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Wolf hybrids: The call of the semi-wild

Rick Sinnott | Mar 18, 2011



It's an enduring myth of the North that dogs can become wolves and wolves, dogs. From folk tales to literature, from Jung's archetypes to the modern environmental movement, wolves are symbols of the distilled essence of the Wild. This is, I suspect, one reason why people own wolf hybrids, the progeny of a wolf mated to a dog. If you cannot possess a wolf, then a wolf-dog may be the next best thing.

Like wolves, many wolf hybrids are large and they can be dangerous. Some states, including Alaska, prohibit owning and selling wolf hybrids. But people still do.

Jack London is largely responsible for this predicament.

London wrote several novels and short stories based on his experience in the Klondike gold rush and subsequent float trip down the Yukon River in 1897-98, a relatively brief, youthful adventure that may have garnered more street cred than it deserved. He survived a winter in the Klondike, but he returned to California before a year was up. Yet his stories of Yukon adventure, often involving dogs, are still avidly read more than a century later.

In London's famous book "The Call of the Wild," a man allows his dog, named Buck, to become feral, to run with the wolves. London glorifies the dog's killing of wildlife: ptarmigan, rabbits, chipmunks, beavers, black bears, moose, and wolverines. Buck becomes "a great, gloriously coated wolf, like, and yet unlike, all other wolves." Ultimately, the dog is seen "running at the head of the pack through the pale moonlight or glimmering borealis..."

London's other most popular book "White Fang" -- and the mirror image of "The Call of the Wild" -- starred a wolf hybrid (three-fourths wolf) born in the wild. White Fang was captured and fetched up in California. He learned how to be a dog from the "gods" who owned him. One important lesson: don't eat domestic animals. "But the other animals -- the squirrels, and quail, and cottontails, were creatures of the Wild who had never yielded allegiance to man. They were the lawful prey of any dog." In captivity White Fang became "fat and prosperous and happy." The book's final scene left him drowsing peacefully in a stable doorway, surrounded by a litter of wolf hybrid pups.

Since London, the urge to own wolf hybrids has been nurtured by Hollywood. Films as diverse as "White Wilderness" (a Disney pseudo-documentary), "Never Cry Wolf," "Dances With Wolves," and the recent "Twilight" series, all featured winsome wolves, putative wolves, or computer-generated images of wolves that struck some chord with the public.

Wolf hybrids come in many shapes and sizes. A high-content hybrid, with a relatively high infusion of wolf DNA, often looks and behaves much like a wolf. Shy and often bonded to a single person or family -- its "pack" -- their behavior can change radically as they mature. Adult wolf hybrids, especially males, may "test" their owners, frequently in a natural attempt to gain status. Adult females may attack their owners or others in defense of young pups.

Wolf hybrids seldom enjoy the cushy life of the wolf-turned-dog, White Fang. Whereas a wolf is capable of trotting 50 miles in a day, the long-legged wolf hybrid is often confined in a pen, chained to a stake, or locked inside a building.

Unlike most dogs -- London's fictitious Buck being a noteworthy exception to the rule -- a high-content wolf hybrid is capable of surviving in the wild and breeding with wolves. Because of this, wolf hybrids may be more likely to transmit diseases to wild wolf populations. The potential for hybridization and disease to eradicate a wild wolf population is very real in a country like Sweden, where there are few wolves and lots of dogs. It is less likely in Alaska, but wildlife biologists still consider wolf hybrids an unacceptable risk to the integrity and health of wild wolf populations.

Most states are wolf-less, unless you count captive wolves. Alaska has thousands of wild wolves. Possession and sale of wolf hybrids is prohibited in only about one-fourth of states. Alaska has the strictest regulation. Although possession and sale have been prohibited for decades, the Alaska Board of Game revisited the law in 2002 because some thought it was ambiguous. The revised law still expressly outlaws owning wolf hybrids as pets; however, it allowed anyone who owned a wolf hybrid before January 23, 2002, to keep the animal if it was microchipped, registered, licensed, vaccinated, and neutered.

In little more than a decade Alaska should have been hybrid-free. But wolf hybrids are still being sold, still being chained to stakes, still busting out of confinement, and still attacking people and pets.

Just how many wolf hybrids are out there? No one knows. In the late 1990s, the Humane Society of the United States estimated 300,000 wolf hybrids in the United States. On average, this would be 6,000 in each state, but these numbers are almost certainly high. For example, although as many as 2,000 wolf-dogs were believed to be in Great Britain in the late 1990s, an exhaustive study -- titled "The Keeping of Wolf-Hybrids in Great Britain" -- concluded that most of these animals were not wolf hybrids. The authors, P. A. Cusdin and A. G. Greenwood, visited five of the seven licensed owners of wolf hybrids in England, Scotland and Wales and found only one animal that appeared to be a wolf hybrid and it was licensed as a wolf. Including unlicensed animals, they believed less than 10 wolf hybrids were in the entire country. Photos of pets that owners claimed were wolf hybrids are laughably doglike.

