

HOWL CHRONICLES

The Wolf Mountain Nature Center

February 2025

562 Hopkins Crandall Rd., Smyrna,
NY 13464

(607) 627-6784

twmncwolves@yahoo.com
TheWolfMountainNatureCenter.org

(a non-profit 501(c)3 organization)
Founded in 2006 by Will Pryor



Tauriel

Head Animal Caretaker's Message...Will Pryor

Stories of wolves & ravens: ancient interactions between these two animal species and the humans who walk the land where they live have been going on for thousands of years.

The crow must beware if it enters raven territory as the raven will fiercely protect its nesting territory. A magical shape shifter, cunning, deceptive, highly intelligent, a messenger from the spirit world, and, in the beginning, the bringer of light into the world, this corvid was/is highly revered by native peoples.

We are fortunate here at Wolf Mountain to share the forest with a family of resident ravens who seem to have learned the feeding schedule and patterns of our wolves and swoop right in for a nibble or two. Given the chance, the ravens will easily consume a third or more of the food meant for the wolves during the winter months. With the skill of a jewel thief, the ravens wait, watch, and

listen for the opportunity to rob from the wolves or even to trick the Center's staff.

An example of staff being played by a raven: during the summer we noticed a very loud squawking raven hopping around in a somewhat odd way. Its wing was held at such an angle that we thought perhaps it had an injured wing and couldn't fly (though it always seemed to appear at different locations throughout the Center grounds.) One day, Pam decided to offer it a fresh trout from the foxes' menu. She carefully approached the "injured" raven, balanced the fish on a tree branch only feet away from the bird and backed away. That deceptive little raven grabbed the fish and flew off—we could practically hear him laughing at our stupidity! Affectionately dubbed "Ranger" by one of our Interns, that raven continues to visit with his growing family looking for free handouts.

During one wolf feeding, staff watched a group of three very smart ravens trick Tehyah. Two ravens hopped on the ground pecking at small scraps of meat that fell from larger chucks while the third raven swooped over Tehyah distracting her. After a few minutes, the airborne raven hopped to the ground to feed and a full-bellied raven assumed the role of distractor. All three ravens continued to swap roles until all three had eaten and then flew off leaving behind a perplexed wolf.

On other occasion, a multitude of ravens circled a deer carcass being fed upon by one of the yearling wolves and did a sort of circle dance around the wolf and carcass with individuals taking turns hopping to the center to snatch a morsel.

Wolf-raven interactions provide hours of enrichment for both species and allow the wolves to retain sharp senses and to practice stalking and defense skills.

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Photo credit: allaboutbirds.org

Red-winged Blackbirds, the First Sign of Spring.

Erin Lord-Astles, Director

By mid-February, most of us upstate New Yorkers are winter weary. Over the next few weeks to months, each of us will likely be searching for any sign of spring - from buds forming on trees to snowdrop flowers and crocuses sprouting through melting snow.

It's common to hear people exclaim that spring has finally sprung when first noticing an American robin foraging for earthworms. It's true some robins do migrate, but many robins also remain in our northern region over winter. The more accurate avian-omen of warmer weather on the way would be to listen for the first "[conk-la-ree](#)" song of a red-winged blackbird...

Red-winged blackbirds are among the first migrating species to return to their northern breeding grounds in late February through March. Large flocks of males return first to establish nesting territories in northern swamps, marshes, and reedy wetlands. Some people say that male red-wings "wear their feelings on their shoulders" as they will display the red and yellow wing patches and loudly sing to defend territories against rival males and to attract females, who typically arrive around two weeks later. A male red-winged blackbird may have several females in his territory. The drabber colored females incubate eggs in a nest built near ground level in wetland vegetation such as cattails, alder, or willow.

During spring and fall migrations, red-winged blackbirds gather in wetland and open field habitat to forage. They commonly travel in mixed flocks with other species of blackbirds like the common grackle, rusty blackbird, brown headed cow birds, and European starlings.



Thousands of individuals in these mixed species flocks often engage in large, perfectly synchronized aerial displays known as “**murmurations**”. These flocks are not led by a single individual. When one individual bird changes speed or direction, they coordinate their movements with their nearest seven neighbors. Those individuals then coordinate their changes in movement with their nearest seven neighbors and so on until the information has travelled across flocks nearing the thousands very rapidly, resulting in movement so fluid it's as if a network of individuals forms one larger organism.

