

Wolf 101

A pack of lessons from the North Woods of Minnesota

By Cliff Terry

ELY, Minn.— On an unusually hot summer morning in northern Minnesota, Shadow, Malik, Maya and Grizzer are lazily roaming around their outdoor quarters. The foursome with the distinctive names are wolves—two grayish/brown Great Plains wolves and two white arctic wolves—and they are the star inhabitants of the International Wolf Center.

This attractive town, hard by the Canadian border, is best known as the jumping off place for trips to the Boundary Waters Canoe area, but in recent years it also has become known as the home of this handsome center, which proclaims itself as the world's premier wolf interpretive facility. It was founded on the belief that co-existence with the controversial predators is possible when people are presented facts about the wolves. Its mission is to support the survival of the wolf around the world by teaching about wolves, their relationship to where they live and the role of humans in their future.

The center attracts about 50,000 visitors annually, and on this particular day, license plates on cars in the parking lot include those from Texas, Florida and Illinois. International Wolf Center membership totals over 8,500 persons in 50 states and 38 countries.

The current pack on exhibit—all born in captive facilities in the Midwest—consists of Shadow and

Malik, two male arctic wolves born in 2000, and Maya (female) and Grizzer (male), Great Plains wolves born in 2004. (Both the Great Plains and the arctic are subspecies of the gray wolf.) There are also two old “Retired Pack” members—Lakota and MacKenzie—Great Plains wolves born in 1993 who now have their own area. The reason: They were “systematically tested for weakness” by the arctic wolves, who arrived in 2002, and are now peacefully living, out of the sight of the public, and sleeping comfortably in one of the center's perks for geezer wolves: box “houses” complete with straw beds.



On this morning, the animals—designated by the center as “ambassador wolves”—seem content to be ambling slowly around or grabbing a snooze or two, rather than their going through their other paces, which range from simple howling to enforcing dominant behavior (or lack thereof) in the pack’s “ranking” order.

The center provides detailed information about the individual animals. Maya, for instance, is nearly identical to her brother, Grizzer, and appears somewhat timid when approaching other wolves. She’s very adept at predatory behavior, often observed stalking birds or small animals within the enclosure. (If there’s a grayish wolf stalking something, it is noted, it’s probably Maya.) Also, she’s very quick to respond to the actions of fellow pack members—perhaps, one assumes, because she’s the sole female. In contrast, arctic wolf Malik is “very curious, showing little intimidation with strangers, described as easy-going by the staff and can be easily distracted by just about anything.”

For almost 2,000 years, wolves have been a target of man. According to the Ely center, they disappeared in England in 1486, Scotland in 1743, Ireland in 1776, Japan in 1910 and France in the 1920s. Over the years, hundreds of thousands in the U.S. were killed in the lower 48 states, leaving only a few hundred in northern Minnesota. But attitudes began to change, as reflected in the Endangered Species Act of 1973, under which wolves were among those protected.

The International Wolf Center opened a \$3 million, 17,000-square-foot facility in 1993. Five years later a 3,260-square-foot addition provided a 120-seat



wolf-viewing theater and additional classrooms, storage and lab space. The viewing room features triangular observation windows (designed to represent wolf eyes) looking out into a 1.25-acre, forest-like wolf enclosure and den site—full of trees, other vegetation and a pond just made for frolicking—that’s home to the resident wolf pack.

For youngsters, there’s the Little Wolf’s Den, an interactive facility for children aged 3 to 9.

During the day, there are various presentations by staffers—such as “Wolf 101,” “Wolf Communication” and “Beavers and Wolves”—as well as documentary films. The center also offers a number of educational programs for adults and families. Afternoon, weekend and week-long offerings include radio tracking and snowshoe treks. On a fall weekend trip, “Wolf Family Rendezvous II,” families can howl to the wolves in the nearby Superior National Forest, observe interactive programs like Wolf Ecology (wolf physical adaptations and behavior and pack dynamics) and Animal Signs, as well as participate in such activities as a scavenger



hunt. In addition, there are various scientist-taught seminars on such topics as “Wolf Ethology: The Study of Wolf Behavior” and “Moose-Wolf Interactions—A 1,000 Lb. Dinner.”

This summer morning during “Wolf 101,” a perky intern named Jessamy—a recent conservation major at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls—is telling the audience such information as the fact that wolves in the U.S. have been on the Endangered Species List for over 33 years, that the average annual litter for a gray wolf pack (six to eight members) is four to six pups, that the two arctic wolves are fed garlic pills to help fend off insects (Great Plains wolves have a natural resistance), that wolves are very territorial and have “an amazing sense of smell,” that wolves have skinny legs

and large paws (which are used in the winter as snowshoes) and that some of the center’s wolves were named through a “Name the Pup” contest in Minneapolis/St. Paul.

Wolves in the wild, she continues, feed every seven to 10 days on moose, beaver, white-tailed deer and snowshoe hare. At the center, the animals are fed only once a week, on Sunday nights. The food is road kill—the Minnesota state police keep a helpful eye out for it—or kill that trappers bring in. The entrée the previous Sunday was beaver. “For wolves, it’s a feast or famine eating cycle,” Jessamy says. “When they do eat, they consume 20 percent of their weight. Here at the center, if they don’t eat all their food, they’ll bury it. After a couple of days, our staff will remove it.”

The public may observe the dining experience, and the staff takes detailed notes. During one feeding, reported Lori Schmidt, the center's wolf curator, "Malik had possession of food, and Maya came over to food-beg. When Malik started growling and hard muzzle-biting Maya, Shadow immediately came over to show-posture his dominance in front of Malik. While Shadow was occupying Malik's attention, Maya took off with the meat. There was plenty, though, so all got their share." Because the summer heat, even in northern Minnesota, can discourage wolves from eating, she added, the staff "enhanced" the average beaver dinner, putting bacon in the beaver's mouth, then removing the stomach and intestines and replacing them with "unusual treats"—frozen Cornish game hens, fish, pork sausage. ("The wolves are extremely excited to investigate these upscale beavers, and readily eat. This allows them

to consume food while it's fresh, rather than let it gather flies.")

Research shows that in 2005 there were about 425 gray wolves in Wisconsin, 400 in Michigan, 30 on Michigan's Isle Royale, 93 in northwest Montana, 294 in the Yellowstone National Park area, 525 in central Idaho and about 30 in Arizona and New Mexico. There were also over 3,000 gray wolves in Minnesota—the largest number in the lower 48. That number includes, of course, a couple of beaver-eating Great Plains individuals popularly known as Maya and Grizzer, and pair of "retirees" named Lakota and MacKenzie.

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