

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Why do wolves howl?

May 19, 2023

Jane 00:21

This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids, from Vermont Public. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, we take questions from curious kids just like you and we find answers. Here's a hint about today's episode:

Ambient sound 00:39

SOUND OF HOWLING

Jane 00:40

Wolves! Today we're going to answer the questions you've sent us about these amazing animals. And to get the answers, Melody and I took a field trip to a small town about an hour and a half from New York City, where we could see wolves up close and talk with someone who helps to protect them.

Regan Downey 00:57

My name is Regan Downey, and I'm the director of education at The Wolf Conservation Center. And we're located in South Salem, New York.

Jane 01:04

When we arrived at The Wolf Conservation Center, there was a sign on the outside telling people they could drop off dead animals like roadkill (when an animal gets hit by a car) to help feed the wolves that live there. That's not a sign I see every day! Regan met us at the entrance and took us over to a big double-fenced enclosure. Inside were two beautiful wolves sitting in the shade and occasionally wandering around out of sight.

Regan Downey 01:29

So these are the wolves the public is guaranteed to see. They're two grey wolves. They're brother and sister. And they are what we call ambassadors. So it basically means they're teachers, and they help us teach people about their wild relatives.

Jane 01:43

Don't get confused, though. These two wolves aren't pets. They were born in captivity, meaning not in the wild, and they can't legally be released into the wild now. So they will live at the center for their whole lives.

01:56

They were born out in Nevada, and they came to live with us as puppies, and they grew up here. So Nikai, who's approaching right now, he is turning nine on Wednesday, and his sister Alawa, who just moved out of frame, she's turning 12 next week.

Jane 02:12

And yes, they do get birthday presents. More about that later. Regan mentioned that Alawa and Nikai are gray wolves. But just like humans and lots of other animals, the coat color on gray wolves can be really different from wolf to wolf. Alawa and Nikai are almost white, which might surprise you when you first see them. And they look kind of the same size as a very large dog. But these two wolves are still very wild in their behavior. So we didn't get to go up close and pet them or anything like that. We just admired them from outside their enclosure. But Alawa and Nikai aren't the only wolves living at the center.

02:51

So we have 30 wolves here at the moment. So this is early April. I say that just because our numbers might change drastically over the next few weeks. We have three potential litters that will be born. We have three potentially pregnant females. So right now we're at 30 wolves, and those wolves are broken up into families. So we have, for example, our ambassador gray wolves, we consider them to be a family group. And then the rest of our families are a mix of red wolf families and Mexican gray wolf families. And they're all separate from one another.

Jane 03:20

Regan walked us over to see one of the 18 Mexican gray wolves who live there. You can't always catch a glimpse of these animals because unlike Alawa and Nikai, a lot of the other wolves here might be released into the wild at some point. So they're very shy around humans, and they like to go into their rock caves or hide out behind bushes.

03:39

So this is our Mexican gray wolf enclosure. It's home to one wolf. Her name is Valencia. She did have a wolf she was living with, her mate Diego. He actually passed away about a month and a half ago. He would have been 16 in April, so April 22. So he was actually our oldest wolf. So he passed away just from old age. The average lifespan of a wolf in captivity is quite similar to a dog. But in the wild, it's a bit shorter just because of the challenges they face. But Valencia, I believe is laying down. So if you see that tree with the white camera on it, if you look to the right of that tree

Jane 04:19

Oh yeah!

Regan Downey 04:19

Kind of back...you'll see a wolf with a little bit of like an ear...

Jane 04:22

Yeah, all I can see is the ear.

Regan Downey 04:24

Exactly

Jane 04:24

Oop, she just moved her head.

04:26

Yeah. So that's Valencia, and she's turning seven this spring. And she is quite possibly one of the most beautiful wolves we have here. Mexican gray wolves are really unique in their coloring because, unlike our ambassador gray wolves who are kind of like that light brown, almost white color, Mexican gray wolves are a mix of grays and browns and blacks and they're just beautiful.

Jane 04:49

You might be wondering why there are Mexican gray wolves in New York State. In fact, it's strange even to have other gray wolves in New York. But it wasn't all always that way.

