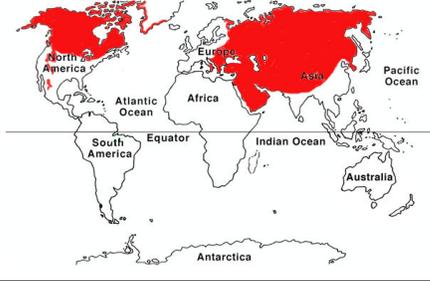


# Gray Wolf

Native Range Map



Kingdom: Animalia  
Phylum: Chordata  
Subphylum: Vertebrata  
Class: Mammalia  
Order: Carnivora  
Family: Canidae  
Genus: *Canis*  
Species: *lupus*



Photo courtesy of Lynne Panebianco

## Habitat

- **In the Wild:** The original range of the gray wolf included the majority of the Northern Hemisphere from the Arctic through Central Mexico, northern Africa and southern Asia. Populations are now found only in a few areas of the contiguous United States, Alaska, Canada, Mexico and Eurasia. Gray wolves are one of the most wide-ranging land animals. They are very adaptive to many different habitats from Arctic tundra to forest, prairie and arid landscapes.
- **Exhibit Location:** Wildlife Trails

## Characteristics

- Gray wolves are the largest of approximately 41 species of wild canids. Size varies based on geographic locality with populations in northern areas larger than those in southern areas.  
Length: males = 48-60 inches; females = 34-44 inches (nose to tip of tail)  
Height: 24-42 inches at the shoulder  
Weight: males = 90 pounds average; females = 80 pounds average
- Coloration varies with geographic locations, ranging from almost pure white in Arctic populations to mixtures of white with gray, brown, and black in more southern populations, and in the most southern areas almost pure black. They have dense underfur that helps keep them warm in extreme cold conditions.
- Wolves have long legs and large heel pads that enable them to run through snow and cover large distances in search of food. They have large skulls and massive jaws with specialized canine teeth that are adapted for tearing flesh and cracking bones.
- They have an acute sense of smell and hearing.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** average of 5-6 years (13 years record); **In Captivity** 15 years (record)

## Behaviors

- Gray wolves are highly social. They live in groups called packs that consist of an alpha pair and their offspring, including the young of previous years and other non-breeding adults. Packs range in size from 2-36 individuals with an average of 5-9 members. The packs travel, hunt, feed and rest together.
- There is a strong hierarchy within the pack. The alpha male is dominant over all males, the alpha female over all females. Rank is demonstrated by body clues and facial expressions such as crouching, chin touching, and rolling over to show the stomach.
- The packs have 2 phases during the year. The stationary phase is during the spring and summer while the pups are being reared. During the fall and winter the nomadic phase occurs.
- Wolf packs usually live within a specific territory. These territories can be as small as 50 square miles and as large as 1000 square miles depending on the prey base. The pack will defend its territory from strange wolves.
- Wolves trot along at 5 mph, but can obtain speeds of 45 mph for short distances. Wolf movements are usually at night and cover long distances.
- Gray wolves prey on whatever food is available. If prey is large, they hunt as a pack. Lone wolves hunt small animals. If prey is scarce, wolves will steal the prey of other predators. Prey is located by chance or scent.

- Wolves support other animals in their territories. Many animals feed on the remains left by the wolves. In some areas bald eagles feed on carcasses. Wolves also help keep prey populations healthy. They prey on small, sick or immature prey, therefore assuring only the strongest survive and reproduce.
- Wolves are noted for their distinctive howl. The howl is used for communicating among others in the pack and as a warning to other wolves invading their territory.
- Scent marking is another way of communicating and is usually done to communicate with other packs such things as territory boundaries.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** scents, scattered food items, pool, boxes, rabbits

### Reproduction

- Sexual maturity is reached at about 2-3 years of age.
- During the months of January through April, females come into estrus (the time when mating occurs). This lasts 5-14 days.
- The female digs a den to raise and protect the pups. Gestation lasts 60-63 days. Litters range from 5-14 pups, with the average size being 6 or 7.
- Pups are born deaf and blind and remain in the den for the first 8-10 weeks. The pups are dependent on mother's milk for the first month. After they are weaned (at about 45 days), the pack members feed the pups regurgitated food. After 6 weeks the pups begin to receive meat also provided by the pack members. All members of the pack care for the pups and act as nursemaids when the mother goes hunting.
- As the pups mature, they leave the den and learn to play fight. This behavior helps to determine their position in the pack. By 7-8 months of age, wolf pups are almost fully-grown. They must be ready to hunt and travel with the pack when fall arrives and the nomadic period begins. At 10 months of age, the young begin to hunt with the pack.

### Diet

- **In the Wild:** moose, elk, caribou (reindeer), mountain sheep, musk oxen, marmots, ground squirrels, hares, mice, beaver, spawning salmon
- **At the Zoo:** Toronto zoo diet, canine chow, rabbit

### Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** not listed; **CITES:** not listed
- Gray wolves are listed as endangered in the lower 48 states by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and threatened in Minnesota.
- Gray wolves have been persecuted and targeted as nuisance animals because they are accused of being responsible for large livestock losses. Persecution by humans and destruction of habitat are prime reasons for the almost total eradication of the gray wolf from the lower 48 states.
- There have been numerous successful programs to reintroduce the gray wolf in former North American habitats. Success has been achieved in Rocky Mountain areas and in Yellowstone National Park. In Canada provincial governments manage local populations and gray wolves are currently not threatened.
- Predators: grizzly bears, wolves, coyotes, humans

### Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- Gray wolves are widely recognized to be the ancestor of all domestic dog breeds.
- Gray wolves can be distinguished from red wolves by their larger size, broader snout, and shorter ears. They are distinguished from coyotes by being 50-100% larger (for the most part), having a broader snout and larger feet and in how they carry their tail. Coyotes in the Northeast are almost as large as wolves.

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