

Wild Kids



Gray Wolves That Are Black and Even White . . . What's Up with That?

by Steve Lokker

What would you expect to see when you visit the International Wolf Center? “Wolves,” you say. In an attempt to trick you, your brother (or sister) asks, “What kind of wolves?” And because you’re smarter than they think, you correctly answer, “Gray wolves.”

Then, when you visit the Center you see a white wolf (Shadow or Malik) resting on a big rock, a grizzle-colored wolf (Maya or Grizzer) chasing minnows in the pond, and a nearly black wolf (MacKenzie) on the television screen.

“Where are the gray wolves?” you ask. After letting your sibling squirm for a minute, you give the correct answer. “You’re looking at them. Despite different colors, all wolves that you see here at the Center are called gray wolves.”

Most people think “gray” refers only to a wolf’s color. In fact, “gray wolf” is actually the species name of an animal that could appear buff, brown, black, white or gray. There are different species, or types, of wolves just as there are different types of cars

(e.g., Ford, Honda, Chevy, Toyota, and others). There are two main wolf species in the world:

- gray wolf, what biologists call *Canis lupus*
- red wolf, or *Canis rufus*

In addition, some scientists think the Ethiopian wolf (*Canis simensis*) is a true wolf. Others think it is a jackal. Furthermore, scientists are now beginning to believe that the wolf in eastern North America is not the gray wolf but rather an animal they call the Eastern wolf (*Canis lycaon*).

But that doesn’t explain why Malik and Shadow are white, while others are black, gray and brown. It’s because Malik and Shadow are a subspecies of the gray wolf known as the arctic wolf (*Canis lupus arctos*).

Cars have different models (Ford has the Explorer, Escape and Focus, for example), and each species of wolf



Despite different colors, all wolves at the Center are gray wolves.

Theresa Williams



ACTIVITY:

You can see the wolves at the International Wolf Center by going to the Center's home page at www.wolf.org and clicking on "Watch live wolves" in the center of the page. Can you spot a white wolf? a gray wolf? a black wolf?

has different models, or subspecies, which are like races of wolves in different areas. Most arctic wolves live north of the Arctic Circle, a barren wilderness covered with snow and ice for most of the year. The unique characteristics of arctic wolves help them survive in one of Earth's most unfriendly environments:

- Being white, like snow and ice, helps arctic wolves blend in with their surroundings when they stalk and hunt their prey.
- They are large because the prey they hunt (caribou and musk ox) are large.
- Rounded ears protect them from the dangers of the bitter cold weather such as frostbite.

Now you know more about wolves. When you have more knowledge than your brother, sister . . . or even your parents, you can help correct some of the wrong impressions that people have of wolves. And people who have correct impressions make informed decisions about how they feel toward wolves. ■

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Personal Encounter

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from my pack, but my food, in a plastic bag hanging from a nearby spruce, is untouched.

The wolf drops its head, moving it back and forth, neither a sign of submission nor aggression but probably more curiosity. It is definitely sticking around, and its interest in my gear is most disquieting, as if I needed any more disquiet right before sunset. "Get out," I yell, and the wolf moves back, but only a few feet, arching its tail. I can't believe that I am actually trying to get a wolf to leave my campsite. What's going on here?

For five minutes, the wolf and I watch each other. I don't know what its thoughts are; I keep telling myself it won't attack and that the many moose on the island, including the bull I was near just two hours ago, are far more a threat to me than a

wolf. Emotionally, however, "Peter and the Wolf" from my childhood and past irrelevant encounters with "campsite bears" win the day. I'm out of here as soon as I get packed. I've already covered 10 miles today. I'm going to do another 10 in the dark, batteries permitting. It's worth it. I start collecting my gear.

I look up, and the wolf has vanished, with nary a thump. Maybe it went to check out the moose I saw earlier in the evening. I'm not at all certain whether it will return. No matter. One way or another, I'm not going to be sleeping much tonight. May as well be walking. I'll have a lot to think about on the trail—and for a long, long time to come. ■

Michael S. Smith lives in Tucson, Arizona. He has canoed in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness for 25 years, often hearing but never seeing a wolf. He plans to return to Isle Royale again next spring.



Lynn and Donna Rogers/www.berastudy.org

