

# Life and behaviour of wolves: *enrichment for captive wolves*



Mosi and Mai inspect their new rope fender

**A**t the UK Wolf Conservation Trust we believe that overall enrichment programmes for our wolves is essential for their mental, emotional and physical wellbeing. This is reflected in how we raise them, their day to day management, the activities they do and the environment they live in. Their lives are a balance of ambassadorial work and free time to be wolves.

All our wolves act naturally whether that is hunting behaviours we see, how they interact with each other and their reactions to new stimuli. The lack of stress related behaviour is due to their rich and varied lives and the natural environment we try to emulate within their spacious enclosures.

*Toni Shelbourne, Education Officer and Senior Wolf Handler, explains how the Trust has achieved this.*

## **Environmental Enrichment: space**

Wolves in the wild have large territories and although in captivity this cannot be achieved it is still important to give them sufficient room to hunt, play, run and get away from each other. At the Trust the three enclosures are around two acres each and only house small packs. The packs are tight family units which interact well and, apart from breeding season when the wolves' aggression naturally increases, limited levels of aggression are seen within each group making them stable and content.

*More often than not they choose to greet, and every visitor is guaranteed to see wolves.*

Enclosures should be large enough for wolves to chase, at full speed, each other and any unfortunate small animal or bird that ventures in. Our wolves are often clocked running up to 25 - 30 miles an hour. This helps keep them in peak condition with good muscle tone and healthy bones.

Although wolves have a tendency to travel the same paths in their enclosures, as they would in the wild, our enclosures stay relatively green and mud free even in the worst wet weather seasons apart from the main entrance in and out of the yard areas and the well worn paths. The wolves use the whole of the space provided but tend to have their favourite resting spots.

Depending on the time of year, wolves have a tendency to disperse themselves when sleeping during the day and lower ranking wolves in breeding season like to keep a low profile. Having large enclosures enables this to happen. The wolves do not feel crowded and therefore inter-pack squabbling is relatively non-existent.

As our wolves are socialised it means they have a tendency to run up to the fences to see who is around and also show all their natural behaviour out in the open. They choose to ignore, greet or hide away from visitors and handlers. More often than not they choose to greet, and every visitor to the Trust is guaranteed to see wolves.

## Environment

It's not just space a wolf needs, what you put in their space is very important too. They need a rich variety of objects and areas so that they have choice. Of course they do need simple open areas which are open to direct sunlight too, wolves love to

*In the winter the ice gives them something else to chew on and play with.*

sunbathe. Within our enclosures we have platforms for jumping onto, greeting people from, hiding out of the weather and to see down the site from. The platforms are sometimes two tiered or have rope boat fenders attached to them from poles so the wolves can chew. We sometimes also string dead birds to them so the wolves can jump up and practice hunting behaviours.

Other structures in the enclosures include log and brush piles. These are good for the insects and birds but also provide objects to be chewed and climbed on, hidden in or played around.

Mounds are also provided to allow the wolves to get up high and see the whole of the site and they are often seen either sitting or sleeping on top of them. They are

also good vantage points for howling. One mound even has a concrete tunnel leading to an underground den and the wolves often play around the entrance, or use it to guard themselves from mock group attacks.

Wolves love water and ideally all our enclosures would have wolf-proof ponds in them. Until then, water troughs are situated by the fences for ease of refilling and to give visitors endless entertainment watching the wolves jumping in and out and sometimes dragging each other in, too. In the summer it helps keep them cool and in the winter the ice gives them something else to chew on and play with. The new pond in the bottom enclosure is regularly used by the wolves and can also be used for food trails, using the waterfall as a good hiding place for food. The pond has been a great success and all the wolves love to take a dip.

Cover from bad weather and the provision of shade is also important, so many trees have been planted as well as wooden kennels provided. These are also both sources of play and chew objects. Kennels with raised beds and straw bedding are provided overnight for our older wolves so they can get out of the elements.

Grass cutting is kept to a minimum within the enclosures to ensure habitat for wild life as well as cosy hideaways for the



Kodiak explores the new waterfall

wolves. However, a track is usually cut around the enclosure so the wolves still have a race track to run, which they use to the full.

Within each enclosure there is a holding pen. This, if not being used, is left open but if we need to get in to do maintenance within the main area the wolves can still have access to a large grassed area which keeps their stress levels down. The holding pen is also essential for separating a sick wolf without breaking the bond within the pack as the wolves can still see each other. Over the years we have had to separate a number of wolves for short periods of time and we have always been successful in reintroducing them back into the main group. Occasionally we might have to shut down an enclosure so one of the holding pens is double skinned. This enables two packs to live temporarily in one enclosure without causing each other injury.

## Mental Enrichment: socialised versus non-socialised wolves

There has been a long-standing debate about which is better. At the Trust we firmly believe that socialised wolves are happy, healthy, have minimal stress and that socialisation does not interfere with natural behaviour, apart from removing their fear of humans. It enables them to live in bigger enclosures, receive veterinary attention, often without sedation, and enables them to visit different places without causing stress; in

fact they seem to thrive on the variety. The one down-side to socialisation is that human contact needs to start before the cubs' eyes are open. However, the majority of wolves at the Trust were either rejected by their mothers or were surplus to requirements, so socialisation was the alternative to a much worse scenario. Cubs are introduced to many different situations and experiences as youngsters and, like domestic dogs that

are socialised, are confident in many situations.

Our wolves enjoy interacting with humans but instead of wolves learning how to act around humans it is more like humans learning the rules and language of wolves. These

are not domesticated animals and should not be treated as such. Unlike dogs that remain puppy-like in their behaviours throughout their lives, wolves mature into dominant, forceful, intelligent

*These are not domesticated animals and should not be treated as such.*

individuals who can sense how you feel by scent and extremely subtle body language signals. They know we are not wolves but we still have to act authoritatively in their presence and gain their respect.

## Mental stimulation

Mental stimulation is provided in a variety of ways, however, care is taken to allow for the behaviour of predators to just sleep during the day. Wolves are crepuscular, meaning they are active at dawn and dusk and our management allows for this. During the day they have down-times but also perform a limited ▶



Mai claims her Halloween pumpkin full of autumn wolf treats

◀ amount of ambassador duties. With three packs the workload is spread. They may go on a walk with visitors or a student might be doing non-invasive research which might involve food, scents or noises. We also complement this type of activity with food trails, problem-solving treat balls in the shape of melons or pumpkins; they might even get meat versions of ice lollipops in the hot summer months.

*it is our duty to ensure they are kept as naturally and stress-free as possible.*

The danger is not to give them too much stimulation, so the balance is monitored to allow for wolves to be wolves. Of course, the best form of mental stimulation and comfort is to be part of a stable pack and we try to ensure our wolves remain within a pack for the whole of their lives. For example, when one of our older females passed away we were left with a single male, Kodiak. As he had previously known and lived with Dakota and Duma, two females, we felt there would be no problem reintroducing him to their pack. Care was taken to observe



Torak and Mosi play with a snowball

their behaviour with a fence between them for several days and they were taken for a walk together before mixing took place. The introduction was very successful and he didn't have to live as a single wolf.

As the keepers of captive wild animals it is our duty to ensure they are kept as naturally and as stress-free as possible. This is greatly helped by an understanding of their behaviours and natural cycles. ■

Toni Shelbourne  
Education Officer and Senior Wolf Handler