

Growing up

The fuzzy little pup has to grow up sometime. When he/she does, there will be changes that are not often found in domestic dogs.

Sexual Maturity in Wolves and Wolf-dog Hybrids

Wolves and wolf-dog hybrids mature both later and more fully, socially and sexually than domestic dog breeds. As with all mammals, these exotic canines undergo hormonal changes when they reach sexual maturity.

Somewhere between the ages of two and four years (sometimes younger in lower content animals), the puppy you thought you finally had under control will begin to change. Just like human teens, their sex hormones begin to flow. Behavioral changes accompany maturation.

In the wild, many newly matured wolves will disperse from the pack when they find they no longer fit in. In captivity they don't have that option, so negative behaviors often arise. Those behaviors can range from minimal testing of boundaries to intense challenges for Alpha position in the pack. The more alpha the personality of the animal, the more testing can be expected.

If the owner has done a good job in maintaining his/her Alpha position with the pup, the testing may be minimal. Neutering by the age of six months will probably affect the amount of testing, but not totally negate it. Hormones are produced in many locations in the body, so eliminating one location does not eliminate those hormones altogether. A "pet" wolf, neutered at six months, nearly killed his owner during a dominance challenge during his fifth year. She didn't see the warning signs and was lucky to escape alive though seriously injured.

The point of sexual maturity is often the age when wolves and wolf-dog hybrids are either given up, or relegated to an outdoor pen to live out their lives. Hopefully, if they are confined outdoors, they are given a spay/neutered companion canine—one of the opposite sex.

Winter Wolf Syndrome

Those wolf-dog hybrids that inherit the reproductive system of the wolf tend to be most prone to intense hormonally driven behavior changes during breeding season. In recent years those changes have been lumped together and been dubbed Winter Wolf Syndrome, hereafter referred to as WWS.

Behavior changes triggered by seasonal hormonal surges can range from simple grumpiness, to all out aggression whenever a person tries to enter the pen. Grumpiness may mean that the animal that normally loves to be petted is suddenly shying away from petting or even growling or showing teeth when the owner attempts to pet him/her. Or the normally very obedient animal is now defiant. Wolf-dog hybrids that are heavily socialized and people oriented normally become merely grumpy or disobedient, but there are no guarantees that more challenging behavior will not be exhibited.

Others may become very protective of their possessions or their mate (whether intact or altered), and present up to a full blown challenge to the owner seeking access to the pen in order to feed, water, or clean.

A number of people have said that at sexual maturity the previously loving wolf-dog hybrid "turned on them." Typically the animal has merely begun experiencing WWS. Such challenges may, and have, resulted in serious injury to owners and visitors, when they are unprepared for these changes.

During this time, the animal may become much more same sex aggressive with other canines or even their human caretakers. If signs of this are observed, it is often recommended that the aggressive animals be separated permanently. A number of people have been injured getting between two females that would just as soon see each other dead. Males tend to fight for a dominant position; females seem intent on fighting to the death.

During this period they may exhibit a more intense prey drive. Keeping them separated from small animals and birds is crucial during this time period. They may also show a keener interest in young children who run around and scream, like wounded prey.

WWS behavior toward the owner will also depend much on whether the owner has established himself as Alpha during the maturation/socialization period of the wolf-dog hybrid—although even a domineering human alpha often cannot completely deter WWS behavior.

When you buy that cute little fuzzy at three or four weeks of age, do you know which end of the WWS behavior spectrum he/she will inherit? It can be partially judged by the actions of the animal's parents at and before breeding time, which means you must visit the breeder just before the pup is conceived.

Will neutering "fix" WWS? In males it will remove the testosterone overload driving breeding behaviors. In most cases, if the animal is neutered early, you will see much less negative seasonal behavior than in an intact animal. If a male is neutered after maturity, or after breeding, many of the behaviors may have become habit, and those will not be decreased significantly for some time, if ever.

In females, the overload of hormones is only present while she is in estrus (heat) or pregnant. Though again, learned behaviors may not be extinguished completely by having the animal spayed. In wolves and wolf-dog hybrids the heat cycle can be as long as five to seven weeks.

How long does WWS last? In most cases, owners should be prepared for a minimum of grumpiness from October through March. It may not last that long, or begin later and last longer -- every animal is an individual. That means that for up to five months of the year, your cuddly fuzzy baby could become the demon-dog from Hades. It could also mean that during this time neither you nor anyone else will be able to enter the enclosure to feed, water, or clean the pen. If you are lucky you will be living with a wolf-dog hybrid that reacts with nothing more serious than a case of PMS during the wolf breeding season.

What precautions should be taken to deal with WWS? Be prepared for the worst and hope for the best. Responsible wolf-dog hybrid owners already have a large escape-proof pen outdoors. During the seasonal breeding time most of these animals will have a serious desire to roam, so make sure they cannot get out. Time in the house may significantly decrease.

Make sure they have an enriched environment with lots of toys. Keep children and toddlers out of harms way. In dealing with animals with serious WWS one should never enter the pen alone, always have another adult accompanying and at least one should be carrying a shovel, or broom, or similar object. This object will not prevent a challenge nor should it be used as a weapon, but often an object such as these can be used to deflect a bite and can allow precious seconds to escape the enclosure safely.

WWS encompasses a spectrum of natural behaviors occurring in wolf packs. It exists in the wild to keep the social and breeding protocols of the pack. It is not abnormal, nor is it something to be taken lightly. It does not translate well to captivity.

WWS is one of the little talked about pitfalls of owning a wolf-dog hybrid and as a result many end up in the rescue system or dead because of the natural behaviors exhibited at this time. Even if the animal only gets the seasonal grumpies, you may find the behavior difficult to accept from a normally loving and docile animal.

WWS is a natural part of being a wolf. It is not natural in most domestic dog breeds. It is part of the package you will be buying when you hand your money to the wolf-dog hybrid breeder.

Spaying and neutering

Spaying or neutering a wolf-dog hybrid will decrease or eliminate many of the above behaviors. It will also prevent unplanned pregnancies. Spaying and neutering is the wisest thing to do for any animal that isn't in a responsible breeding program. Not only does it curtail if not eliminate many negative behaviors, it has also been shown to increase longevity.