Regan Downey 05:00

Wolves actually used to live all across the United States. The only state that did not have any type of wolf was Hawaii. So there was a mix of gray wolves and red wolves living across the United States, and wolves were hunted virtually to extinction. They were killed out of fear, misguided fear. Wolves are not dangerous to humans, but they were killed. Also, because people thought they would pose threats to their livestock. So people thought wolves might eat their cows and their sheep. And they thought the best way to solve this was just by killing wolves. And this did cause the wolf population to drop. About 400 years ago, scientists think there were maybe a quarter of a million wolves living across the lower 48 states. So about 250,000. In the 1970s, there were less than 700. And they were living in northern Minnesota, and on an island off the coast of Michigan. So thankfully, there's something in the United States called the Endangered Species Act, and it was passed in 1973. So we're celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. And that gave wolves protections. So people couldn't hunt them; people couldn't trap them or shoot them. And thankfully, we've seen the wolf population increase, but we've not yet seen wolves make it back to New York permanently. So New York hasn't had a resident kind of thriving wolf population since at least the 1890s. We do, however, have wolves that sometimes cross through the state, because we're so close to Canada. Canada has a very large population of wolves. And it's natural for wolves to disperse, which means they leave their families, and they head out looking for a new place to live. But they also head out looking for new wolves to live with. And because we don't have any wolves in New York State, any wolves coming here aren't really going to find what they're looking for. So we've not yet had an established population. But I imagine with protections and with wolves expanding elsewhere, it's only a matter of time before they make their way back into New York State. And so it's important that people here are ready to welcome them back.

Jane 06:53

You said wolves are not dangerous to humans. But all of these wolves are in enclosures. And on the fence it says "No hands on the fence" and we're not going to go in and pet these wolves or anything. So...I assume that's partly to keep them here so they're not traveling around and getting hit by cars. But they're also wild animals and you can't just go up--they're not little like dogs that you keep in your house. You can't pet them.

Regan Downey 07:14

Correct. Wolves are not pets for people; they are wild animals. But technically any wild animal is dangerous. We know we don't want to approach deer in our yards. Deer are actually very dangerous. And it's important with wolves, even though we know they're not dangerous, we still want people to remember that it's better to keep a safe distance. And that's really for the comfort of the animal. Wolves are very afraid of people naturally. Our two ambassador wolves are not necessarily afraid of people; they've been socialized from young pups, so they are used to humans. However, that means because they show no fear, they could actually be a bit more dangerous.

Regan Downey 07:51

It's important to keep wild animals wild if you want them to stay away from people. Typically, we see that with wild animals of any species. When they do become considered dangerous it's when they're habituated or when they're used to people. And maybe that's from people feeding them in their backyards. Like bird feeders, for example. Those could be a nice food source for black bears. And so then black bears start spending more time your people and then maybe they think they can make a nice little den under your deck. And then that's where they have their children. And so if we create more attracting areas for wildlife that are near people, that's when you might start to see problems begin.

Max 08:32

My name is Max. I'm five. I live in California. How are wolves made and where do they come from? And how to wolves turn into dogs?

Jed 08:51

Hello, I'm Jed. I'm eight years old, and I'm from Colchester, Vermont. I live in [unclear], Northern Ireland. How did wolves become pugs?

Finley 09:03

My name is Finley. I'm from Edinburgh, Scotland. I'm eight years old. How do wolves domesticate into dogs?

Regan Downey 09:13

Basically, scientists think that all wolves today descend from a common ancestor that was like a wolf. And over the years, that ancestor and its offspring kind of split off. And so wolves that we have today, and dogs actually had a common ancestor. But just like wolves branched from their common ancestor, dogs and wolves branched from a common ancestor. So dogs are actually the closest wolf relatives. And scientists think wolves and dogs split off maybe 12-40,000 years ago. So there's still a lot of uncertainty there. But basically wolves, dogs, are canids. And so they came from an ancient kind of wolf relative. But today we just have wolves and dogs; that ancient relative has gone extinct. And wolves have evolved into many different types of wolves as well.

Jane 10:10

Okay, so that's how wolves and dogs split into two distinct types of animals. But how did dogs become house pets that sometimes curl up in our beds and live in our homes, while wolves are still very, very wild?

Regan Downey 10:24

Scientists still debate exactly how dogs came to be from wolves. But one of the most commonly accepted ideas is I think what many of us have heard of is that some wolves realized that if they spent more time near people, they might get some extra scraps of food. And then what humans were tossing away, the wolves were eating, and eventually, some wolves became more comfortable around humans. And then their children were more comfortable as a result. And over time, those wolves were just always near people. And then because they weren't living and kind of needing to survive in the wild, they started to change just a bit because they maybe didn't need to have as great of a sense of smell because they were spending time with people. Rather than having to search for their food, people would give it to them. And so over the years, we eventually started seeing many different dogs come to be, and then those dogs were very separate from wolves. But other wolves were still out in the wild, because maybe they weren't as comfortable around people. So they still continue to exist as well.

