

The Wolfdog; A factual overview

by Steve Masuch

Introduction to the wolfdog

The wolfdog, also known as the wolf-dog hybrid and wolf hybrid, is a mix between a wolf and a dog. Genetically, the wolf and the dog are the same species.¹ The wolf is classified as *Canis lupus x*, where x is the subspecies of wolf, such as arctos. The family dog is classified as *Canis lupus familiaris*, changed in 1993 from *Canis familiaris*.¹ Currently, there are no genetic tests available to distinguish a wolf from a dog.³ While many people claim to be able to detect the wolf content in any particular animal based on physical appearance, this is purely the individual's subjective opinion. Because the family dog descended from the wolf, and are the same species, there are no definitive tests to detect wolf content in dogs. Many northern breeds of dogs carry many or all of the same physical attributes as the wolfdog.³

Are wolfdogs more vicious than other dog breeds?

Many people would mislead you to believe that wolfdogs are the most vicious dogs around. On the contrary, wolfdogs have far less fatal attacks than other large breeds of dogs. In a recent study conducted by Jeffrey J. Sacks MD, there were 109 dog bite fatalities in the years 1989 to 1994.² The most commonly reported dog breeds involved were pit bulls (24 deaths), followed by rottweilers (16 deaths), and German shepherds (10 deaths).² The authors point out that many breeds, however, are involved in the problem.

The wolfdog is 6th on the list of dog attack fatalities, with Pit bull terriers in the lead position.³ One should note the very conservative number of estimated wolfdog population. Estimates range from one hundred thousand (100,000) to two and a half (2.5) million, with three hundred thousand (300,000) being the most frequently quoted population estimate. With this in mind, combined with the AVMA estimated 52 million dogs in the US, if there were a breed specific problem, you would see a far greater amount of dog bite fatalities. The truth is, it's just not the problem it's reported to be, statistically speaking.

People would also have you believe that wolfdogs are kid killers. The sad fact is, most dog attack fatalities are children. **Of the 157 fatalities between the years 1979 to 1988, 70% of the fatalities were children under 10 years of age.**⁴ Only five (5) of the 157 fatalities involved wolfdog hybrids. Wolfdogs average less than one fatal attack incident per year over a 15 year period. There are on average 18 dog-bite fatalities per year.² To contrast these numbers, 165 children drowned in bathtubs in 1991.⁵ Another 598 children drowned in swimming pools, and another 361 died from riding their bicycles.⁵ And yet another 237 children under the age of five (5) died in motor vehicle accidents in 1990 because of lack of appropriate restraining device.⁵

Although we have strict laws to prevent such fatalities, these things still happen. Why? Inadequate public education is one reason. Does anyone believe the parents would purposely risk their children's life if they knew of the dangers? Legislation and regulations can only go so far in protecting the public. Breed specific bans will not work, not only because of the unconstitutionality of them, but also because it's not a breed specific problem. Most of the factors contributing to dog bites are related to the level of responsibility exercised by dog owners.² Public education about dogs and dog ownership is key and recommended.⁶

Aggression

One cannot talk about wolfdog behavior without talking about standard canine behavior. Two recent reports by The Association of Pet Behavior Counselors state that, "Aggression towards people" was the most frequently recorded behavior problem in dogs.⁷ Although nuisance attention-seeking behaviors and training problems were frequently recorded, they were usually correlated with another behavior. For example, attention seeking behavior included, dominance aggression towards people, or separation problems. Training problems included, territorial aggression or dominance aggression towards people.⁷ These

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behaviors are all reported by anti-wolfdog people as being wolf and wolfdog behaviors, but in reality, they are standard canine behaviors.

Environment also plays a large role in canine behavior. Dominance aggression, learned nuisance behaviors, and separation problems due to owner attachment, are likely to occur in dogs from “domestic” environments. Fear aggression towards strangers and dogs, and fears/phobias are more prevalent in unsocialized dogs, particularly from a “kennel” environment.⁹ Socialized dogs will exhibit this behavior but the chance further decreases if the dog was from a “domestic” environment.⁹ Unsocalized dogs from either environment are more likely to be reported as showing this behavior than socialized dogs. The incidence in socialized dogs in either environment increases in line with age obtained.⁹ In essence, better socialization equals a more social dog or wolfdog, and less socialization presents more anti-social behavior. You cannot develop the same intimate social relationship within a “kennel” environment as you can from a “domestic” environment.

