

WOLF HYBRIDS: SOME FACTS ABOUT A GROWING PROBLEM

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Wolf-dog hybrids are becoming increasingly popular and causing problems for many shelters (see account of wolf-hybrid attack case in *Shelter Sense*, February 1991). Here, presented in question-and-answer format, are facts about wolf-dog hybrids every shelter staffer and potential hybrid owner should know.

1. What is a wolf hybrid?

A wolf hybrid is *any* animal resulting from the breeding of a wolf with a domestic dog. The most common wolf-dog hybrids result from breeding wolves with malamutes, Siberian huskies, or German shepherds, but many breeds of dogs have been crossed with wolves, including collies, standard poodles, rottweilers, and pit bulls. Hybrids can be bred to other hybrids, pure dogs, or pure wolves to produce offspring whose genetic contribution from wolves will vary widely.

2. Why do people want them?

For most people it is simply the "prestige" of owning something different or exotic. For others it is a desire to see themselves as somehow in touch with the wild nature of the wolf. Some mistakenly think that they are getting an animal that will be a good watchdog or guard dog, when in fact most hybrids are extremely timid and unpredictable. For an increasing number of people these animals are simply a "cash crop." A few hybrid owners mistakenly feel that they are helping wolves or dogs by raising hybrids.

3. How do people get such animals?

The HSUS has identified many



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wolf-hybrid breeders and even large-scale wolf-hybrid puppy mills throughout the United States.

Animals may sell for as little as \$100 or as much as \$1,500. Many of these breeders advertise in local and national magazines and newspapers and routinely ship animals as young as one or two weeks old around the country. In addition, many owners, burdened by the expense of keeping these animals, begin to breed and sell them to support their own animals.

4. How many wolf-dog hybrids are there?

Although no definitive census exists, various wolf-hybrid organizations have estimated that there are at least 100,000 to 300,000 such animals in the United States. Based on reports from animal-control

Agencies must educate potential hybrid owners to look beneath the outward beauty of these animals.

agencies around the country, the number of hybrids is growing.

5. What's wrong with keeping wolf hybrids as pets?

More than 12,000 years of domestication have transformed the wild wolf into the dog. Like many hybrids in nature, the wolf-dog hybrid cannot adapt well to the environments of either parent. They cannot live as wild animals, and their size, strength, and often unstable temperament make them generally unsuitable for life as companion animals. Wolf-dog hybrids are frequently unpredictable, destructive, rarely trainable, and

very adept at escaping from confinement. Many are hit by cars or killed while attacking livestock or pets. Many others are forced to live out their lives chained outdoors or confined in basements or small cages.

6. Are these animals dangerous to people?

Too often the answer is "yes." For thousands of years humans have bred dogs to be far more aggressive than wild wolves. Many people use dogs for purposes other than companionship, including attack, protection, and dogfighting. The canine potential for aggressiveness, when combined with the wild wolf's general timidity, can make wolf-dog hybrids *unpredictably* aggressive.

In addition, hybrids living in close proximity to people sometimes fail to make the distinction between people and prey, responding to children as they might respond to small animals. Severe and fatal attacks by wolf-dog hybrids, in fact, have been disturbingly common. At least *seven* children have been killed

by pet wolf-dog hybrids since 1986. Several severe maulings in 1991 have led many communities to seek restrictions on these animals.

7. Are there other public health problems associated with pet wolves and wolf hybrids?

Currently there is no rabies vaccine approved for use in wild canids or hybrids. Even though vaccinated hybrids might be protected from rabies, any animal involved in a bite incident is assumed to be unvaccinated. As a result, bite victims must undergo rabies treatment, or biting animals must be destroyed for rabies testing.

8. What happens when animal-control agencies or humane societies receive wolf hybrids?

Nearly all local humane societies and animal-control agencies have policies against placing any wolf hybrids for adoption. The few organizations that have the space, finances, and expertise to safely and humanely keep hybrids are already

