

## Wolf pack structure

*The wolf pack is a very intricate society, one based on formalities, hierarchies, and rituals. We will deal more with the position of Alpha in this chapter, as that is what the human must be in a relationship with a wolf-dog hybrid*

### **Alpha, Beta, Omega—What's with the Greek letters?**

The Alpha is the leader of the pack. In the hierarchy of the wolf pack, he/she is the top wolf, usually the parent of other pack members. He or she comes by that rank by being stronger, bigger, or more dominant than other members of the pack, though sometimes the Alpha is not the largest pack member. In most packs there is an Alpha pair, male and female, who are the only members to produce offspring.

Beta is the second in command, often dealing with minor problems the Alpha chooses not to. When the Alpha is killed or driven out of the pack, the Beta usually assumes the position of Alpha. We might call him/her the Alpha in training.

If there is an Omega in the wolf pack, they are the lowest in rank, last to eat, and often somewhat ostracized by other pack members. When the pack travels, they may be seen following at some distance. Their temperament leads them to avoid confrontation.

### **Alpha**

A wolf may become leader of the pack in different ways. They may form their own pack with another lone wolf dispersed from the birth pack, or they may rise through the ranks within an established pack. When the Alpha dies, the Beta may just take over the Alpha position with no posturing, or challenging competitors for the position.

Wolves are highly social creatures. The Alpha of the pack does not rule by brawling, but by communication, through body language, and vocalizations. The pack's survival depends on cooperation—in the hunt, in producing offspring, in all aspects of daily life.

Body language corresponds with a wolf's rank in the pack. Alpha carries the tail erect, ears are erect, and the whole body gives the impression of benevolent leadership. Don't be fooled by the term benevolent, the Alpha is entirely capable of killing any other member of the pack. He/she chooses not to do so, though in rare instances he must to protect the integrity of the pack.

Alpha is an attitude, one of leadership. Other members of the pack show respect for that rank. That respect is often demonstrated by ritualistic behavior, on greeting, on division of food, in hunting. All pups begin life in a subservient position, begging food from the adult pack members.

Pups are born with different types of personalities. Often one pup will show dominance over littermates early on. This may or may not become the dominant animal when the litter has reached maturity, but more often than not the dominant pup has what it takes to survive and pass on their genetic material to the next generation.

### **Human as Alpha**

When humans and wolves or wolf-dog hybrids interact, Alpha is definitely an attitude. It can be neither learned nor taught. You either are, or are not the Alpha in your family pack. If you are not, the relationship may be fraught with challenges for leadership, which can include nips, bites and even intense attacks by the wolf or wolf-dog hybrid.

Consistent, and preferably positively reinforced, behavior modification with a young pup will establish the human as Alpha. As the pup grows, consistency must be maintained. Few major confrontations occur when the position of Alpha has been consistently and fairly reinforced.

When the human is not the Alpha in the relationship with a wolf or wolf-dog hybrid, the animal assumes the rank of Alpha, and dictates the parameters of the relationship. The human's head should always be above that of the canine, there can be no relaxation of established rules, and there can be no show of subservience from the human. Interacting with an adult wolf or wolf-dog hybrid in a subservient or fearful manner can bring on aggression, mauling, or even death.

The severity of Winter Wolf Syndrome (discussed in the chapter on sexual maturity) is often dependent on the degree of "Alpha-ness" of the human caretakers. Those humans who are dominant in their behaviors with wolves and wolf-dog hybrids have found the symptoms of Winter Wolf Syndrome to be minor. Those who are not dominant Alphas have had difficulty entering the enclosure of their wolf-dog hybrid for the five month breeding and whelping period, whether or not the animals are neutered.

### **The Language of Wolf**

Wolves communicate in many ways, but none of them imitate any part of the human language. Vocalization—including howling, growling, yipping, and barking—is one form of communication. Body language is another—the position of

the head, ears, tail, and actually the entire body all communicate with other pack members.

It is extremely important to learn and understand the language wolves speak. They cannot learn to communicate in our language, though they may learn to recognize a few, or a few hundred spoken words. Knowing the animal's body language may keep an owner from a serious confrontation with the wolf-dog hybrid. Knowing how the adult wolves deal with pups will help an owner in disciplining a rambunctious pup, or redirecting aggression toward more civilized behaviors. As we are asking them to live in our world, we must make concessions to learning about their mindset and their world.