientists believe that these early encounters help establish the hierarchies that determine which members of the litter will grow up to be pack leaders.

Wolf pups grow rapidly for, come winter, they must be ready to travel with the pack. Within two months, the pups reach 20 pounds. Within a year they are full size. All the adults in a pack share parental responsibilities for the pups. They indulge the pups' voracious appetites by providing a constant supply of food. From the time the pups are four week old until they are able to hunt with the pack, the adults feed the pups by regurgitating food for them.

Pups remain with their parents for at least the first year of their lives during which they reach full adult size and learn to hunt. In their second year of life, when their parents are raising a new set of pups, young wolves may remain with the pack or spend periods of time on their own. Frequently, after summer forays, they return to spend their second winter with the pack. By the time they are two years old, however, most wolves leave the pack for good to find mates and territories of their own. Some of these "dispersers" travel enormous distances to find unoccupied territories; others remain on the fringes of occupied territories, hunting and living alone in "buffer zones" or in areas where several pack territories converge.

Not all the pups in a litter live to the age of dispersal, of course. Biologists have determined that only one or two of every five pups born live to the age of 10 months, and only about half of those remaining survive to the dispersal age of two or three. After that, the survival rate is fairly high. The maximum life span for a wild wolf is 16 years, but most do not live much beyond the age of seven.

Wolves communicate through facial expressions and body postures, scent-marking, growls, barks, whimpers, squeaks and howls. Howling alone can mean many things: a greeting, a rallying cry to gather the pack together or to get ready for a hunt, an advertisement of their presence to warn other wolves away from their territory or a spontaneous expression of play and bonding. There is no evidence, however, that wolves howl at the moon. Pups begin to howl at one month

of age. The howl of the wolf can be heard up to six miles away.

Wolf packs are highly organized and tightly knit. Order is maintained through a complex social hierarchy with each member of the pack ranked according to status. Wolves engage in a variety of displays of dominance and submission that reinforce the pecking order. Pack members communicate with one another in a number of ways. They use their entire bodies; expressions of the eyes and mouth, set of the ears, tail, head and hackles and general body posture combine to express excitement, anxiety, aggression or acquiescence. Wolves also wrestle, rub cheeks and noses and nip, nuzzle and lick each other. Wolves will leave “messages” for themselves and each other by urinating, defecating or scratching the ground to leave scent marks. These marks can set the boundaries of territories, record trails, warn off other wolves or help lone wolves find unoccupied territory. In a similar fashion, wolves will roll in items with a strong scent, such as carrion or the droppings of other animals, as a way of “storytelling.” Other pack members can tell where a wolf has been or what it has encountered by its scent. No one knows how wolves get all this information by smelling, but it is likely that their sense of smell is so acute they can distinguish among many very similar odors.

Check Out Your Reading Skills
Pack Life and Communication

Short Answer Questions: Write your answers on notebook paper.

1. What is the average pack size? (Remember: pack size depends on many factors, among them prey density and size of the prey.)
2. What are the responsibilities of the alpha female and the alpha male?
3. When does the alpha pair mate?
4. How long is the gestation period?
5. What is the average litter size?
6. How do the adults feed the growing pups before they learn to hunt?
7. When is a wolf pup full size?
8. How long do the young stay with the pack?
9. What is a disperser?
10. What is a buffer zone?
11. What is the average life span of a wild wolf?
12. List the ways in which wolves communicate:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

How did you do? How many did you get right? _____ What do you need to review? _____