

# Let's Learn About Wolves

Did you know that modern dogs share 99.9% of their DNA with wolves? What are the differences between wolves and dogs? Keep reading to find out!

Wolves were important to Native American cultures for their ability to help hunters find small game in the forest, and to protect their camps. The relationship between humans and wolves started before farming existed. Scientists believe that wolves started following human hunters and gatherers because of food scraps. Eventually, humans offered food to wolves, and a relationship and a bond between human and wolf, and then dogs, developed over time. Wolves and dogs share a common ancestor that is now extinct. Scientists have found evidence that dogs appeared on Earth between 20,000 – 35,000 years ago.

In this worksheet, you will learn about the habitat, diet, and some other unique and fascinating features about wolves, and learn the differences between wolves and dogs. You will also learn more about the different kinds of wolves that live in the wild.



*Releasing a Sawtooth wolf pup into the Nez Perce acclimation pen, February 1997.  
NPS Jim Peaco*

## All About Wolves

Wolves are **mammals**, which means they are warm-blooded, have bones, breathe air, are covered in fur, and give birth to live young. Wolves can only breed once a year, in late Autumn, and wolf babies are called pups. Wolves nurse their pups with milk for about 45 days after they are born and continue to help feed and care for their pups throughout their lifetime. Their pups become part of their pack. Scientists agree that there are two primary species of wolf: The Grey Wolf and the Red Wolf. Within each of these species of wolf, however, there are several varieties. Both the Grey Wolf and the Red Wolf are found in the United States. The Ethiopian wolf is debated, as some scientists consider it to be a jackal instead of a wolf. Although they make lots of different sounds to communicate with each other, wolves are known for their amazing howl.

Follow this link to watch and listen to wolves howling! <https://youtu.be/5laYm3NjJnM>

Wolves appeared on Earth approximately 750,000 to 1 million years ago, and were the most abundant carnivore on Earth, with populations in the millions. Today, wolves live in North America, Europe, North Africa, and Asia. Wolves were native to every state in the US, but their numbers dropped drastically as settlers moved west. Millions of wolves were killed by hunters out of fear and threat to their livestock, and the wolf was nearing extinction. In 1926, wolves were no longer living in Yellowstone National Park. In an effort to save the majestic wolf, wolf cubs were bred in captivity and returned to the park starting in 1995. Wolves were also returned to Arizona, Wyoming, Montana, and Northern Idaho in the 1990's. Today, approximately 6000 wolves live in the continental United States, with the majority of native wolves living near the Great Lakes and Alaska. The Red Wolf is critically endangered, with an estimated population of 100 or less in North Carolina. Wolves are no longer found in Connecticut, but large coyotes are now common.



Photo courtesy of [endangeredwolfcenter.org](http://endangeredwolfcenter.org)



## Habitat

Grey wolves like to live in the woods and remote forests, but red wolves may also live in swamps or coastal prairies. They will dig a den only to raise their young or in bad weather. Wolf dens will typically be near water and dug on a south-facing slope in well-drained soil. They might dig under tree roots, into the side of a bank, or they may even use a hollow log. They might even live inside of cliff caves. Wolves often will enlarge a den abandoned by a fox or a coyote. When they are no longer taking care of pups in their den, they will usually sleep on the ground. Below is a picture of a Grey wolf den under tree roots.



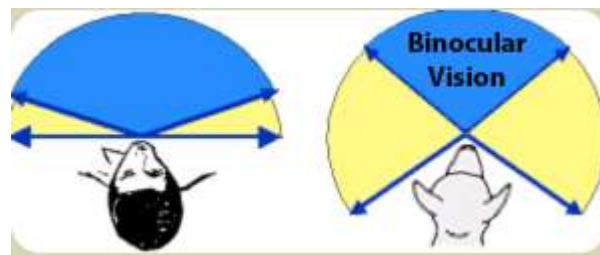
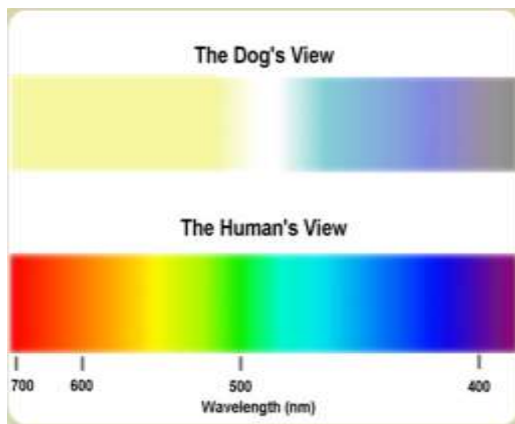
*Photo courtesy of wolfcountry.net*