HSUS President Paul G. Irwin states; "Dog bites are not caused by "bad dogs," but by irresponsible owners. Dogs that haven't been properly "socialized," that receive little attention or handling, that are left tied-up for long periods of time, frequently turn into biters."⁸

Destructive Behavior

The wolfdog is accused of having a propensity toward destructive behavior. Such as digging, shredding and chewing furniture. This is true in some cases. The destructive behavior is also apparent in other canines as well. Separation from the owners often results in separation problems in other dogs, with destructive behavior being the leading problem at forty-seven percent of the time.⁷ “The regular occurrence of separation problems in a “domestic” environment highlights the need for adequate training to ensure puppies can tolerate periods of separation from the owners.”⁹ Separation anxiety is treatable in older dogs as well.¹⁰ Boredom can also result in destructive behavior.

Are wolfdogs wild or exotic animals?

Not according to the United States Title 9 Code of Federal Regulations (CRF). The CFR defines “dog” as any live or dead dog or any dog-hybrid cross. It also defines animal as any live or dead dog, cat, etc.

“Exotic” animal means any animal not identified in the definition of "animal" provided in this part that is native to a foreign country or of foreign origin or character, is not native to the United States, or was introduced from abroad.¹¹

“Hybrid cross” means an animal resulting from the crossbreeding between two different species or types of animals. Crosses between wild animal species, such as lions and tigers, are considered to be wild animals. Crosses between wild animal species and domestic animals, such as dogs and wolves or buffalo and domestic cattle, are considered to be domestic animals.¹¹

“Pet animal” means any animal that has commonly been kept as a pet in family households in the United States, such as dogs, cats, guinea pigs, rabbits, and hamsters. This term excludes exotic animals and wild animals.¹¹

“Wild animal” means any animal which is now or historically has been found in the wild, or in the wild state, within the boundaries of the United States, its territories, or possessions. This term includes, but is not limited to, animals such as: Deer, skunk, opossum, raccoon, mink, armadillo, coyote, squirrel, fox, wolf.¹¹

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Can wolfdogs be trusted around children?

Wolfdogs or any other large breed of dog, for that matter, should not be left unsupervised with small children. This is for the dog's sake as well as the child's. Children have a tendency to pull and tug, pinch and poke, step on and sit on dogs and cats. The animal's reactions can vary widely depending on their training, socialization and mood. Furthermore large breeds can easily damage a small child with playful actions or quick corrections to the child.

In fact, of the twenty-five reported dog-bite infant fatalities between the years 1979-1988, all involved pet dogs and ten involved infants sleeping or in their crib.⁴ None of which were listed as wolfdog hybrids. Opinions vary widely from, "Never leave infants or young children alone with any dog"¹² to, "dogs that weigh more than 30 pounds should not be left alone with children under age five."¹³ Again we see that the problem is not a wolfdog problem, but an education, training and socialization problem concerning all canines.

Can wolfdogs be trusted around smaller animals?

Wolfdogs as other canines can be socialized to live with smaller animals. "If the new pet is expected to live harmoniously with children, cats, dogs, and gerbils," explains Dr. Landsberg, "then you should have the puppy or kitten interact as much as possible with children, cats, dogs, and gerbils in those critical first two to four months."⁶ This is true of all canines, many wolfdog owners have reported their animals get along well with cats and other small animals.

Will wolfdogs turn on you?

Wolfdogs as well as other dogs have the capability to turn on the owners if they are mistreated. Although it is a rare event, it has happened in the past, and will continue to happen as long as people abuse their dogs. A healthy well-socialized canine will not do this. If this were a problem, there would be numerous documented reports about this. With the estimated 100,000 to 2.5 million wolfdogs in the US, turning on their owners, there would be a major public outcry over this. It's just not a problem.

Is it true that wolfdogs cannot be "house dogs"?

Wolfdogs can be house dogs! Many wolfdog owners report about their house dogs. It takes a lot of time, commitment, and patience to properly train and socialize a wolfdog. Some dogs prefer the inside and some prefer the outside. Some allow them inside under strict supervision, while others allow minimal supervision. As with any canine, it depends on the levels of training, socialization, and acceptance of the owners as to "rules" in the house.

