

# The Wolf in the Living Room



**For centuries, wolves**—incredibly charismatic, highly social and extremely intelligent—have held a special place in our consciousness, starring in as many nightmares as they have in paintings and pop songs. With their bigger brains, stronger muscles, and teeth and jaws many times more powerful than any dog's, they're also quite dangerous, capable of killing an elk, a moose, even a bison.

It's both understandable and surprising that people want to take a bit of that wildness home in the shape of a wolf/dog mix—or "wolfdog"—which some consider to represent the best of both worlds: a dog's friendly companionship paired with a wolf's good looks and untamed nature. Buy a wolfdog, the thinking goes, and live out your Jack London fantasies, even if you're in Akron rather than Anchorage.

As with many things, reality is not so simple. Wolfdogs are perhaps the most misunderstood—and, many would argue, mismanaged—animals in America. Advocates say they can be wonderful pets, while opponents argue that they're unpredictable, untrainable and inherently dangerous. They're permitted in some places, forbidden in others and are showing up on breed-ban lists, along with Pits and other

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**Continued: THE WOLF**

so-called "dangerous breeds."

What's more, there's no approved rabies vaccination for wolfdogs. While the federal government officially sees them as domestic pets (and leaves their regulation to individual states and municipalities), they're treated as wild animals when it comes to rabies. Thus, the wolfdog who bites a person can be considered a rabies risk—even if he's been vaccinated—because the USDA, which regulates veterinary medicines, does not extend approval for use of the standard rabies vaccine with "hybrids" (the vaccine is approved for use in dogs, cats, ferrets and horses). Euthanasia is necessary, the USDA says, because the only reliable test for rabies requires an examination of the animal's brain.

Wolfdog owners are encouraged to vaccinate their animals, but to do so, they have to make a tough choice: lie to their veterinarian about the animal's lineage or sign a waiver stating that they understand that the vaccine is being used "off-label" on a hybrid animal and thus cannot be relied upon to deliver full protection against rabies, and that their animal can be impounded and put down if it bites someone—a high-stakes gamble, and one for which the wolfdog could pay with his life.

When it comes to their legal status, the regulations are literally all over the map. At the time of this article's publication, it's illegal to keep one as a pet in Alaska, Connecticut, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, North Dakota and Rhode Island. However, in some of these states—Alaska, Michigan and North Dakota—a wolfdog can be "grandfathered" in. Other states—Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Texas and Utah—don't regulate ownership on a state level, instead leaving it up to individual counties. Among the states that allow wolfdogs, many require the owner to obtain a permit, or mandate registration and/or confinement in specific kinds of cages. In some states (New York, for example), that means getting a

"dangerous animal" permit—the same type needed to keep a lion.

And, legal or not, wolfdogs pose significant behavioral challenges for owners, many of whom are unable or unwilling to meet them, thus creating a large population of unwanted animals who wind up chained in backyards, abandoned or euthanized.

"These are beautiful animals, and a lot of people are attracted to something that's exotic and different," says Nicole Wilde, a wolfdog expert and author of *Wolfdogs: A-Z* ([nicolewilde.com](http://nicolewilde.com)). "They want to own a piece of the wild, and they often say that the wolf is their spiritual sign or totem animal. Unfortunately, they don't realize that it's not really the same thing as having a wolf in their living room."

Like Pit Bulls and pornography, wolfdogs can be tough to identify, regardless of laws passed to limit them. Several years ago, the USDA released a report estimating that there were about 300,000 wolfdogs in the US; how they came to this metric is unclear, as the numbers are impossible to nail down. Some people deny their pets' heritage, while others claim their 100 percent dogs are part wolf. In fact, experts say that the vast majority of animals sold (or bragged about) as wolfdogs actually possess very low wolf content, or none at all.