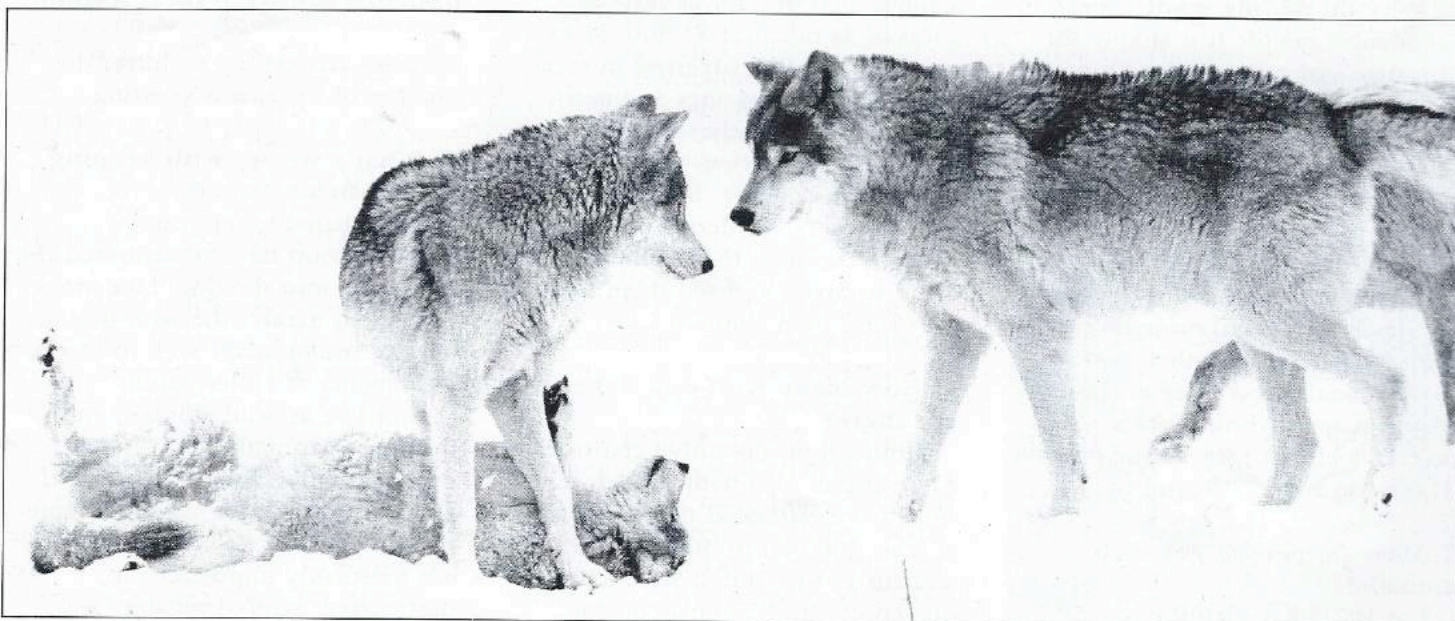
harboring all the animals they can. Recently some of these sanctuaries have reported receiving *thousands* of calls every month from hybrid owners seeking to get rid of problem animals. Thus many hybrids are euthanized or abandoned when their owners can no longer keep them.

9. What is the impact of wolf-dog hybrids on wild wolf populations?

Contrary to the claims of hybrid owners, wolf biologists and wolf conservation advocates agree that the proliferation of wolf-dog hybrids has actually *hurt* wild wolf populations. Attacks on humans by

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Despite popular misconceptions, there are no documented accounts of fatal attacks by healthy wild wolves on people in North America. Wolf hybrids only serve to perpetuate that notion.



IDENTIFYING WOLF-DOG HYBRIDS: GUIDELINES FOR SHELTERS

States vary widely in their legal definitions of wolf hybrids, ranging from those that define any animal with more than 1% wolf "blood" as a hybrid (e.g. Rhode Island) to those that require more than 75% wolf ancestry to be defined as a hybrid (e.g. Florida, Indiana, and Tennessee).

At present there is no blood or tissue test that can clearly identify the extent of wolf genes in a specific canine, although work is underway to identify unique genetic markers that might make such tests possible. Even if such procedures become available, though, the cost of such analysis is likely to make routine use of such tests impractical.

The problem is made worse by the fact that the wolf-hybrid trade is often plagued by fraud. In some cases, animals represented to buyers as wolf hybrids are simply mixed-breed malamutes or huskies. In other cases, the breeding of *true* hybrids is often misrepresented to avoid restrictive laws.

Given these problems, how can shelters make informed decisions about the identity of animals that are suspected of being wolf-dog hybrids? There are currently two separate approaches:

1. Identify a hybrid as *any animal that is advertised, registered, licensed, or otherwise described or represented as a wolf hybrid by its owner*; or
2. Identify a hybrid as *any animal exhibiting primary physical and behavioral wolf characteristics*.

