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## So You Think You Want A Wolf or Wolf Hybrid?

by Jill Moore

So you think you want a wolf or wolf hybrid? Before you rush out to get a puppy, here are some things to consider.

Let's assume the animal you are getting has a fair amount of wolf in it or is a pure wolf. If you treat the animal as a wolf even if the animal is more dog-like, you will not be as surprised when the animal displays wolf-like behavior.

A wolf hybrid is not like a dog and it cannot be treated like the average dog. It's important to remember that a lot of dogs don't work out either. However, this is not a dog problem, it's a people problem. Often a person sees a wonderfully well-behaved example of a particular dog breed and decides they want one "just like that." They get a puppy of the same breed and expect it to know how to behave like the well-trained dog they met. What the person does not see was all the work that went into the first dog.

With the wolf or hybrid this is even more true. I know of people who have met a well-behaved wolf or hybrid and saw it for a few moments, say at a program, or in a vehicle. The person decided they wanted one, thinking how much fun it would be to have a "pet wolf" just like the one they'd met.

Let me tell you a little about what goes into raising a well-socialized wolf or hybrid.

First, if the animal has much wolf in it, especially if one parent is wolf-like, you must take the puppies away from their mother at about two weeks of age. After the age of three weeks it is too late to create a decent animal. It will most likely grow up shy. Of course, at two weeks of age the pups must be bottle fed around the clock for the next couple weeks. The formula must be modified for wolves or developmental problems will occur. You must also stimulate them to relieve themselves and keep them clean. Then they must be weaned onto a meat diet. Wolves and high content hybrids do not do well on a dry dog kibble diet. Can you afford to supply your animal(s) with two to five pounds of quality meat a day for about the fifteen years most of them live? One of the best types of meat is venison, from fresh road-killed deer, which you typically need a permit to pick up. By the way, in most states, counties and cities you will need a special permit to own one of these animals, if they are not illegal to own.

The wolf or hybrid pup must be handled properly from the time it's eyes are open (10-14 days of age.) These animals are very impressionable and one bad experience may cause problems the rest of it's life.

If you have ever had a dog with which you had problems and you gave up the dog - STOP HERE - don't get a wolf hybrid!! It won't be different, it won't be easier or better, it will be WORSE. Once you have an animal and decide to give it up, you typically sentence that animal to death. There are virtually

NO good homes for second-hand animals. There may be bad ones, however. Some people will take your animal, place it in a small cage or on a chain and breed it. This creates more puppies doomed to die young.

For the first four to five months of life the pups must have very restricted contact with any adult canines. However, it must have some contact so it will not fully imprint on humans. This is dangerous since an imprinted wolf will direct all of it's social behavior toward humans, including sexual behavior and social aggression.

The pup must also have contact with canines so it doesn't fear them later. A few visits per week of about 20-30 minutes is plenty. The rest of the time is spent with people, twenty-four hours a day.

The pup must meet a variety of people while it's young. However, do not take the pup out into the public. I have seen many wolf and hybrid pups ruined by stress when they were taken out and forced to meet people. Rather, have people come to the pup. Have a small (150-200 sq. ft.) puppy pen (while the pups are young - 4 -8 weeks) with a secure "den" in which the pups can retreat if scared. Always have the meetings occur in the presence of well-known puppy caretakers. The pup should have male and female caretakers and meet people of both sexes. DO NOT FORCE THE PUPS to come up to people, or to do anything. Let them do it on their own. A pup which feels it has a choice will be more comfortable doing things.

A pup should be leashed trained. One cannot simply put a leash on the animal and drag it around and expect it will enjoy or even tolerate being leashed.

The pup must ALWAYS associate the leash with pleasant experiences. Don't let the pup run around free before (or ever!) starting leash training or it will resent restraint. If you always and only take the pup out on a leash to explore new areas it will associated the leash with fun experiences and like to be leashed. Never use prong collars or choke chains. If you are able to properly train your animal these are unnecessary and can cause problems. The only methods I've ever seen work on wolves are positive reinforcement, not punishment. Also, one bad experience on a leash (or anywhere) can ruin the animal for future handling. With pups 6 -8 weeks old you should take them into tall grass so they cannot see objects at a distance or approaching. These could cause them to spook and panic. Use a light chain which can be purchased at a hardware store. Loop the chain around the pup's neck and snap it. Keep the lessons short, about 3-10 minutes maximum and do this every 2-3 days. When the animal is an adult use a heavier chain 10-12 feet long clipped around the neck.



