

BACKCOUNTRY HORSEMEN OF CALIFORNIA

Wolf Wisdom

*When the moon rides high and the air is still,
Through the silence, sharp and shrill,*



*A wolf howl sounds wild and clear.
It stirs the soul"*

R. Cramer

Wolves in California: How did wolves come to be in California, as there have been no wolf sightings here since the 1920's? In 1973, the Endangered Species Act became federal law, with the aim of protecting endangered species, preventing extinction and promoting recovery of species. The wolf was included in the list of endangered and threatened species. "Promoting recovery" led to the introduction of Canadian gray wolves into Yellowstone National park in 1975. Since then, wolves have returned to California, with the first animal, Wolf (OR – 7), entering California in 2011 and the first pack being established in Shasta County in 2015. Currently there are seven packs in California: in Lassen, Modoc, Plumas, Shasta, Tehama and Tulare Counties.

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife maintain a web site (1) with extensive information about the known wolves in California. This page has information about wolf activity, current law and regulations, and a "wolf sighting" map.

Characteristics of Wolves: (2) Physically, the gray wolf is an impressive animal. They can be various colors, but most are a mottled gray. Wolves range from 60 to 120 lbs, stand 36" at the shoulder, and can be 6 ft. long. They have large teeth, and can crush bone with their bite. They have long legs and blocky feet, which helps them rapidly cover long distances while hunting. Socially, wolves are much like other canines. The basic social unit is the pack, which has a breeding pair and their offspring, often 5 to 6 pups. Occasionally, an older female or a lone wolf will join a pack. This pack structure helps with nursery activities and makes for efficient hunting. When the pups become old enough to reproduce, they leave the pack and set out as a lone wolf to find a mate and establish their own pack, thus expanding their range and increasing the wolf population.

Wolves survive by hunting in packs. Wolves and their prey have coexisted together, with wolves taking the vulnerable and less fit members of a herd, leaving the fit animals to reproduce. But not all hunts are successful! It is feast or famine for the pack. When they are successful, a wolf can eat up to 22 lbs. of meat; or it can go up to 4 months without a meal. Wolves have lived in every place in the world where there are herds of animals. They are very adaptable and have no natural predators. Wolves, like bears, are opportunistic feeders. They will eat whatever they can wherever they find it.

1 <https://wildlife.ca.gov/conservation/mammals/gray-wolf>

2 Cited in *Wolves: Behavior, Ecology, and Conservation*. Mech, L. David and Boitani, Luigi, Editors. University of Chicago Press. 2003



Wolf

4 - 5 ½ inches long,
by 3 ¾ - 5 inches wide



Coyote

2 ¼ - 2 ¾ inches long,
by 1 ¾ - 2 ⅝ inches wide



Dog

Small dogs ranges from 1.69 to 1.97 inches
Medium dogs range from 2.48 to 3.07 inches
Large dogs range from 3 inches or more

Wolves and Humans: Are wolves dangerous to humans? Following is from the web site International Wolf Center.(2) “The risks associated with a wolf attacking a human are ‘above zero’ but far too low to calculate. The only confirmed attack in the US occurred in 2010, when a woman was killed in Alaska.” But, the authors warn, the risk is not zero. Wolves, like bears, are opportunistic foragers, and become food habituated. Thus, some precautions should be taken: don’t feed them, control garbage sites, remove food sources, etc. Most incidences of wolf aggression are attributed to rabies, wolf-dog hybrids, cornered wolves, or pet dogs that are perceived as a threat to the wolf’s territory. People should never approach, feed, or otherwise interact with a wolf.

If you have a close encounter with a wolf

- **Do not run.** Maintain eye contact.
- Act aggressively, make noise while retreating.
- If the wolf does not retreat, continue acting aggressively by yelling or throwing objects.(1)

Of greater concern to farmers and ranchers is livestock depredation. Because livestock is an easier prey than a wild herd, wolves can become habituated to feeding on cows rather than hunting for deer or elk. This interface with humans threatens their survival, as the farmers and ranchers believe that this depredation causes them economic loss and want a more common-sense management policy. Recognizing the economic impact, the CDFW has a policy of reimbursing farmers and ranchers for confirmed kills as a means of dealing with the problem of wolves moving into farming and grazing areas.

What should you do if you see a wolf? First, make sure that it was a wolf. The CDFW site has excellent information on distinguishing the difference between dogs, coyotes and wolves under the heading “How do I know if I’ve seen a wolf?” Then, after determining it was a wolf, it is important to report it. Photographs and GPS coordinates are very helpful for CDFW management purposes. A “Gray Wolf Sighting Report” is located under this heading on the CDFW site to facilitate reporting.

The wolves are among us, no longer animals of the wilderness. They have extraordinary flexibility and adaptability, which means that management control is necessary for the wolf’s survival. Today, thanks to conservation efforts, wolf populations have proliferated, expanding their ranges into areas that have been silent of howls for half a century or more.

