



## Wolf Biology and Behavior

***"Ranchers can't make good management decisions based on myth."***

- Andrew Anderson, Montana land-owner and producer

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **ARE ALL GRAY WOLVES GRAY IN COLOR?**

No, Gray wolves can be white, cream, black, tan, brown, or grizzled, which is a combination of tans, browns, and black. The term gray wolf is a species name and comes from all gray wolves having a grey-colored undercoat.





## **HOW LONG DO WOLVES LIVE?**

The average is seven years in the wild and twelve years in captivity.

## **HOW MUCH DO ADULT WOLVES WEIGH?**

Adult female gray wolves in northern Minnesota weigh between 50 and 85 pounds, and adult males between 70 and 110 pounds. Gray wolves are larger in the northwestern United States, Canada, and Alaska and in Russia, where adult males weigh 85 to 115 pounds and occasionally reach 130 pounds. Males generally weigh about 20 percent more than females. Wolves attain their adult height, length, and weight in the first one to two years. Most look like adults by late autumn of their first year.

The largest (heaviest) male gray wolf reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park weighed 130 pounds. All other wolves reintroduced into Yellowstone and central Idaho were smaller and of lighter weight. Though genetics plays an important role, nutrition is probably more important in determining what weight a wolf can achieve.

The average height of a gray wolf is 26-32 inches.

## **HOW FAST CAN WOLVES RUN, AND HOW FAR DO THEY TRAVEL?**

Wolves trot at an average of 5 miles per hour, but they can run in short bursts at up to 35 miles per hour. They can travel as much as 30 miles daily (sometimes more!) as they survey their territory and hunt for food.

## **WHAT IS THE MAIN CAUSE OF WOLF MORTALITY?**

Human activity, including lethal management, is the number one cause of wolf mortality in areas with people. Territorial disputes are the second cause of mortality (wolves killing wolves). Canine parvo, distemper, and mange are also responsible for some mortality.

## **HOW LONG IS THEIR GESTATION PERIOD?**

The gestation period is approximately 63 days.

## **HOW MANY PUPS ARE USUALLY BORN?**

The average litter is five pups. It can vary depending on the abundance of prey, wolf population density, and the size of available territory.



#### **HOW MUCH DO PUPS WEIGH WHEN THEY ARE BORN?**

Newborn wolves weigh about one pound. They are born deaf and blind.

#### **WHAT IS THE MAIN PREY OF WOLVES?**

Their primary prey is elk, followed by deer. Caribou in Alaska are common. Wolves also take moose and bison but much more infrequently.

#### **WHAT IS THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE PACK?**

A pack is generally one related family unit consisting of two breeding adults, a male and a female, who are the pack's leaders. They are also the most likely pair to breed. The beta wolves are in the second position, and the omega wolf is in the lowest position within the pack. A pack commonly consists of the breeding pair, yearlings, and pups. When wolves reach maturity at approximately two years old, they may disperse (lone wolves) to mate and establish their own territory.

Other wolves choose to remain with the pack for safety and hunting security. Wolves that don't disperse cannot breed unless an unrelated wolf joins the pack. If the breeding male is killed and an outsider takes his place, the new wolf may mate with the alpha female and one of her daughters, as they are unrelated. In this case, a pack can have two or more litters.



## WHAT IS THE SIZE OF A TYPICAL WOLF PACK?

A typical pack, which includes the parents, pups, and possibly one to several wolves from previous litters, is six to eight wolves. There have been instances, however, where packs have been much larger. Wolf packs typically form by two adults pair bonding during fall and winter dispersal, breeding once a year in late winter or early spring and giving birth to 4-6 pups in March or April. Calling wolves “alphas” can be misleading since they usually pair and mate without needing to establish dominance; therefore, “breeding pair” is a preferred term.

## WHAT IS A LONE WOLF?

A lone wolf can be a member of a pack that happens to be traveling alone temporarily, which often occurs in the summer. More typically, the phrase is used to describe a wolf that has dispersed from its natal (birth) pack. Wolves often disperse to seek a mate or new territory to call home. Dispersing usually occurs at two years of age during the breeding season, but if resources are low, wolves may leave the pack at one year. Lone wolves have been documented to travel hundreds of miles over multiple years.

## More Information

For more information, please visit our partner’s wolf education pages:

- [Oakland Zoo](#)
- [The National Wildlife Federation](#)
- [Colorado Wolf and Wildlife Center](#)
- [Southwest Colorado Wolf Cooperative](#)
- [International Wolf Center](#)

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