Part of the problem is that there's no clear definition of what a wolfdog is, says Nancy Brown, director of Full Moon Farm ([fullmoonfarm.org](http://fullmoonfarm.org)), a wolfdog rescue and sanctuary in Black Mountain, N.C. Most experts use the term to describe an animal with a pure wolf in its family, no more than four or five generations back. But there's no way of proving any animal's pedigree, as there is no breed registry (and no such thing as "papers" for a wolf or wolfdog, no matter what those who breed them contend). Genetic testing is theoretically possible but, as it is reserved for wildlife management and law-enforcement agencies, is essentially unavailable to individuals. Phenotyping—having an expert evaluate



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an animal’s physical and behavioral characteristics—remains the most accessible way to identify a wolfdog. Unfortunately, few are trained in phenotyping wolfdogs and, as a result, many dogs are erroneously labeled.

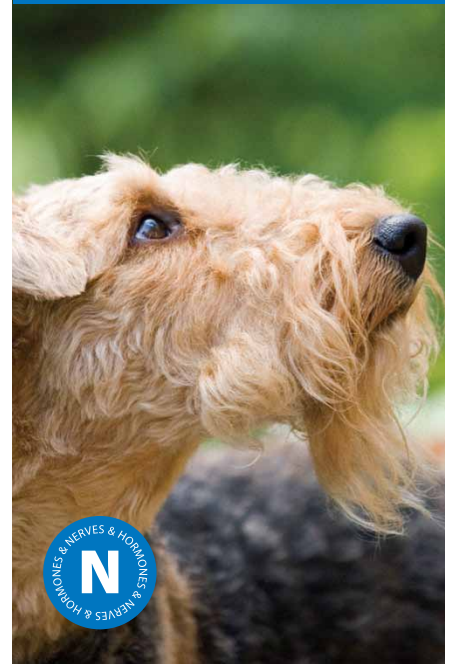
Even if you could draw its family tree, there’s no way to predict an animal’s “wolfiness,” says Stephen L. Zawistowski, PhD, executive vice president and science advisor for the ASPCA. “I’ve seen ads for animals that are ‘98 percent pure wolf,’ but these are bogus numbers,” he says. “These claims are based on the misguided belief that genes blend like food coloring: if you take half red and half blue, you get a nice, even purple.” In reality, he says, genes “blend” more like marbles. Say you have a dog, represented by 20 red marbles, and a wolf, represented by 20 blue ones. If you breed the two, you’ll get 10 marbles from each parent, so you’ll have half of each color; this is an F1 (Filial 1, or first filial generation)

cross. But in subsequent generations, you’ll get a random assortment of red and blue from each parent. So the individual offspring of two F1, 50/50 wolfdogs (an F2 cross, a generation removed from full wolf) could have anywhere from three-quarters wolf genes and one-quarter dog genes to three-quarters dog and one-quarter wolf—yet all will be considered one-half wolf. Thus, he says, you can see enormous variations among wolfdogs, even those who come from the same litter.

Knowing an individual animal’s filial number—the number of generations it is removed from a pure wolf—is probably the best way to speculate about its future behavior and potential problems, says Kim Miles, vice president of the Florida Lupine Association ([florida.lupine.org](http://florida.lupine.org)), a wolfdog advocacy group. “Wolfdogs aren’t easily pegged because they’re essentially a combination of wild and domesticated animals.” According to Miles, the biggest difference between

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a wild and a domestic animal is its tractability, or the ease with which it can be managed or controlled. “A dog is like a 12-year-old child, and a wolf is like a 35-year-old man. The dog will generally do what you want it to, but the wolf will do what you want only if he wants to do it himself.”

Experts agree that the vast majority of wolfdog breeders are selling dogs with little or no wolf content, despite the fact that the animals fetch as much as \$2,500 apiece. Moreover, the majority of “wolfdogs” being kept as pets—and being surrendered to shelters and sanctuaries—are all dog, too. “I’d say about 70 percent of the so-called ‘wolfdogs’ out there are not wolfdogs at all,” notes Ken Collings, director of Wolfdog Rescue Resources, Inc. ([wrr-inc.org](http://wrr-inc.org)), a national rescue organization headquartered in Stafford, Va. “Individuals take Malamutes, Shepherds and other dogs and cross-breed them until they get an animal who looks like a wolf. And because most people [who want a wolfdog] are uneducated [about them] and have no idea what they’re looking at, they buy it.”