Is it true that wolfdogs cannot be considered as "pets"?

Wolfdogs can be considered as "pets", but most owners prefer using the term companion animal. Most owners report a higher intelligence level than with other dogs. Many wolfdog owners have stated they would not go back to any other breed of dog. Keeping a wolfdog is a great responsibility, one that should not be taken lightly. They are fairly large dogs that need some room to run and play. Apartments are not ideal for these dogs as their size and exercise requirements do not fit well with normal apartment life. As with all companion animals, careful consideration should be given to the lifetime commitment. The average wolfdog life expectancy is 12-15 years.

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Is it true that wolfdogs are not "trainable?" and cannot be housetrained?

No, wolfdogs as any canine can be trained. Wolfdogs do not respond well to negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement training reportedly works best. It is highly recommended to train them in the very least to basic commands. Wolfdogs are intelligent animals and can be trained with persistence. Wolfdogs are as individual as you and I, and training methods need to be flexible enough to adapt to the individual animal. A training method that works on one wolfdog may not always work on another.

Are wolfdogs unpredictable?

A wolfdog can be unpredictable if you do not socialize it, or train it, and you have not thoroughly researched wolf (and dog) behavior. These same things can be said for other dogs as well.

Isn't the wolf side always fighting the dog side?

Some people say wolfdog hybrids are caught between two worlds, that the wolf side is fighting to get back to the wild. Now lets think about this for a moment. First off, the dog and the wolf are the same species. Second, most wolfdog hybrids are several generations away from a pure wolf. Third, most of the domestic captive wolves that have been bred with a dog are not wild wolves but are from several generations of domestic captive wolves, never knowing the wild.

It's kind of like saying a mix between a husky and a malamute are always fighting internally as to whether it's a husky or a malamute. It's also like saying my German side is always fighting to go back to Germany although I am several generations away from a "pure". Just as I have never been to Germany, wolfdogs have never been in the wild, so how can you miss somewhere you have never been? It's just a dumb statement and I hope you can see it for what it really is.

Are wolfdog hybrids' predators?

In a strict sense yes, but no more so than any other dog. I say in a strict sense because like other domesticated dogs they are not taught to prey on other animals for food. It is a well know fact that animals learn to prey and learn what is prey.

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Footnotes

¹ 1993 Mammal Species of the World: A Taxonomic and Geographic Reference, edited by D.E. Wilson and D.A.M. Reeder. Published by the Smithsonian Institution in association with the American Society of Mammalogists

² PEDIATRICS (Vol.97 No. 6, 891-5), Jeffrey J. Sacks, MD and associates.

³ Detroit News Wednesday, November 8, 1995 Regulating wolf dogs would be a waste. Cliff Mortimer, Michigan Guardian, Guardians of Wildlife.

⁴ JAMA, September 15, 1989-Vol 262, No. 11 Dog Bite-Related Fatalities- Sacks et al pg. 1489

⁵ Pediatrics News At Your Desktop, Volume 1. Number 7 - June 20, 1996, Presented By: ROBERT BELFER, MD

⁶ The American Animal Hospital Association, OWNER EDUCATION IS KEY TO PREVENTING PET BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS, Gary Landsberg, DVM, BSc.

⁷ The Association of Pet Behavior Counselors 1994 Annual Report

⁸ USPS Press Release, June 7, 1995, U.S. Postal Service and Humane Society Join to Prevent Dog Bites

⁹ The Association of Pet Behavior Counselors 1995 Annual Report

¹⁰ AMVA Press Release, July 24, 1996, VETERINARIANS UNCOVER NEW TREATMENTS FOR SEPARATION ANXIETY IN OLDER DOGS

¹¹ United States Title 9 CODE OF FEDERAL REGULATIONS. Chapter 1, 9 CFR Ch. I (1-1-1992 Edition) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, USDA. Subchapter A - Animal Welfare Part 1 - Definition of Terms Authority: 7 U.S.C. 2131-2157; 7 CFR 2.17, 2.51, and 371.2(g). 1.1 Definitions.

¹² News from Pediatrics, June 28, 1996, Fatal Dog Attacks

¹³ The American Animal Hospital Association, SIMPLE PRECAUTIONS ENSURE CHILDREN AND PETS COEXIST SAFELY