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WOLF PACKS

What comes into your mind when I say the word ‘wolf’? Probably a howling at the moon animal that attacks anything they see. When in actuality these animals are a close nit group that only kills when necessary. Wolves are an evolved species that have been around since 20,000 BC. How? How could they have survived that long? Because as a pack, that can differ from 2-20, wolves have a unique system related to the packs function, hunting styles and recruitment.

Wolves follow an unspoken but very serious set of rules. It’s widely known that there is always an alpha wolf, as well as a female alpha, but the role of pack leader can switch from male to female. This pair is seen as the leaders and parents of the pack, given they are the strongest, wisest, and most experienced with age, but confidence is also an important key. The alphas do most of the decision making, and attain the ultimate respect as the rest of the pack is submissive to them. Even though they are alpha, they allow lower status wolves to sometimes make decisions, as long as the bounds have not been overstepped. Only time when the bounds are allowed to be overstepped is when the role of alpha is challenged by another wolf. If the challenger wins the fight, then he may choose to be Alpha. The other role switch is when the alpha steps down or passes away, allowing the Beta to step up and be pack leader. The Beta is second in command, much like the vice president to the president. The beta duties for the pack are to help the alpha and although beta does not receive as much respect as alpha, it does receive respect from lower ranks. The rank under beta is omega. Omega is seen as a scapegoat or joker. The omega duties are to break up fights, keep the peace, and lighten the mood when things are tense. The omega gets picked on more than others and sometimes strays away from the pack and may even leave the pack to be a lone wolf or make his or her own pack. Even with the roles of peacemaker, the omega is seen as the weakest, so he or she is attacked sometimes by its own pack. Then there are the juveniles, who are the younger members of the pack. They have no rank or are trying to achieve one by going through the motions. Some of these motions are known as signals, which is how wolves communicate. Most used signals are body postures, gestures, and soft sounds. These can differ for different ranks. If a beta comes across an alpha, it will move into submissive position with a crouch, tucking its tail in, or looking away while ears are down. If the beta comes across an omega, it may stand up tall; make direct eye contact with ears up, as well as tail. Other signals like the ‘agonistic pucker’ which means that the wolf is showing submission, but if threatened will attack. This is shown when the wolf’s ears and tail is up or down, and teeth will be barred. Another way they communicate is by smell; given wolves have 200 million scent cells, allowing them to smell territorial locations, prey, as well as other wolves. The most famous way thought, is by sound. They can whimper, whine, grow, sequel, etc. adding that to body postures giving away the mood, or message. Then there’s the howl, which is split into three different ways. Chorus howl: three or more wolves howl in unison to call a pack back home or warn pack of others. Solo howl: one wolf calls for mate, or relate a lost wolf. Duet howl: This has many different meanings that are made out of two wolves. The way this hierarchy is set up, is so the pack can function smoothly rather than fight for the ‘top dog’ constantly.

This helps when the wolves go out and hunt. One major thing wolves use as a hunting tactic is the order of the alpha. They usually hunt during the night given they are nocturnal animals. When alphas start a hunt they start with the tracking. When a scent or track is found, wolves will move together to chase down the prey. They can split up and go high on rocks or down low as well as send one or two wolves to test out the herd they located. Wolves do not always try to aim for the fittest or strongest prey, they look out for the weakest or easiest kill, that’s not to say they won’t go the extra mile for dinner. When a wolf chases down its prey they attack the prey so the prey would bleed our or die of shock. When the feeding starts, the alphas eat first as well as the best part of the animal, like the heart and internal organs. Then the others follow, eating by rank. The lower the rank the lower quality or worst pickings they gets, the omega may get the fat or the hardest to chew areas. Wolves eat as much as possible and little to waste, to make up for the next few days if they happen to not run into any meals. In order for good kills to be made, the pack needs to keep good members.

In order to have good members, wolves must be selective. When a wolf dies, a routine is made. Wolves are one of the only animals to grieve. During the grieving process they let out a howl signaling the loss of a wolf, and giving any wolf of a ten mile radius that a slot is open for the pack. If a lone wolf comes to join the pack it will be tested to be accepted. A fight may happen or they may make it come back for a few nights to see loyalty. Once the wolf is accepted it will find its vital part in the pack. Another way to join the pack is to be born into it. The alpha female or another female will mate with either the alpha male or any other of her choosing for mating. Once that is done, the litter of pups will be brought into the world, nursed, raised, and trained to become part of the pack and maybe even alpha one day.

Learning all of this, allows a closer view of the animal that is commonly thought of as something threating that kills without thought. This remarkable animal is actually much more complex. As it has been shown, wolves follow a code of conduct that happens with every wolf in the pack. This code stretches from anything like mating to hunting.

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