If you have an opportunity to stop and watch the swirling cloud of a blackbird murmuration during spring migration this year, try to take a moment to observe and appreciate the boundless forms these immense flocks can take. Notice how impressive and spectacular their coordinated efforts are. Take a moment to celebrate this beautiful natural phenomenon, because the first sights and sounds of red-winged blackbirds in Late-February through March are indeed an indicator that spring is on the way!



Common Grackle,

[Link to All About Birds, Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#)



Rusty Blackbird,

[Link to All About Birds, Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#)



Brown-headed Cowbird,

[Link to All About Birds, Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#)

Very gregarious species, often flocks together with other species of blackbirds. Shows very little territoriality in breeding grounds, sometimes nest in large colonies up to 200 pairs.

Overwinter in SE US, breed boreal wetlands of Canada, ADKs region of NYS. Population declined 85-99% over last 40 years likely due to habitat loss, competition with other species, effects of climate change.

Co-evolved with nomadic herds of elk and bison, developed strategy of brood parasitism. Lays eggs in nest of other species, leaving them to raise chick as own, sometimes outcompeting chicks of host species.



European Starling,

[Link to All About Birds, Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#)

European starlings are an introduced species. Many people credit starling colonization to a wealthy socialite and Shakespear enthusiast, Eugene Schieffelin in NYC's Central Park in 1890. However, there were actually several documented series of starling releases across NYS, Ohio, and Oregon between 1870-1890s during an era when people regularly experimented with translocating animals to new areas. Now there are millions of these foreign birds nationwide who're considered an invasive agricultural and urban pest that often outcompetes native bird species.

Foxes

Peg Fuller, Head Fox Care Specialist

Winter Wonderland with the Foxes

Winter is in full swing as I write this. Winter began on December 21st and ends March 20th. We have had a great winter so far regarding snow. After all, winter is supposed to be cold and have lots of snow at Wolf Mountain Nature Center. Aurora, Avalanche, and Snowflake think this cold weather and lots of snow are wonderful. They would really like more cold weather and more snow. Our coldest this season so far was -10F; that is air temperature, not wind chill.



The Arctic Foxes are very happy.

Even when the snow gets very frozen, they still dig holes to bury food or just because they can. When it is really windy and the snow is blowing, they will happily face the wind and enjoy the snow in their faces. If they are ready to curl up and sleep, they find a nice place in the snow, ignoring their shelters and piles of hay. Arctic foxes have one of the warmest pelts and their bodies are designed to adapt to the weather conditions. They can use their tail to lay on or tuck their nose into. Their fur is so thick that their body is dry under all the fur even with a heavy layer of snow on top of them.

So, what about our Gray Foxes, Trillium and Fern? Do they like snow? Gray foxes are native to New York state, so they survive in the cold weather in the wild. But it is obvious Fern and Trillium prefer warmer weather. Their coat maintains the same color, unlike the Arctics who change colors, but it does get a little thicker so they can adapt to the cold weather. In the wild they will find burrows, holes, brush, etc. to curl up and stay warm. Fern and Trillium have several shelters full of hay, but they too pick their own sleeping spots and kick out the hay. Gray foxes like to sleep in an elevated spot. The enclosure was designed with their needs in mind, so there are many elevated platforms for them. They have an area of their shelter that has a roof and an area that has fencing. In the winter they choose to curl up and sleep on the side of the enclosure that has a full roof, so the platform is not covered in snow. Being nocturnal animals they move around a lot in the evening and will travel throughout their enclosure



and will dig in the snow on occasion too. Footprints in the snow indicate where they go when we don't see them and it shows they are active in the evening. As with all our animals at Wolf Mountain, we make sure they have healthy food all year, but Fern and Trillium are looking forward to spring when the bugs come out and they can enjoy that special snack.

In the wild, foxes stay warm too. We may not see that spring is coming very soon, but the foxes do. They are already utilizing dens in the area. The dens are helping them stay warm but those same dens will be very active in the spring with the next generation. So, as you drive around upstate NY, look across fields and maybe you will see the tell-tale sign of little footprints in the snow around a den in a field. Mom and Dad fox are staying warm and in just a couple of months the kits will arrive.