For animals not represented as wolf hybrids, several physical and behavioral characteristics can aid in making a determination. However, it is important to keep in mind that the extent to which individual hybrids show any of these traits will vary, depending on the degree of wolf ancestry.

•**Weight.** Many hybrids show "hybrid vigor" and reach weights that are unusual for shepherds, malamutes, and huskies. Males often weigh in excess of 120 pounds and females more than 90. Hybrids weighing more than 170 pounds have become common.

•**Size.** Hybrids usually appear longer and taller than dogs, with long neck and tail. The legs also appear longer than in comparable dogs, particularly at the pasterns. Hybrids, like wolves, are usually not

broad-chested and, even when well fed, appear surprisingly thin without being bony, especially around the hips. The feet usually appear disproportionately large with long toes.

•**Teeth.** Teeth are usually large and well shaped, with the upper canines larger than in most dogs and sometimes visible even when the animal is relaxed. Gums, lips, and eye rims are typically black.

•**Eyes.** Eye color is usually not helpful in identifying hybrids since even pure wolves show variation from grey to brown to yellow. More characteristic is the angle of the eyes, which often appear slanted when viewed head-on.

•**Ears.** The ears are often thicker and more rounded than in dogs and are often heavily furred on the inside.

•**Coat.** Coat color varies widely in wolves and hybrids, but in general the guard hairs of hybrids are longer with more banding, giving a more grizzled appearance than in dogs. Often the ruff of fur at the shoulders is quite heavy. The winter undercoat is typically very dense and sheds very heavily in summer.

•**Behavior.** Hybrid behavior is also highly variable. Most animals appear very alert but are quite shy and easily frightened. Most higher percentage wolf-hybrids will not walk well on a leash. Even large animals frequently show submissive behavior to strangers and many dogs. Although not usually aggressive, some poorly socialized hybrids have been very aggressive around strangers. Even "friendly" hybrids show a high level of predatory behavior, which might be directed toward children, pets, or livestock, making hybrids dangerous even when they are not vicious. They are typically very destructive in the home and are adept at escaping by digging, climbing, or jumping. □

Children and wolf-dog hybrids can make deadly combinations because hybrids can show both the aggressiveness of dogs and the instinctive predatory behavior of wild wolves. It is the canine element in hybrids that causes their unpredictability, and the result has been at least seven fatal attacks on children since 1986.



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hybrids serve to perpetuate mistaken notions of wolf aggression despite the fact that there are no documented accounts of fatal attacks by healthy wild wolves on people in North America. In addition, the release of hybrids and subsequent attacks on pets and livestock have seriously undermined projects aimed at reintroducing wild wolves into habitats they once occupied. The genetic integrity of recovering wild wolf populations is also threatened by the potential for breeding with wolf hybrids that escape or are released into the wild.

10. Doesn't federal law restrict the ownership of wolves?

Yes. However, these federal laws do not apply to hybrid animals that result from any breeding with domestic dogs.

11. What other restrictions already exist?

A growing number of states and local governments are restricting ownership of wolf-dog hybrids (see chart, page 13). Measures range from outright bans to permit systems. In the past, enforcement of

HSUS ADOPTION POLICY

The HSUS believes wolf hybrids and other hybrids of wild and domestic canids should not be placed for adoption by shelters due to their special physical, emotional, and veterinary requirements and their frequently unpredictable and unstable nature. We recommend that such animals be euthanized or placed with appropriate wildlife sanctuaries. □

such restrictions has been lax, but public-health and animal-control agencies are now taking the problem more seriously.

12. Isn't it difficult to distinguish between wolf-dog hybrids and other mixed-breed dogs?

While there are no definitive biological tests that can completely distinguish between wolves, dogs, and wolf-dog hybrids, there are a number of characteristics such as size, conformation, and behavior that can be used to help identify hybrids. Since a major cause of recent problems with hybrids has been the rampant breeding and sale of these animals, it is also useful, for the purposes of legislation, to define hybrids as "any animal that is represented as a wolf hybrid by its owner" (see sidebar, page 11).