## Diet and Social Habits

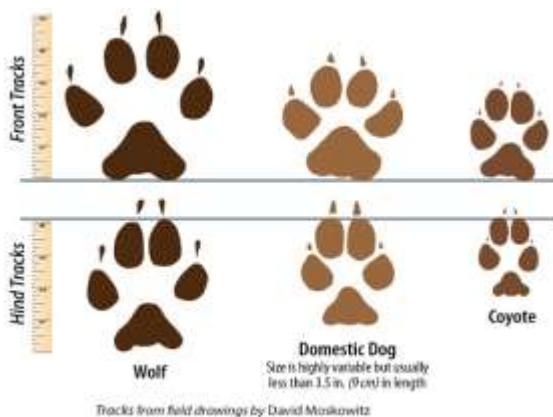
Wolves are **carnivores**, which means they eat only meat. Wolves will typically hunt hoofed animals such as deer, elk, mountain goats, and bison. They may also hunt fish, beavers, birds, lemmings, rabbits, and livestock. In one meal, a wolf can eat up to 22 ½ pounds of food at a time, but they need at least 5 pounds of food a day to survive. Wolves are very social animals, and work together as a group. Wolves hunt in packs, and the packs are led by an Alpha male and an Alpha female. Wolves communicate with each other during a hunt and will take turns chasing prey to tire them out so they are easier to catch. Wolves are known for the howling sound they make, which is different than many other animals. The Alpha male and Alpha female are often the parents of the other wolves in the pack. Wolves have a highly organized social structure, and the Alphas are the only wolves allowed to breed in the pack, and they eat first as well. It is believed that wolves were very curious about humans at first, and that is how the relationship between humans and wolves began. They are now considered to be typically timid and shy animals around humans because they have been hunted for so many years. The wolves at Yellowstone have shown to be a little too comfortable around humans, and this puts them at risk, since they are not afraid of crossing a busy road. They may also come closer to humans than is usual for a wild wolf.

## Physical Characteristics

Wolves are covered in fur, have canine (fang) teeth that can be 2 ½ inches long, pointed ears, large feet, and a long, straight tail. Wolves may be white, cream-colored, buff, tawny, reddish, gray, black, or any combination of these colors. Wolves have keen senses of hearing and smell as well as night vision. They have eyes that are set slightly to the side, allowing them excellent peripheral vision. Their eyes are blue at birth, but will change as they age to yellow, amber, light brown, green, or dark brown. Any adult wolf with blue eyes is actually a “wolf dog”, as blue eyes are a dog trait. Black wolves are also a hybrid of wolf and dog. Adult female wolves are smaller than males, and wolves vary greatly in size depending on where they live. Depending on the type of wolf, adults can weigh as little as 30 pounds, but some weigh up to 130 pounds. The Grey wolf is known to be about 26 to 32 inches tall, with a length of 4 ½ - 5 feet, and the Red wolf is slightly smaller. Wolves walk about 4 miles per hour, trot about 8-10 miles per hour, and can easily run 30 miles per hour. Wolves can easily travel 30 miles a day but may travel up to 60 miles. A wolf can sprint up to 37 miles per hour if chasing prey. Wolves and dogs can see color, but their color vision is limited. Look below to understand how wolves and dogs see the world differently than humans!



**Wolves** differ from dogs in several ways. Wolves and dogs have the same number of teeth, but a wolf's teeth are about twice as strong as a dog, larger, and they have stronger jaws. Wolves have pointed ears and a long tail, but dogs can have floppy ears and curly tails. A wolf's feet are larger than a dog's, and they have two toes longer in the front that allow them to sprint longer distances. Wolves have a broader skull. Wolves are carnivores, but dogs are omnivores (meat and plant eaters). Wolves are faster than dogs and are known to be better at problem solving. Wolves have better hearing than dogs. Dogs differ greatly from wolves in the way they interact with humans, so they are thought to have better social skills.



(All photos above courtesy of MexicanWolves.org)

## Wolves vs. Dogs: Quiz

1. What type of animal is a wolf?
  - a. Reptile
  - b. Bird
  - c. Mammal
  
2. How long have wolves existed on Earth?
  - a. 50,000 years
  - b. 75,000 years
  - c. 750,000 – 1 million years ago
  
3. How long have dogs existed on earth?
  - a. 50,000 years
  - b. 10,000 years
  - c. 20,000 – 35,000 years
  
4. What are a few differences between wolves and dogs?
  - a. Wolves are omnivores, and have smaller teeth than dogs
  - b. They are the same
  - c. Wolves are faster than dogs, have larger teeth, and a broader skull
  
5. What special characteristic does a wolf and dog have in common?
  - a. Big eyes
  - b. Excellent peripheral vision
  - c. Good sense of hearing
  
6. What is an Alpha wolf?
  - a. The youngest wolf
  - b. One of the two leaders of the wolf pack
  - c. The biggest wolf

(See next page for answers)

Answers: 1.c, 2. c, 3.c, 4.c, 5.b. 6. b