Coyotes

Dave Conner, Head Coyote Care Specialist

Eastern Coyote's Winter Survival Adaptations and Behaviors

Coyotes start preparing for winter survival in early fall. They increase their consumption of small rodents, insects, fruits, grains, nuts, and vegetation which in turn increases their fat supplies and weight gain. Thick winter coats of fur begin to grow in and their bushy tails fill out in order to help conserve



body heat when the cold temperature arrive. The

metabolic rate of coyotes will decrease during colder months, thus allowing them to reduce the amount of food required to retain body heat. They can allow their body temperature to vary within a range rather than maintaining a constant core body temperature. The body of the coyote will reduce blood supplies to extremities (legs, ears, tail) to assist with maintenance of a core body temperature.

Hunting behaviors change during winter months in an effort to further conserve energy. In the deep snows of winter, it becomes more difficult to find and secure small game such as mice and chipmunks, so the coyotes focus more on medium sized game and use more stealthy tactics of tracking and stalking their prey as opposed to chasing it for longer distances. The coyotes will also increase their consumption of carrion found within their territory. Occasionally, coyotes will venture into urban areas looking for food, edible trash, and small unattended pets. When natural game is scarce,

coyotes will sometimes form small packs to take down a sick or weak deer (typically coyotes travel and hunt alone or with their mate only.)

During the winter, water freezes and fresh, open water may be hard to locate (though at Wolf Mountain Nature we provide fresh water to all of our animals on a daily basis.)

However, renal adaptations in coyotes enable them to preserve water and reduce the frequency with which they need to drink water. Urine in coyotes is very concentrated and the water in it is able to be reabsorbed by the kidneys, which helps prevent loss



of water through urination. Such adaptations allow coyotes to exist during winter months on limited water intake. Of course, eating snow is common and also provides liquid intake.

Coyotes are incredibly adaptable animals and amazing winter (and year-round) survivalists able to continue flourishing throughout winter.



Wolf Life Expectancy in the Wild vs. Captivity: Why such a Difference?

by Alex Gross, Caretaker Assistant & Aspiring Conservation Biologist

One of the most common questions we are often asked by visitors is, *how long do wolves live for?* The answer differs greatly depending on what type of wolves we are talking about, namely, wild vs. captive wolves.

Let's start with wild wolves. It is important to note that average life expectancy for wild wolves varies from ecosystem to ecosystem. Due to their longevity of research and extensive dataset, I will pull numbers from Yellowstone Wolf Project.

The average life expectancy for wolves within Yellowstone National Park (YNP) is 4-5 years of age. 77% of wolf deaths within the park are attributed to natural causes. The most significant of these natural causes is when wolves die in conflict with other wolves, also known as *intraspecific interactions* (42%). Additionally, wolves dying from other species (i.e., elk, mountain lions, etc.), known as *interspecific interactions*, makes up a percentage of wolf mortality in YNP (8%). The rest of the breakdown for natural causes is 15% unknown, 5% malnutrition, 3% disease, and 4% other. 17% of wolf deaths in YNP are attributed to human causes. The breakdown of that 17% is as follows. 7% harvest (i.e., wolves causing livestock issues being legally removed), 6% vehicles (mostly collisions), 2% illegal, 1% control, and 1% other. The remaining 6% of wolf mortality is unknown.



So, let's discuss these numbers a bit. Within natural causes, the biggest driver of wolf mortality is wolves. Packs contend for territory and must coexist with each other on a day-to-day basis. That doesn't mean that packs are always fighting with each other for more territory. That probably does not happen that often. But when packs have conflict with each other, these direct encounters can be fatal for individuals. Not all these intraspecific interactions are pack vs. pack. On average, wolves leave their natal pack, or disperse, at two years old in YNP. Dispersal is dangerous, since individuals are leaving their pack, likely traveling alone to start their own pack, or assimilate with an existing group of wolves in need of a breeding individual. Dispersals can be

