

# The Wolf

By Aoife Moynihan



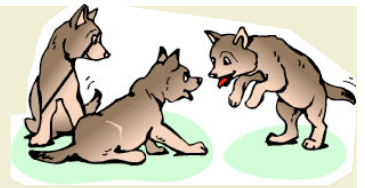
Courtesy of Alan D. Wilson www.naturesonline.com

The wolf is the wild relative of the domestic dog. Wolves though have bigger skulls with a longer nose than a dog, and also have much larger teeth that are ideal for crushing bones. The eyesight and sense of smell of wolves are not as strong as some dog breeds but their night vision is much stronger and their hearing is extremely sharp. Wolves are very strong animals and are capable of running at speeds of 56–64km per hour and can keep running at this speed for up to 20 minutes. They have long legs but their paws are actually quite small. Their front paws have five toes but only four of the toes leave a print as the fifth toe, called a dew claw, is higher up the leg. The back paws only have four toes. The fur of the wolf is thick and very furry during the winter, which is very important as it helps keep them warm even in temperatures as cold as -40°C. They are able to go to sleep quite easily in really cold weather by putting their nose in between their back legs and then covering their faces with their tails. The colour of their fur can be white, cream, brown, grey or black.

## The Wolf Pack

The wolf pack is normally made up of a pair of parent wolves and their young of several litters. The parent wolves will remain together for all of their lives until one of them dies. When the female becomes pregnant, she will go away from the main pack and find a den where she can give birth. The den will either be a small cave or the old burrow of another animal that is made bigger to make the den more comfortable. The female is normally pregnant for up to 75

days and the pups are born during the summer months. There are normally 5–6 pups in a litter and they are born deaf and blind, not being able to see until 9–12 days after they are born. The father wolf will bring food to the den, so the mother and the pups don't need to leave the safety of the den. After three weeks, the pups are old and strong enough to leave the den and go explore the outside world.



## Hunting Habits



Wolves hunt their prey in a large area known as a territory, and a wolf pack will guard and defend their territory very fiercely from other wolf packs. They do this by howling at and attacking those

that come too close, as well as marking the edges of their territory by scent marking - urinating, leaving their faeces or scratching the ground on a certain spot. They will normally mark rocks, boulders or trees, with each scent mark lasting up to 2 or 3 weeks. Wolves mostly hunt hoofed animals such as deer, wild goats, elk, moose or caribou. However, if this prey is not available, they will hunt smaller animals such as water-birds, hares, badgers, foxes, mice and voles.

## Hunting the Wolf

The wolf is found in North America, Canada, Greenland, Russia, China, the countries of the Middle East and in some parts of Europe such as Spain and Portugal. Wolves were hunted by humans because they feared that wolves would attack their cattle and other livestock, but they were hunted so much that their populations became very small indeed, especially in Europe. These days however, hunting is banned and wolf populations are slowly increasing. Wolves were hunted to extinction in Ireland - the last wolf was killed in 1786.



## A Howl of a Time!

Wolves communicate mostly by howling, which is used to gather the pack together before or after a hunt, to raise the alarm if there is danger and to communicate across very large areas. They also communicate through growling, whining or barking. Wolves generally only bark if they are startled or surprised. When nervous or excited they whine and growl when playing or feeling threatened.