13. What steps can be taken to deal with wolf-dog hybrids?

The HSUS believes the ownership of wolf hybrids must be strongly discouraged and, through attrition, eliminated. This can be accomplished by restricting the sale, trade, release, import, or export of animals across state or local boundaries. Owners of animals already in the state or locality should be required to house animals in humane ways that meet the animals' physical and behavioral needs and that also protect public health and safety. Governments should impose licensing fees adequate to cover the costs of inspecting containment facilities and other expenses associated with implementing regulations. Existing animals should be spayed or neutered. Owners of wolf hybrids should also be held civilly liable for damages or injuries caused by their animals. □

SUMMARY OF STATE REGULATIONS PERTAINING TO WOLVES AND WOLF HYBRIDS

Contact state wildlife agencies for details and interpretation.
Local ordinances may be more restrictive.

STATE	WOLVES AS PETS	CLASSIFICATION OF HYBRIDS	HYBRIDS AS PETS
ALABAMA	not regulated	not regulated	not regulated
ALASKA	prohibited ¹	uncertain	should need permit
ARIZONA	prohibited	not regulated	not regulated
ARKANSAS	requires permit	not regulated	not regulated
CALIFORNIA	prohibited ¹	F ₁ are wolves	F ₁ requires permit ²
COLORADO	requires permit	F ₁ are wolves	F ₁ sale needs permit
CONNECTICUT	prohibited	considered wild	prohibited
DELAWARE	prohibited	not regulated	not regulated
DIST. OF COLUMBIA	prohibition pending	pending	prohibition pending
FLORIDA	requires permit	> 75% wolf is wolf	> 75% wolf needs permit
GEORGIA	requires permit	up to authorities	may require permit
IDAHO	requires permit	up to authorities	may require permit
ILLINOIS	prohibited ¹	considered wild	prohibited ¹
INDIANA	requires permit	> 75% wolf is wolf	> 75% wolf needs permit
IOWA	requires permit	considered wild	restricted ³
KANSAS	not regulated	considered domestic	not regulated
KENTUCKY	prohibited ¹	not regulated	not regulated
LOUISIANA	requires permit	permitted as wolves	requires permit
MAINE	not regulated	considered domestic	not regulated
MARYLAND	prohibited	considered wild	prohibited
MASSACHUSETTS	prohibited	considered domestic	not regulated
MICHIGAN	prohibited	considered domestic	not regulated
MINNESOTA	requires permit	not regulated	not regulated
MISSISSIPPI	not regulated	not regulated	not regulated
MISSOURI	requires permit	up to authorities	not regulated
MONTANA	requires permit	> 50% wolf is wolf	> 50% wolf needs permit
NEBRASKA	prohibited	up to authorities	prohibited if judged wolf
NEVADA	not regulated	not regulated	not regulated
NEW HAMPSHIRE	prohibited	considered domestic	not regulated
NEW JERSEY	prohibited	considered domestic	not regulated
NEW MEXICO	importation prohibited	considered wild	importation prohibited ⁴
NEW YORK	prohibited ¹	considered wild	prohibited ¹
NORTH CAROLINA	requires permit	considered domestic	not regulated
NORTH DAKOTA	requires permit	not regulated	not regulated
OHIO	not regulated	not regulated	not regulated
OKLAHOMA	not regulated ⁵	considered domestic	not regulated ⁵
OREGON	requires permit	not regulated	not regulated
PENNSYLVANIA	requires permit	considered wild	requires permit
RHODE ISLAND	prohibited ¹	> 1% wolf is wolf	prohibited ¹
SOUTH CAROLINA	prohibited	not regulated	not regulated
SOUTH DAKOTA	restricted ⁶	not regulated	not regulated ⁶
TENNESSEE	requires permit	> 75% wolf is wolf	> 75% wolf needs permit
TEXAS	prohibited ¹	not regulated	not regulated
UTAH	prohibited	up to authorities	usually prohibited
VERMONT	prohibited ¹	considered wild	prohibited ¹
VIRGINIA	prohibited	considered domestic	not regulated
WASHINGTON	requires permit	not regulated	not regulated
WEST VIRGINIA	requires permit	not regulated	not regulated
WISCONSIN	prohibited ¹	not regulated	not regulated
WYOMING	prohibited ¹	considered wild	prohibited ¹

¹Scientific or educational permits may be issued

²F₁ refers to first generation hybrids

³Animals without approved rabies vaccination prohibited

⁴Possession of wolves (except Mexican wolf) and hybrids from within state is permitted

⁵Dog breeder's license required for more than one animal

⁶Wolves and hybrids less than three generations removed from wild are prohibited