wide-ranging, and lead individuals into unfamiliar pack territories. If these packs don't take too well to visitors, it can easily end fatally for that dispersing wolf, since they would be largely outnumbered in any direct conflict. Another noticeable cause of mortality in wolves is from other species. The most obvious of these is hunting. The northern range of YNP is the wintering grounds for elk, so many of those packs hunt them primarily. Bull elk can weigh anywhere from 700-900 lbs., while cows weigh in at around 500 lbs. They are big, and a kick to the jaw or ribs can fatally wound a wolf while hunting them. That's not to mention the impressive racks that bulls carry, which can gore a wolf as well. Packs in the more southern portions of YNP will also hunt bison. It is basically the same thing as elk. They are huge and very dangerous, and one mistake from a wolf can easily spell its end. It is also worth noting that in YNP, wolves are sharing the ecosystem with other dangerous predators like mountain lions and brown bears, which can also contribute to mortality, though probably not as much as the prey that wolves hunt. Other causes of mortality vary on a year-to-year basis. Disease (i.e., mange, distemper, parvovirus) can be randomly more significant in any given year, and starvation may vary as well. But the primary determinants of mortality within YNP are *inter-* and *intraspecific interactions*.



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It is worth noting with these numbers that YNP is a unique example. Wolves within the park are protected, which is why human-caused mortality is so much lower compared to natural causes. Now if we were to extend the range to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, which encompasses YNP and lots of area around YNP, the numbers shift significantly. Human-caused mortality makes up 77% of wolf mortality, while natural causes make up only 23%. Outside of YNP, wolf hunting/harvests are legal, which certainly contributes to the difference between just using YNP as a study area, vs. the entire Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.



So now let's move on to captive wolves. Our oldest wolf at the Center is Cayuga at 13 years (he turns 14 in April). We have three wolves that turn 10 in April (Tamarack, Dyani, and Okwaho). Of our ten wolves that have crossed the rainbow bridge, 7 surpassed 10 years of age, and the average lifespan of them all was almost 12 years old, which is 2-3 times higher than the Yellowstone number (our oldest wolf was Tashina, who passed a month before her 16th birthday). So why the difference? Well for one, our wolves do not have to defend their enclosures from other wolves. Our fences do that for them. They also do not need to hunt their food. We feed them every other day, and their dead chicken and deer and other treats certainly do not fight back

when we toss them over the fence. And lastly, we are constantly monitoring the health of our wolves on a day-to-day basis. If we notice anything wrong, we can react as needed with medical intervention and take the necessary steps to resolving their health issues when possible.

Even with all being told, there are always exceptions. In late December of 2024, Yellowstone lost its oldest wolf, female 907F at 11.8 years old, a remarkable testament to the resiliency of this species. The cause of her death? A confrontation with a rival pack. 907F and the other Yellowstone wolves that have beaten the average lifespan in the wild are outliers. What separates them from their counterparts we may never know. Perhaps they are brilliant and witty, just flat out lucky, or some combination of all these things. To conclude, wolves in the wild face a plethora of hardships that they need to overcome to survive. Remove most of those hardships entirely, and you see just how long these animals can live.



February brings changes in wolf behaviors; primarily due to hormone fluctuations during breeding season. There are more grumbling and dominance displays amongst the wolves, more howling, appetites decrease and food is cached. The latter behavior is an instinctual one as a reaction to potential food scarcity in the wild during harsh winter months.

Snow here is deep and the shoveling of paths, gates, and airlocks becomes an exhausting ritual, yet, the sun is higher in the sky, daylight lingers longer, and the songs of birds are subtly changing. Spring is approaching!

Big plans, projects, and exciting news are all in store for the Center for 2025 (our 19th season!)

Walk in balance with Mother Earth...

Will



In Memory of SAKARI

Run wild & free Sakari! 5/2/19 – 1/17/25

Our sweet Sakari unexpectedly crossed the rainbow bridge this winter from a sudden mesenteric torsion.

She was born at the Center and was the smallest of her litter of five though she certainly was not lacking in energy. Sakari, whose name literally means "sweet one," was an exuberant, playful, and fun-loving wolf who loved everyone and everything. She learned to go to her "station" when asked, loved playing a game of human-wolf hide and seek, and always had to be first to greet Caretakers as they entered her habitat.

Sakari was a favorite among Caretakers and visitors and loved watching over the Center from atop her wolf skywalk bridge. We will always remember our special "sweet one."