At least two factors contribute to the overestimation of wolf hybrids by owners and animal control agencies. As much as they want to own a wolf look-alike, some dog owners simply do not know what a wolf or wolf hybrid looks like. The Internet has examples of people claiming, or asking others to verify, that their mutt is a wolf hybrid. And people who sell wolf hybrids inflate their "content" or degree of wolf. A puppy born from the mating of a wolf and a dog is only 50 percent wolf. The only way to get a higher "content" is to subsequently

backcross wolf hybrids with wolves or higher content wolf hybrids. The incentive? Profit. A pup that is 90 percent wolf is worth more than one that is only 50 percent wolf. But it's much easier to claim an animal is 90 percent wolf than to actually breed one.

For years, Alaska's law was almost impossible to enforce because people who may have bragged about owning a wolf hybrid suddenly realized the animal was a "husky mix" when it attracted the attention of an animal control officer or state trooper. In some cases, an owner willing to admit his or her pet was a wolf hybrid was allowed to transfer possession to someone outside of Alaska. Some wolf hybrids were euthanized under local laws after biting someone. Other wolf hybrids were returned to their owners. Enforcement officers needed a DNA test that could determine whether an animal was a dog, a wolf, or something in between. Geneticists in California recently developed just such a test, seemingly the Holy Grail of wolf-hybrid enforcement. The test can be conducted inexpensively, using a saliva sample, by the forensics unit of the Veterinary Genetics Laboratory at the University of California, Davis.

However, even a DNA test wasn't strong enough evidence for Fairbanks assistant district attorney Ben Seekins. Charges were dropped against Terry Delbene of Healy, who had three large, wolflike pets in a fenced enclosure at his home in late January 2011. According to Wildlife Trooper Ralf Lysdahl, Delbene admitted knowing wolf hybrids were illegal in Alaska. But he called his animals Inuits. An Inuit dog is either a breed originating in northern Canada that typically looks a lot less like a wolf than Delbene's three pets, or it's a breed developed in the late 1980s that is supposed to resemble a wolf but looks more like a Malemute mix. An Internet search notes both possibilities.

Nevertheless, DNA tests confirmed two of Delbene's animals had recent wolf ancestry. Seekins could have reduced the charge to a violation -- like being charged with an unwitting speeding violation -- and prosecuted Delbene under the strict liability mental state, instead of holding him to the higher criminal standard of possessing two wolf hybrids "intentionally, knowingly, negligently or with criminal intent." He chose not to prosecute at all because recent wolf ancestry was not detected in one of the three females, which looked more or less like the other two. In other words, as Delbene said, he may have not known his pets were wolf hybrids.

Seekins' decision not to prosecute may have placed too much faith in the DNA tests. According to Beth Wictum, director of the veterinary forensics unit at UC Davis, an "animal certainly could have a lot of wolf in it and not have uniquely wolf DNA at the markers we test ... this is particularly true if it is a female," because nuclear DNA doesn't include Y-chromosomes from the male lineage.

"It's possible to have a full-blooded wolf," Wictum said, "with no uniquely wolf alleles in the nuclear DNA." In other words, the DNA test used to determine wolf ancestry in Delbene's pets is conservative. If the test says the animal is a wolf hybrid, then it's a good bet it is. If the test can't find evidence of recent wolf ancestry, then prosecutors may need to rely on physical and behavioral characteristics, statements by the owner and seller, or other evidentiary means. Delbene was advised that his animals were potentially wolf hybrids and he could eventually be charged for possessing them. One solution would be shipping them to a state that allows ownership of these semi-wild pets.

Wolves and wolf hybrids are not easy animals to keep as pets. Lois Crisler recounted the demise of eight wolves and at least as many wolf hybrid pups in her books, "Arctic Wild" and "Captive Wild." In 1953 and 1954, Lois and Herb Crisler bought seven wolf pups taken from dens in the Brooks Range and raised them in their wilderness camp for the Walt Disney film, "White Wilderness."

After filming, the wolves couldn't be released back into the wild, so five pups were taken to the Crislers' home in Colorado and kept in pens. All of them escaped regularly, and four were shot, poisoned, or never seen again. Another wolf was acquired from a zoo, but killed by her dogs. Unable to acquire more wolves, the Crislers bred their last wolf with a dog to obtain the next best thing, wolf hybrids. Agonizing over her inability to control her obstreperous and unpredictably dangerous pets, Crisler in the end fed sleeping pills to her last wolf and wolf-dog, followed by "a bullet to the center of the furry foreheads."

The title "Captive Wild" is an oxymoron, a combination of two incompatible words. Intended or not, the title captures the ironic, obsessive impulse of some people to own an animal because it symbolizes wildness.

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