Jane 11:26

Now as for how we got from wolves to pugs, those little dogs with the buggy eyes, well, we could do a whole episode about different domesticated dog breeds. But basically, when people got involved and decided they either wanted their dogs to do specific things like help with hunting or be guard dogs, or be cute little companions that are easy to pick up and put in your lap, they started breeding dogs that seemed like they were really good at those things. So they would maybe put two kind of small dogs with cute faces together to have puppies. And then those puppies would make more puppies with another really cute little small dog. And over time, those cute little small dogs started to take on a specific look. And they got their own breed name--in this case, pugs. The American Kennel Club says pugs, in particular are actually one of the oldest known dog breeds. They've been around for thousands of years. Here's a question from Jessie, who lives in Ontario, Canada,

12:25

And I'm four years old. Where some habitats that wolves like?

Regan Downey 12:30

So wolves can live in a variety of habitats. The one kind of limiting factor thing that would prevent wolves from living in a certain area is if there are a lot of people. Wolves are not comfortable living around humans. But outside of that, wolves can live in the desert, wolves can live in the Arctic tundra. Wolves can live in the woodlands, they can live in rainforests. There are some wolves that live on the Pacific coast of Canada. There's a really cool area called the Great Bear Rainforest. And there are wolves that live there. And they actually swim along the coastline. And they catch fish and crabs and oysters. And one wolf even swam seven and a half miles to get from one island to another. So wolves can live really in anywhere that has food, water and shelter. But if there are a lot of people there, they're not going to be spending time there. And that's one of the main differences we see between wolves and some of their relatives, like coyotes or dogs. These animals are very good at living near people. And wolves have not gotten good at that.

Martin 13:35

My name is Martin. I live in Omaha, Nebraska. I'm seven years old. How do wolves run fast for so long?

Regan Downey 13:45

Wolves can run fast, but it depends on what animal you're comparing them to. So compared to humans, yes, wolves can run very fast. When a wolf is sprinting, they can actually run at about 35 to 38 miles per hour. But if they're chasing an animal like a moose or an elk, animals that wolves like to eat, those animals can sometimes run about 40 to 45 miles per hour. So wolves are fast, but they're not really as fast as their prey if they're chasing a very healthy prey animal. However, wolves can travel very far distances, so they're really good endurance animals. So think about it like a marathon runner, for people, versus a sprinter. Sprinters can reach very fast speeds, but they can't sustain that speed for a very long, whereas a marathon runner will travel not quite as fast, but they can maintain that pace for very, very long. And wolves are like that. So wolves can travel sometimes up to 30 miles in one day. And they might do that at a speed of about five miles per hour. But they'll save their sprinting speed for when they're chasing their prey, because that's when they really do need to use all of their energy to run as fast as they can because their prey is also running as fast as it can.

Sonnie 14:59

Why do wolves howl at the moon? My name is Sunny and I'm eight years old and I am from Danville, Indiana.

Eva 15:06

My name is Eva. I am six and a half years old. I live in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Logan 15:13

Hi, my name is Logan. I'm eight years old. I live in Victoria, Australia and I'm almost nine.

Olivia 15:19

I'm Olivia. I'm six years old. I live in Corcoran, Minnesota.

Lettie 15:23

Hi, my name is Lettie. I'm five and a half years old. I live in North Bennington, Vermont.

Michael 15:29

My name is Michael. My age is seven, and I live in Toronto, Canada. My question is how do wolves howl?

Nate 15:40

Hi, my name is Nate. I'm five years old. I live in North Carolina. Why do wolves howl at the moon?

Regan Downey 15:48

So wolves can howl for many reasons. For wolves to howl is just one of their many ways of communicating with each other. They can communicate verbally, which means they'll make noises, typically a howl. But they can also communicate non verbally, which means they won't make any sounds but they can communicate using body language. But howls are great because wolves can hear howls up to 10 miles away over open terrain. So if they're separated from their family, they can howl. If they're looking for a new wolf to live with, they can howl as well. They can howl to warn potential

invaders not to come any closer. But sometimes will tell just to sing. [Wolf howls can be heard underneath the speaker.] So scientists have found that with wolves, howling can be kind of like the social glue of a family. And so you can think about it as if you're sitting at the table with your family at the end of the day. And everyone's sharing what they did at school or at work. And it makes you feel more connected as a family because you know what's going on. And with wolves howling can achieve that same thing because families can sing together. And it's a good way to kind of strengthen those bonds.