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On the same note you must constantly be aware of what the animal is learning from you. You've all heard wolves are very smart. That makes it harder to train them but easier to make mistakes with them. They never reach a point where they stop learning or are "safe." Unlike a dog, which if you raise properly you will be dominant over, even if you become sick or injured, you will only be dominant over a wolf until the animal sees an opportunity to become dominant at your expense. I've heard of this happening at any age from two years up to eleven years of age!

I have heard it said "wolf hybrids are more unpredictable than either wolves or dogs." This is not necessarily true. However, if you try to keep a hybrid like a dog and expect it to behave as one - yes, it may become true. The animal may also surprise you with the intensity of its behavior. On the other hand, if you keep a hybrid as a wolf, it will seem easy by those standards...

**ASK YOURSELF, IF YOU HAD AN ANIMAL WHICH ATTACKED YOU AND YOU COULDN'T GO IN WITH THE ANIMAL ANYMORE, WHAT WOULD YOU DO?** Would you continue to feed and care for the animal for its natural life span? If not, do not get the animal in the first place!!!

It is not fair to the animal to get it, have problems with it, then kill it for doing what wolves can do. It is natural wolf behavior to want to be high ranking. A wolf will try to dominate an individual (wolf or human) which it accepts into its social structure and it feels is vulnerable.

I know of people who have been attacked by their pet wolf or hybrid. In some cases they could salvage the relationship. The attack was context related, i.e. food guarding, breeding season, etc. In other cases the relationship was damaged and the person could not safely interact with the animal. The ones I respect the most set up an enclosure in such a way the animal can be cared for (fed, watered and cleaned), and allow the animal to live with a canine companion for its natural life span without the owner needing to enter the enclosure.

While interacting with a young pup you must decide what behaviors you want in the animal as an adult. Most people do not want their full grown wolf or wolf hybrid mouthing or biting. Do not allow the pup to mouth. Place your hand in its mouth and gently spread your fingers to open the mouth and say something (like "mine") each time the pup puts its mouth on something it shouldn't. NEVER hit, bite, pin and shake by the scruff or shout at the pup. Wolf parents are very tolerant while pups are small. They DO NOT punish a pup for chewing and biting. Many hybrid owners make the mistake of trying to physically dominate their animals. This can damage the relationship you are trying to build with the animal. Also remember some wolf pups grow up and kill their parents!

It is also very valuable to teach the pups to submit on cue. This is not to say that as an adult they will submit on cue every time, but you will have laid the foundation for the behavior. You must be very consistent and condition the animal to submit without

thinking each time. This works well if done properly. Little puppies will automatically submit to their parents. One method would be to GENTLY poke the pup in the side or inguinal (belly) area, and give a command. Reward the pup each time it rolls over by scratching its tummy. Also reward the animal for being calm. Do not rough house with the animal. You do not want it to interact roughly with you. This can lead to testing, and that can lead to an attack. Do not punish a rowdy animal. Distract it. Try to be creative and come up with things which will not hurt or scare the animal, but take its attention from whatever undesirable behavior the pup is performing. You need to always be aware of what the animal is doing. You have to be aware of what you are teaching it, both purposely and accidentally. Rewarding the animal for bad or unwanted behavior can be much worse and give you far more problems down the road than you can imagine. It may be cute when an eight week old pup grabs your pants leg and growls but it won't be cute when the animal weighs 100 pounds. It will be dangerous.

Remember, the goal is to create an animal with which you can live for ten to fifteen years. If you cannot make that kind of commitment, not just to keep it on a chain or small kennel, but to give the animal a good quality of life, DON'T GET IT!

Some of the many reasons for hand raising include being able to give the animal medical care with a minimum of stress, having an animal which is comfortable around people so the mere presence of humans is not upsetting. Another benefit is being able to enrich the life of the animal in captivity by being able to go in with the animal and doing things with it to break up the tedium of life in an enclosure for an animal which is used to living in a territory which can be anywhere from fifty square miles to five hundred.

