

Calendar

This Fur Is Not for Petting

A Walking Tour of Wolf Territory

When wolf populations dwindle, wildlife biologists warn, the effects are felt all the way down to the shrubbery in the landscape. With wolves gone, coyotes flourish. But they aren't big enough to bring down elk. So elk multiply, feeding so heavily on the vegetation it can't replenish itself.

Meanwhile, fox and badger numbers drop, since they compete with coyotes for rodents and other small game. More ecological disruption

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occurs when scavenging birds, accustomed to finding elk carcasses abandoned after wolf kills, must search all the harder for food, or die.

"In California, no wolves are known to exist in the wild," says Patrick Valentino, executive director of the California Wolf Center. It's been that way since the mid-1930s. At the center, however, there are 13 captive Alaskan gray wolves. There are also six Mexican wolves, a subspecies so rare that scientists can count them exactly. At the moment, in the whole of North America, there are 199.

The six at the center include a breeding pair that produced an "estimated" three pups on April 20. "We don't count them officially until much later," says Valentino, "due to their high

mortality rate. It's higher in the wild, obviously. Still, we don't count them at all for over six months."

The Mexican wolves are part of a potential "release pool." Successful candidates would be released someday in Arizona or New Mexico — not by the center but by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which has designated the center part of its Species Survival Plan. For now, they live in two enclosures, measuring a combined 1¼ acres, and are fed a zoo-brand diet, along with donated road-killed deer. But it's not a zoo situation. Pack members aren't exhibited. In fact, they have minimal human contact, enhancing their odds for survival, when (if) release becomes reality.

What raises a wolf's chances of being released? "Number one, its pair-bonding skills," says Valentino, since wolves return to the wild in family groups. "[A good candidate will have] bonded well with its mate and has had healthy offspring already," increasing the likelihood that it will reproduce again. Secondly, it must have "good feeding behavior," meaning it won't prefer the processed zoo food to its natural food — the deer carcasses. Good fear of humans is another critical factor. "You get a wolf that doesn't mind the caretakers? That's going to be a big strike against it. You want a wolf who, when he sees a human, tries to get as far away as it can."

The center's Alaskan gray wolves



Gerald, Alaskan gray wolf

are not in the release pool. Unlike the Mexican wolves, they live in enclosures that are visible to visitors, who are invited for a glimpse every Saturday afternoon. "Ambassadors" is how the center refers to them. Their purpose: education.

What visitors see while walking past the fenced perimeter is "basically up to the wolves," Valentino says. "We caution people: we're not a circus; we're not a commercial venture." But last Saturday a group was treated to the sight of six or seven emerging from dense brush: "I couldn't have predicted it; I certainly didn't plan it; I didn't call their names." One came right up to the fence line.

At a narrated slide show prior to the walk, Valentino tries to correct misconceptions. "Probably the most common one is that wolves kill people." It's completely false, born of myths and movies. "We have no confirmed instances of wolves killing anybody in North America. You're more likely to be killed while sitting at a sidewalk café than even encountering a wolf. We could go into the state with the most wolves, Alaska, and never see one."

People who have romanticized wolves are "not especially helpful," either. Nor are those who interpret the animals' instinctual behavior as moral or immoral. "They see some wildlife as good and other types as bad. They don't like coyotes because they're a — quote unquote — problem. But they like

wolves because they're fuzzy. That doesn't make any sense to me. They fall in love with the photos. But we don't reintroduce wolves because they're safe to be around little kids. We introduce them because they're critical predators, selective killers. They take weak, sick, diseased, and old, and without them, we're out of balance. It's all part of the rhythm of the ecosystem."

Wolves, in short, are neither heroes nor villains. They're wild animals that deserve our respect and, Valentino would argue, our legal protection until they have recovered their numbers.

At the same time, they need us to keep our distance. Their fur is not for petting. It may take us down a peg to realize the truth of it, but they'd be content if they never saw another human again.

— Jeanne Schinto



"Wolves of North America"
Slide presentation
and walking tour
Saturday, June 10, 2:00 p.m.
California Wolf Center
4 miles south of Julian,
3 miles north of Lake Cuyamaca
on Hwy 79, behind the KQ Ranch
Campground
Adults \$7; children under 15, \$3;
center members, free
Reservations required
Info: 619-234-9653 or
www.californiawolfcenter.org