Unfortunately, people who like the

idea of owning a fearsome predator as well as those with a misguided nature fetish often don’t understand what they’re getting into. In many cases, a person will think he has had experience with wolfdogs in the past—maybe he had or knew an animal who he thought was a hybrid but was, in fact, all dog—and decides to get a wolfdog puppy. “Only this time, he gets the real thing,” Collings says. “And by the time the pup is five or six months old, [she’s] eaten the couch or clawed [her] way through the drywall.”

Of course, not all wolfdogs behave the same way, and there’s probably more variety in behavior among wolfdogs than any other kind of dog. “You have to remember that a wolfdog is not a wolfdog is not a wolfdog,” says Brown. “There’s no such thing as ‘typical.’”

“A high-content animal is probably going to act a lot more ‘wolfie’ than a low-content animal,” adds Wilde. “With a high-content wolfdog, you might start out with the puppy in the house and then, as he hits adolescence, you’ll be building an enclosure outside. You’ll have to.” It’s for just these reasons that many experts, including

Wilde, discourage people from breeding wolfdogs, or buying wolfdog pups from breeders.

“The average dog owner won’t deal with their Beagle, and can’t handle an ordinary dog’s behavior problems,” says Wilde, who rescued a wolf and two wolfdogs several years ago. She can personally attest to the challenges of keeping these beautiful canines. “I worked with them to the point that I could look between their paw pads and look at their teeth—and give them tummy rubs—but I never forgot what they really were.” 

*Editors’ Note: In our opinion, despite their undeniable beauty and appeal, deliberately breeding or purchasing wolfdogs as companion animals does a disservice to both *Canis lupus* and *Canis lupus familiaris* as well as to the individual animal. If you love wolves, honor their ancient connection with our domestic dogs by joining the effort to preserve their habitat and maintain their status as a federally protected species. HSUS ([hsus.org](http://hsus.org)) and the Defenders of Wildlife ([defenders.org](http://defenders.org)) are just two of many groups working on their behalf.*

## WOLF 101

Experts have determined that wolves and dogs share more than 99 percent of their DNA, but those few strands make a big difference. As a wild animal, a wolf must be self-sufficient, capable of finding (and killing) prey, fending off enemies and generally preserving its own life—essentially the opposite of what you want in an animal who’s sharing your home. Wolfdogs may display any or all of these behaviors to one degree or another, including:

- **High-level curiosity.** Wolves are constantly exploring their environment, says Frank Wendland, executive director of the WOLF Sanctuary ([wolfsanctuary.net](http://wolfsanctuary.net)) in La Porte, Colo. In the wild, that means knowing every inch of a territory that can comprise from 50 to 1,000 square miles. In your house, that means knowing what’s inside everything, including the cabinets, appliances and furniture. “Wolfdogs have to investigate,” he says. “We have a TV on the wall of our office, and I’ve seen them go into the adjoining room to see where the image is coming from.” Quite often, this exploration is done with teeth and claws. “I’ve seen them shred barbecues, walls, sofas,” he says.
- **A drive to roam.** Hard-wired to guard their turf against other packs as well as intruders of other species, they’re also

wide-ranging creatures, and in the wild have been known to cover up to 30 miles a day. A wolf’s genes tell her to hit the road (and get out of any enclosure she’s been put into) and defend her territory. Wolves also mark their territory with urine more frequently and copiously than dogs do.

- **A propensity toward den-building and digging.** They can destroy your lawn (and furniture) in the same exercise and can also dig several feet down in order to escape from an enclosure.
- **A strong predatory instinct.** A wolf looks at other animals (with the exception of other wolves) as dinner. Pet wolfdogs often make short work of cats and small dogs, and may also attack bigger animals. Unfortunately, that drive can also be directed at humans; children are especially vulnerable. “A small child is really just about the size of a sheep or a fawn—bite size,” Zawistowski says. “And that small stumbling animal triggers the predatory behavior.” In the wild, a wolf would never be close enough to a child to have that instinct triggered, he says. But wolfdogs are regularly kept in homes with kids, with occasionally tragic results. “Wolves tend to avoid people, as most wild animals do,” says Zawistowski. “They have the ‘fight or flight’ thing, and most of the time, they choose flight. But when they fight, they’re really, really good at it.”