Now let's talk about containment. A four foot fence or tie-out chain is out of the question. A good minimum for two animals (wolves and hybrids should not be kept alone) is a half an acre pen. The fence should be of 7' or 8' chainlink with an overhang and ground-wire. There should be a double gate area to make entering and leaving more secure. A smaller holding pen to separate animals is advised as well. This also makes working with one animal at a time easier. It will also be necessary to have a perimeter fence. This will prevent people from gaining access to your animals, as well as preventing your animals from roaming at large if they should escape the primary enclosure. The perimeter fence should be at least six feet tall and be at least five feet from the primary fence.

Another important issue to consider when making the commitment to care for a wolf or hybrid is the fact that they are predators and display predatory behavior in an intensity far beyond that of a dog. These animals ARE NOT GOOD WITH CHILDREN!! They can be safe in a few instances while meeting children in a controlled manner (such as while on a leash). If the child should wiggle, squirm or make small prey-like noises the animal can react quickly and undesirably in that it can attack the child without more than a subtle warning. The

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squirming child can trigger a predatory attack in an animal which was a moment earlier submitting to the same child. This includes a child the animal has known since puppyhood and has "always been good with the child." This but one of the reasons wolves and hybrids don't make good pets.

Predatory behavior is easy to recognize if you know what you are looking at. Unfortunately most people don't. An animal displaying predatory behavior will not be growling or raising it's hackles ( this is social aggression, which is directed towards another canine or human.) The animal will typically look "happy" and excited. It will be quite focused on it's "prey" and usually has it's ears pricked forward. I have many times in zoos and such heard the parents of children who were being stalked by the wolves on display say things like "... look, the wolf likes you..." The wolf "likes" the child, but not in a manner with which the parent may be comfortable! I have seen many hybrids whose oblivious owners were not aware their animals were stalking children. Wolves and hybrids are also not safe with other animals for the same reason. They are intolerant of other canines with which they have not grown up with and may display an enormous amount of social aggression towards such an animal. Again, the intensity of these behaviors will shock a person only experienced with dogs.

Wolves and hybrids do not work out in the house. They are more curious and therefore more destructive. They will tear apart a couch to get to the squeak of the springs they heard inside and then guard the remains from you. (I can fill dozens of pages with accounts of such tales of destruction and guarding just from people and animals I know personally...)

These animals are consummate escape artists. It is VERY important to provide adequate facilities for the animal(s). If an animal gets out it often gets in trouble and you as the owner will be held responsible. The animal may be killed by a car, or neighbor or may be picked up by animal control. Many shelters will not give a wolf or hybrid which was picked up running at large back to the owner. Instead they kill it. This is why you must keep your animal under control at all times.

Owning a wolf or hybrid just for the sake of having one is not a very good reason. You should be doing something more, such as educating the public about these animals. Do something to benefit wolves in general. Make your animal an ambassador for it's species. This does not mean taking the animal out and parading it around to inflate your own ego. Perhaps you can set up a small nature center and bring people to you. I know many people who have done just that. They are assets instead of liabilities to their communities and to the wolf.

This article was not meant as a "how to" manual and the information contained is by no means complete. It is just a small sample of what it takes to live with a wolf or wolf hybrid. For more information about these animals or for information about the wolf behavior seminars offered by Wolf Park go to [WolfPark.org](http://WolfPark.org)

I would recommend taking a behavior seminar for anyone even considering owning a wolf or hybrid. This would introduce you to some of the things you will need to know and give you some valuable tools with which to work.

For some information on the concepts of positive reinforcement and behavioral shaping and conditioning read Karen Pryor's book "Don't Shoot The Dog." This can be ordered from Wolf Park if you can't find it locally. It costs only about five dollars and is worth a million.

There are many wolf and wolf hybrid organizations around the country. Some are great and some are not. Some of these organizations offer registries as well. You may contact Wolf Park for a recommendation. We will also offer a hybrid packet which is available for a small fee. (Wolf Park is a non-profit organization.)

I could write an entire book filled with stories I've collected while talking with wolf and hybrid owners. Besides actually working at a facility with wolves, talking with these owners is one way to learn about the animals. Actually meeting as many wolves and hybrids is the best way to get an idea of the variability involved.

One last and VERY IMPORTANT note if you should have read all this and are still tempted to devote your life to a hybrid. Spay or neuter your animal!! Do not breed!! Thousands of hybrids and even pure wolves end up dead each year because that "perfect" home WASN'T! Do not add to this. I personally would not want an animal I brought into this world to end up dead prematurely! Would you?