Jack 16:52

My name is Jack, I am seven years old. I live in Marleton, New Jersey, I want to know, do wolves have different howls?

Regan Downey 17:06

Every wolf has their own voice just like every human does. And so it's not just the same sound. And sometimes wolf families will harmonize and it will make their pack appear a bit larger in size.

Jane 17:18

Here's something interesting: Wolves from different parts of the world have different howls kind of like different languages. Researchers have actually isolated 21 different wolf dialects. Those howls was your hearing now are the two ambassador wolves we met earlier: Nikai and Alawa--and Regan. She howls to them and they howl back at her. But she says Alawa is actually famous for being kind of a lazy howler.

Ambient sound 17:48

Wolf making a grumbly howling noise.

Regan Downey 17:50

Her videos have millions of views because she likes to howl, but she also likes to sleep. And so sometimes she'll still lay down, but she'll howl and it's more of a groan. But she'll do it for as long as the rest of the wolves are howling. And so it's really funny. So just like humans have those unique voices and some like to sing in certain ways wolves like to sing in certain ways, too.

Jane 18:12

I guess even wolves feel lazy sometimes! Coming up. Why are people afraid of wolves? And should we be?

BREAK 18:19

[BREAK]

Jane 18:22

This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids. I'm Jane Lindholm. We're on a trip to The Wolf Conservation Center in South Salem, New York to visit and learn about wolves with the center's director of education, Regan Downey. Wolves are typically born in the springtime. So every April and May the wolves at the Conservation Center get birthday presents. What do you think a good birthday

present for a wolf would be? I bet this will surprise you. But it turns out wolves really like perfume! Out in the wild, wolves like to roll in strong scents and get them all over their bodies. You might have a pet dog that likes to do that, too. A lot of human perfumes smell really strong, and the wolves like them. So on special occasions, the wolf center will spray perfume on cardboard to put in the wolf enclosures.

Regan Downey 19:14

People will sometimes donate their leftover perfume bottles. We get cologne...Axe body spray is a big one that is donated to us--it's very strong. But the wolves love it. The stronger the scent, the better.

Jane 19:25

You're not spraying it behind their ears or on their wrists.

Regan Downey 19:28

No, they actually do this quote "spraying" themselves. Because the boxes are very smelly. We throw the boxes in and then the wolves roll on the boxes. It's a way for wolves to mark their territory. They have scent glands located along their back in different parts of their body. So they're marking the present as their own but in turn, they're getting marked by the present as well. We've also given them bubble machines in the past and blow bubbles into their enclosure. So they always get something fun. We want them to know that they're appreciated and loved and birthdays are a great way to show that.

Jane 19:56

It wasn't anyone's birthday the day we were visiting. So no smelly perfumed wolves. But we did get to see a different kind of special treat: two red wolves who were visible in their enclosure as we walked past.

Regan Downey 20:11

The one that's laying down closest to us, that's the female. Her name is Lava. And she actually just turned seven. Her birthday was on April 6, and her mate, Tyke, is standing behind her a few yards back, and he's crunching on a bone or a stick or something.

Jane 20:26

When we first spotted her, I thought she looked almost like a fox.

Regan Downey 20:29

Yes. Oh, yes, red wolves do look very similar to foxes. And actually, almost as if like a fox and a coyote had a child. The name implies that they have bright red coats, and they do not. It's actually more of like a dark brown kind of orange color. Sometimes the backs of their ears have orange tints. But they do blend in very, very well with their surroundings. And because these wolves are the wolf that would have lived in the southeastern United States, they do have slightly larger ears to help with heat dispersal. They have very long legs, but they're also a bit smaller as well. So they're a bit more petite in size. It's very rare for red wolves to be upwards of 80 pounds or so. So they're very, very small. But just like with other wolves, and like humans as well, with you know, humans can have different hair color, different features, red wolves can have different coat colors, but still be red wolves. So we had a red wolf a few years ago, his name was Jack, and he was actually almost entirely gray and white, and there was

barely any red. And there also used to be a type of red wolf that was actually black. So black red wolves. And they're now that kind of color phase has gone extinct. But they were fully black, but like a red wolf, and it was really cool to see pictures. Red wolves are fascinating.