Summer Internship Openings

Karley Bush, Intern & Volunteer Coordinator

With the approach of winter's end, it is time to announce the opening of applications for our 2025 Summer Internship. Though it seems we are far removed from the warm days that mark the beginning of Summer, and our busy season at Wolf Mountain, they will be here before we know it!



Our summer Intern position offers an inclusive experience of what operating a licensed animal facility encompasses. This includes hands-on and classroom/field instruction to acquire skills in captive wildlife husbandry, observation and documentation of animal behaviors, habitat maintenance, public relations and education, and basic non-profit office management. For our internship there are large public speaking, public education, and physical labor components. Exceptional candidates will be presented the opportunity to assist with care and socialization of expected fox kits and wolf pups for the 2025 season.

Past projects our interns have worked on include: creating animal enrichment programs, monitoring trail cameras for "captures", pond macroinvertebrate surveys, various species site surveys, monitoring interactions between wolves and ravens, and behavioral observations at different stages of pup development. When off-duty, past interns have been known to spend time enjoying the nature trails at the center or exploring nearby local parks and trails.



This summer's program begins Wednesday, May 21 and concludes Sunday, August 10 for a total of 12 weeks (our Assistant Fox Care Internship may have different dates), however past interns have begun sooner or stayed later in the season based on their desires. Limited on-site housing is available. For a more detailed job description and application please visit our website's Volunteer/Intern tab. We begin reviewing completed applications February 1st as they are received. Candidates should be currently enrolled in a college program such as biology, pre-veterinarian, wildlife management, environmental conservation, or other related course of study.

"Thanks for a fun & educational experience. I really enjoyed every day I was here!" -JP



Wishes and Wants: As a non-profit we rely heavily on donations. Below are some of the many items that would help the center. If you can help, please contact us or simply bring the item(s) on your next visit!

Though it is still winter here on the hill, we will soon be busy with landscaping and construction/maintenance type tasks. Having certain skills in these areas is helpful, but not required as we will train you as most tasks are fairly simple to master. Please contact us 607-627-6784 or twmncwolves@yahoo.com if you, your family, your work place, etc would like to sign up to help! Work days occur both weekdays and weekends. Please note all workers must be at least 16 years old. Thanks in advance!

Animal Care
 Metal "pooper-scoopers"
 Farmer's Dog moist food (frozen)
 6' round/oval galvanized water troughs
 Commercial grade garden hose (3/4")
 Gift Cards: Tractor Supply, Country Max
 Gift Cards: Chewy.com, Harbor Freight
 Bags of cedar or pine chips

Office/Classroom
 Toilet Paper
 Paper Towels
 Hand Sanitizer
 Non-latex gloves (large/XL)
 AA batteries
 Gift Cards: Staples, Wal-Mart

Landscaping/Maintenance
 Picnic tables &/or benches
 Gift Cards: Lowe's, Curtis Lumber
 Working push mower
 Contractor size trash bags
 Salt/sand spreader for pickup truck
 Use of bulldozer
 RTV or ATV cart

Open Hours and Admission Rates

*Last admission is 30 minutes prior to closing time.

	Sundays	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fridays	Saturdays
Regular Season September 1 – June 30 (closed January & February)	Open 12 – 4 pm Various animal enrichment programs; Guided Tours at 12:30	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed
Summer Season July 1 – August 31	Open 12 – 4 pm Various animal enrichment programs; Guided Tours at 12:30	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed	Open 12 – 3 pm Various animal enrichment programs; Self-Guided Tours	Open 12 – 3 pm Various animal enrichment programs; Self-Guided Tours

Regular Admission: ages 6 and up: \$8/person; kids 5 and under free
 (Please note special events/programs may have different admission fees applied)

We will reopen on Sundays beginning on Sunday, March 2, 2025 (weather pending; closings will be posted on website, Facebook, and voicemail)

Photography Session of Wolves

Saturday, March 22, 2025 10 am – 12 pm

\$100 pre-registration required via website

Includes use of our two photography platforms where participants can take pictures of the wolves without fencing obstructing views. Also includes guided tour of rest of Center. Limit of 10 participants per session. Held rain, sun, or snow!