

Wolf Safety In Alaska



Living safely in wolf country

Photo: Sue Steinacher

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How to live safely in wolf country

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1. Intro

There are thousands of wolves in Alaska and thousands of people who live, work and enjoy outdoor activities in wolf country. Although wolves must make their living by preying on large animals, aggression by wolves toward people is much less common than aggressive behavior by other large animals such as bears or even moose. Yet there are instances when wolves can threaten or injure people and pets.

A basic introduction to wolf behavior is presented here to help you understand and avoid the potential dangers of wolf-human encounters.

2. Aggression During Human–Wolf Encounters

A published review of wolf-human encounters in North America (McNay 2002a,b) revealed that the reported incidence of aggression by wolves is very low, but it has increased in recent years. For example, there was only 1 case of unprovoked wolf aggression documented between 1900 and 1969, but 18 cases of unprovoked aggression toward people between 1969 and 2000. Since 2000 there have been several more cases of injuries inflicted by wild wolves on people in both Alaska and Canada, and in 2005 a young man in northern Saskatchewan was killed by wolves. That increasing trend in wolf-caused injuries is occurring as wolves increase and reoccupy areas where they were formerly removed. Human populations are also increasing, and human activities such as camping, hiking, sightseeing and industrial developmental are increasing in areas occupied by wolves.

Most of the recent cases of wolf aggression occurred where wolves were protected such as national, state, or provincial parks, or near large industrial sites located in remote wilderness areas (mines, oil fields, logging camps).

3. Wolf Defensive Behavior

When people are injured during encounters with bears, it is often the result of defensive behavior by the bear. A bear is either defending cubs, is aggressively defending a kill, or is surprised at close range and is defending itself out of fear. That is not the case with wolves. Unlike a powerful bear that can successfully fight its way out of a sticky situation; wolves rely on their speed and quickness to insure their safety. Sometimes when people inadvertently stumble onto an occupied wolf den the adult wolves will dash toward them, then veer off suddenly with sharp barks and snorts. Commonly the wolves then retreat and howl repeatedly, but they may rush toward the intruder again. The vocalization behavior is very consistent when wolves are defending a den. If you are surrounded by wolves at close range that are howling or barking at your presence, you almost certainly are near a den or rendezvous site where young wolves are resting. One group of hikers was so taken by the loud barking and rushing behavior of a wolf pack that they climbed nearby trees until the wolves withdrew, but an equally effective strategy would likely have been to retreat back along their original route. There are no documented attacks resulting in human injury by wolves defending a den.

Similarly, it is not typical for wolves to aggressively defend kill sites to a point of attack. Although they may initially growl or briefly run at a human intruder, wolves commonly retreat into concealing cover when flushed from a kill and remain silent.

The only time when wolves have acted extremely aggressively in self defense is when they are cornered by being caught in a trap, or by being pursued to the point of contact by a snow machine, aircraft or boat. An injured wolf may also act aggressively if it feels that it is at a point of last resort in its self defense and it is unable to escape because of its injury.

4. Aggressive Behaviors Associated with Habituation and Food Conditioning

Where animals are protected or where humans by choice act passively toward the animals, the animals gradually lose their natural avoidance response to people. This is called habituation. It is a common behavioral trait among large herbivores (i.e. moose, caribou and sheep), bears, foxes, ground squirrels and many birds in National, State, and Provincial parks. It can also occur with wolves. Habituated wolves are “comfortable” around people and tolerate close approaches by people. The wolves may even initiate approaches toward people, seemingly out of curiosity or a desire to interact. Ironically, wolves that exhibit those behaviors are actually the most likely to act aggressively. Among documented cases of wolves that injured people, the wolves often had a history of repeatedly acting disinterested or even “friendly” toward people at close distances in the weeks or even months before they become aggressive.

Habituation involves a relaxation of inhibitions and when wolves feel comfortable around people they are more likely to direct their natural social behaviors toward people. As pack animals wolves have a well developed social repertoire of behaviors that include play behaviors as well as aggressive behaviors designed to dominate or deflect the aggression of competitors within their pack. Habituated wolves may therefore initiate an aggressive behavior toward a person just as they might against a pack mate. People who have been injured by those types of wolf behavior are totally surprised by the unexpected aggression.

Wolves also quickly learn that human activity can provide a source of food in garbage cans, landfills, or from campground food scraps. When wolves begin to seek out human foods near human use areas they have become food conditioned. Some food conditioned animals are not totally habituated. For example they may only come into campgrounds or near garbage at night or during daylight if people are absent.

Food conditioning provides a fast track to habituation because it puts wolves near humans, and if the human response to the presence of wolves is passive, habituation is fostered. Some food conditioned animals may appear quite friendly, but may exaggerate their approach behavior if they do not get an expected response from people. This behavioral response is common in all animals, even in people. For example, if you knock on your friendly neighbor’s door thinking they are at home you expect your neighbor to answer the door. If they don’t answer, you will knock again, but louder and longer this time. Similarly, if a wolf is fed by people it begins to expect food handouts. If that wolf approaches a person but gets no food, it then exaggerates its behavior by approaching closer and acting more willful (i.e. it knocks louder!). That willful behavior can suddenly turn to aggression and that type of aggression is probably responsible for many of the bites that wolves have inflicted on people in recent years.

Like wolves, other wildlife such as moose or bears also become habituated or food conditioned and then become aggressive toward people. Those animals are usually killed for public safety reasons. Nobody wins with food conditioned wildlife.

5. Rabid Wolves

The rabies virus is present in Alaska’s wolf population along northern and western coastal areas where wolves interact with dense populations of foxes. The fox populations serve as a reservoir for the rabies virus. Usually only a small number of wolves are affected, but some population declines in wolves have been attributed to rabies in northwestern Alaska. Attacks of people by rabid wolves have been documented in arctic areas of Alaska and Canada but not in Interior, south central or southeastern Alaska.

Rabid wolves may attack viciously or they may exhibit slow and ponderous, but persistent attempts to bite. A

rabies infection causes a loss of inhibition in the affected animal and many infected animals also show other signs of physical disability. Because of the presence of rabies in arctic areas many wolves that exhibit fearless behavior near villages are often killed in fear of rabies, but most of those wolves are probably not rabid, instead they have had little or no prior experience with people and are simply curious.

The rabies virus causes a variety of symptoms that include:

- Loss of fear of humans
- Glazed, poorly focused stare
- Frequent shifting of aggressive behavior from one object to another.
- Stubborn, undeterred approach
- Staggering walk or trot
- Biting the ground or other inanimate objects such as sticks, or rocks.
- Large number of porcupine quills in the mouth or neck
- Lack of reflex response if struck by a thrown object
- Excessive salivation

You can become infected with rabies if you are bitten or licked by an infected animal, or if saliva or brain and nerve tissue from an infected animal comes into contact with your eyes, broken skin (cuts or scratches), or mucous membranes such as lips, mouth or nasal passages. Rabies is almost always fatal in humans and animals, although symptoms may not show for several weeks. Any person exposed to an animal that may have rabies should immediately contact their local health care provider.

If you suspect this has happened and you must kill an animal you think has rabies do not shoot it in the head or cut into the carcass. A diagnosis of rabies in wolves is accomplished by taking samples from the head of the animal so a suspected rabid wolf should not be killed by striking it or shooting it in the head.

Samples to collect

You should bring the animal fresh to the local clinic, hospital or biologist. If there is going to be a delay in shipping, the animal may be frozen to preserve it.

For foxes, double-bag the entire animal in strong plastic garbage bags and put in a leak-proof container. Contact the nearest Fish and Game office or the Virology Unit in Fairbanks. Frozen specimens are okay. For larger animals, do not cut into carcasses suspected of being rabid. Contact your nearest Fish and Game biologist.

Do not eat the meat from an animal that has rabies, and do not feed any of it to dogs.

For more detailed information about rabies, submitting carcasses and carcass disposal see the Alaska Division of Public Health

Alaska Rabies Prevention and Control Manual

<http://www.epi.alaska.gov/id/rabies/RabiesControlManual.pdf>

Prepared by the Alaska Section of Epidemiology

Main telephone number 907-269-8000

After-hours number 800-478-0084

6. Wolf Aggression Toward Dogs

In their natural environment wolves defend territories against other wolves; it is common for wolves to kill other wolves in territorial disputes. Wolves are also very aggressive toward domestic dogs. Although encounters between a single wolf and a domestic dog sometimes result in play behavior, encounters between several wolves and a dog usually result in the wolves aggressively attacking the dog. Wolves may act aggressively towards dogs even when people are present, and even when dogs are on a leash or being held by their owner. Among documented attacks on dogs, the wolves commonly directed their attack solely at the dog and not the pet's owner.

Although many people enjoy taking their dogs on camping trips in wilderness areas where the dogs are allowed to run free, dog owners must recognize that this practice places their pet at some additional level of risk. Dogs that are pursued by wolves or bears will probably try to retreat to their owner, thereby bringing the threat closer to the people. A safer practice is to maintain control of pets within sight of the owner during wilderness excursions.

In the recent past there have been several cases where wolves have come into cities, towns and villages around the State and have killed and eaten dogs that were either off leash or chained outside. Most of those cases occurred in winter and were related to low numbers or low vulnerability of wolves' natural prey. However, anytime a wolf pack takes residence near a human settlement, dogs or livestock may be preyed upon. Therefore it is important for pet and livestock owners to take basic precautions when wolves are known to occupy nearby areas. Those precautions could include:

1. Indoor shelter options for animals during hours of darkness. For example dog houses, sheds, or barns.
2. Chain link fences around dog yards and overwinter livestock areas.
3. Electric fences around dog yards and livestock areas.
4. Lights around dog yards and livestock areas.
5. Clearing brush to provide a perimeter clear of concealing vegetation around dog yards or livestock areas.
6. Noise makers.

7. Wolf Safety

Don't make your home or camp attractive to wolves (or bears).

- Keep a clean camp; don't dispose of food by dumping into the campfire.
- Don't leave unwashed cooking utensils around your camp.
- Keep food in animal proof containers.
- Don't leave garbage unsecured.
- Don't cook food near your tent or sleeping area.
- Don't allow pets to freely roam away from your camp.
- Don't bury garbage, pack it out.

In the rare event that you do have an encounter with an aggressive wolf:

- Don't run, but act aggressively stepping toward the wolf and yelling or clapping your hands if it tries to approach.
- Do not turn your back toward an aggressive wolf, but continue to stare directly at it. If you are with a companion and more than one wolf is present place yourselves back to back and slowly move away from the wolves.
- Retreat slowly while facing the wolf and act aggressively.

- Stand your ground if a wolf attacks you and fight with any means possible (use sticks, rocks, ski poles, fishing rods or whatever you can find).
- Use air horns or other noise makers.
- Use bear spray or firearms if necessary.
- Climb a tree if necessary, wolves cannot climb trees.

Should Children play outside when wolves have been sighted nearby?

It is important to remember that we live in wolf and bear country. Commonly, wolves and bears may pass through our woods, our neighborhoods, or our yards without our knowledge because most animals are secretive. This is a normal occurrence and is not something to be alarmed about.

If however, there is a repeated number of sightings of wolves or they are showing unusual behavior such as attacking dogs, approaching homes, or showing a lack of fear, then the following are some sensible precautions:

- Keep your children close when wolves or bears are known to be in the vicinity of your home. Children should remain close to adults when outside, particularly small children. The probability of a predatory attack by a wolf on a child is very small, but is greatest for very small children that are alone near concealing vegetation or terrain. When camping in wilderness areas travel with your family as a group keeping children comfortably close, do not leave children alone in camps even when motor camping in established campgrounds of government parks or recreation areas.
- Although thousands of Alaskan children wait in the dark at bus stops every morning without incident, it is appropriate for school bus stops to be supervised by an adult when bears or wolves have been sighted nearby.
- Noise makers (such as air horns) may be helpful and should be placed in handy locations if you live in an area that is frequented by wolves or bears.

Questions?

Call the Alaska Department of Fish and Game Regional Offices to report unusual wolf activity or for more information.

- Fairbanks: (907) 459-7206
- Juneau/Douglas: (907) 465-4265
- Anchorage: (907) 267-2257
- Nome: (907) 443-2271

Resources:

- McNay, Mark E. 2002a. Wolf-human interactions in Alaska and Canada: a review of the case history. *Wildlife Society Bulletin*, 30(3):831-843.
- McNay, Mark E. 2002b. A case history of wolf-human encounters in Alaska and Canada. Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Technical Bulletin 13.
- ADF&G, 2001. A Field Guide to Common Wildlife Diseases and Parasites in Alaska.