Jane 21:48

Regan told us these two red wolves might be having a litter of red wolf pups in the few weeks after we visit. And the hope of the center is that these wolves will eventually be released with their puppies into the wild. So they make sure to keep these wolves as wild as possible while they're living at the center. And we felt really lucky to see them. But not everyone feels the same excitement Regan feels when they think about wolves in the wild. And several of you have picked up on that.

Emily 22:17

I'm Emily, I'm nine years old. I live in Hampton, Virginia. And my question is, why are people scared of wolves?

Regan Downey 22:25

People have been afraid of wolves for a very, very long time. But other groups of people have not been afraid of wolves. And so it really depends on where people grew up and what their culture told them about wolves. Many indigenous cultures actually really like wolves. But many people that grew up in Europe, hundreds of years ago, they had been told stories about wolves: Wolves were dangerous, wolves were scary. Because historically, yes, there have been examples of wolves attacking people. But this was also at times where people were venturing out into wolf territory. And so if you're moving into an area where wolves live, you have to understand that you're then becoming the invader, and you're approaching areas where they typically feel safe. And so those stories were passed on. And eventually it was just what people grew up hearing. You might be familiar with some fairy tales that tell us wolves are scary. Little Red Riding Hood, for example. The Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf. But because people read stories, and they watch werewolf movies, they grow up believing that wolves are just as dangerous in real life, and they're actually not. In the last 100 years in all of North America, only two people have been killed by healthy wolves. There's no reason to be afraid. However, we do need to respect them. Respecting an animal means giving it space and letting it do its own thing. And so for wolves, that means giving them space to be wild. Because if we don't bother wolves, they won't bother us.

Saoirse 23:54

My name is Saoirse. And I live in Qatar. I'm six. And I want to know if wolves eat people.

Jane 24:02

No, Saoirse, humans are not wolf food and wolves don't eat humans. Wolves are carnivores, meaning they eat meat, but they typically choose things like elk, deer, rabbits, and mice.

Arlo 24:14

My name is Arlo. I am five years old, and I live in Salt Lake City, Utah. My question is how do we protect wolves from the hunters?

Jane 24:23

What are the hunting rules? And more broadly, how do we protect these wolves?

Regan Downey 24:28

Sure. So that's a great question, Arlo. And it's also important to note that hunting of wolves does vary by country. So if you're living in Europe or Asia, your guidelines might be very, very different. But in the United States, gray wolves can be hunted in Montana, Wyoming and Idaho, because they don't have Endangered Species Act protections in those states. And they also don't have Endangered Species Act protections in a tiny little corner in Utah. Elsewhere in Utah though they are protected but you currently doesn't have any wolves living in the state. But sometimes wolves do travel through.

Jane 25:05

Regan says many people who kill wolves aren't doing it to get food for themselves or their families. They're often either killing wolves because they're scared of them, because they think wolves might kill their livestock like sheep or cows, or basically for fun. And that's something she'd like to find a way to stop.

Regan Downey 25:23

Wolves are a keystone species, which means they have a huge impact on things that share their landscape or their ecosystem. And so it's important to have wolves living in the wild, because they just make sure everything else is doing its job. So they make sure all of the other animals are doing what they're supposed to do, and they make sure that no population is getting too big. So they're really good to have in the wild.

Jane 25:47

Even if you find wolves a little scary to think about. Remember this: wild animals, even the big predators, are really important to the health of our landscapes. And wolves are generally more afraid of you than you are of them. Maybe sometime you'll get a chance to see one running away from you in the distance in the wild, or up close and personal at a responsible wildlife center like this one. It might give you a different perspective on wolves.

Jane 26:14

I hope you enjoyed this episode. Thanks to the Wolf Conservation Center in South Salem, New York, and to Regan Downey for letting us come visit. Now if you have something else you'd like us to do an episode about, tell us! We talk about animals a lot because you send us a lot of animal questions. But we're happy to talk about whatever's on your mind that you'd like to learn a little more about. So tell us your first name, where you live and how old you are, and of course what your question is, and your adult can use a smartphone to record you. And then they should mail the file to questions@butwhykids.org. But Why is produced by Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm, at Vermont Public and distributed by PRX. Our team also includes Kaylee Mumford and Kianna Haskin. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious!