



## Tracking the Pack

### A View From the Bottom of Wolf Pack Hierarchy

As scientific research has taught us, wolves maintain pack harmony by their rank order. The order of a pack is usually gender specific (females dominate lower ranking females, males dominate lower ranking males). At the top of the rank order is the alpha male and female (who dominate both sexes), but at the bottom is a position some scientists call the omega or “scapegoat” (dominated by all the pack members). Either a male or female wolf may occupy this position. At the International Wolf Center, the omega is clearly Lakota.

Since the Arctic pups were introduced to the Center’s ambassador pack in August 2000, the dynamics of the wolf dominance hierarchy has changed (and it may change again as the pups mature). Shadow and Malik have been taking every opportunity to climb social rank order. Shadow is

becoming far more intense in his climb for rank order, and he has become more aggressive in mobbing Lakota. This is natural wolf behavior that may ensure an individual’s survival in the wild, but makes wolves in captivity a challenge.

What’s life like for the bottom of the rank order? For Lakota, the most noticeable aspect is her restricted movement in the enclosure. Any time she strays from the lower part of the enclosure, she may be driven to the den for refuge. In the early days of the pups’ introduction to the pack, Mackenzie and



Lucas led the chase on Lakota with the pups following. As the pups matured, Shadow often led the chase with a completely erect tail, indicating his increasing dominance.

Another reality of omega life is that access to food may have to wait until the higher-ranking pack members are finished feeding. Jen Westlund, a wolf care staff member, noted that Shadow began biting Lakota when she approached the carcass he and Malik were eating, and then the other wolves mobbed Lakota. Shadow dragged Lakota by her tail,

then Lakota retreated to the den.

Despite her new status, Lakota is doing well. She has been seen paying homage to the alphas and to Shadow by licking their faces. This indicates she feels a part of the social structure.

To Lakota, this is just another view from the bottom of the social rank order. To the Center staff, it is an opportunity to educate visitors about the dynamics of wolf social pack interaction.

If you are interested in following the weekly highlights of the pack dynamics, see the “Notes from the Wolf Log” section on our Web site, at [www.wolf.org](http://www.wolf.org). ■



*Lakota, the pack’s omega wolf, bears her teeth in defense of a pack mobbing.*

Sherry Jokinen