



FAST FACTS

Name: Wolf

Common name: wolf

Scientific name: *Canis lupus*

Average weight: 20 to 75 kg

Average height: 60 to 90 cm

Did you know?

Most experts believe the domestic dog descended from the wolf – the two are genetically identical and are capable of interbreeding.

PHYSIOLOGY

The wolf is the largest wild member of the dog family. It can be many colours, from white to black, but most often grey. The wolf has short, soft under-fur covered by coarse, outer guard hairs. The under-fur is dense and insulates the wolf against the cold. Stiff hairs also protect its footpads. Its size is similar to that of a German shepherd, but it is leaner with bigger feet and longer legs. It also has a long, bushy tail with a black tip.

HABITAT/BEHAVIOUR

Wolves live in groups, or packs, of three to seven individuals, and there is always a dominant male and a breeding female. The pack is hierarchical, and each wolf has its own place in the group. The order of the pack is displayed each time the wolves meet by caressing, romping, tail wagging, wrestling, and many other expressions. The dominant wolf, or alpha male, stands tall with its ears up and forward. Around the alpha male, lesser-ranked wolves crouch, holding their tails between their legs, and lower their ears. Because these gestures are all understood by the pack, there is relatively little aggression within the order. However, outsiders are dealt with brutally.

Packs normally occupy a set home range and frequent the same paths. They mark their paths and territory with urine. During breeding season, a pack will live in a den or under a shelf of rock. The pack protects and feeds the breeding female while she's nursing. Lesser-ranked members may have to baby-sit the pups while the parents are out hunting.

All of the wolf's main prey can outrun it, so wolves use cooperation and cunning to catch their prey. Wolves hunt as a pack and respond to signals from the dominant member. They either take turns chasing the prey to tire it, or they split up and chase it into an ambush.

RANGE

The wolf was the most widely distributed mammal two centuries ago, living all over North America, Europe and Asia. The only habitats it could not occupy were deserts, tropical rain forests and the peaks of high mountain ranges. Now, the wolf's range has been much reduced due to hunting and habitat loss. The wolf has been exterminated in the Atlantic provinces, the heavily populated areas of southern Canada, Mexico and the United States – with the exception of Minnesota, Alaska, and some western states. They can still be found in less settled parts of Canada, from Labrador to British Columbia and in the Yukon Territory and the Northwest Territories.