



# Tracking the Pack

## Canine Cousins

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If you are a dog owner, you have probably observed your pet demonstrating behaviors that make you question whether you live with a beloved pet or share your house with something from Wild Kingdom. These behaviors may be as entertaining as watching your dog howl to sirens or as distressing as finding the cushions of the living-room sofa shredded like a deer carcass. Many of your dog's behavioral traits, even its habit of completing smaller and smaller circles until finally lying down, have a genetic link to wolves.

For years, biologists have theorized that the domestication of dogs began about 10,000 to 15,000 years ago. Recently, DNA analyses have suggested that this process may have begun as long as 100,000 years ago. In either case, domestication was a long process of selective breeding to keep the traits beneficial to humans and eliminate the negative traits. Over time, domestication changes the genetic makeup of an animal, but genetic evidence can tie a domesticated animal to the DNA of its

ancestors. Recent genetic studies reveal strong evidence linking the domestic dog to its likely ancestor, the wolf.

To acknowledge this close relationship, a 1993 review of the taxonomic classifications of wolves led to a scientific name change. The dog had been called *Canis familiaris* and was considered to be a separate species from the wolf. Since 1993, the scientific name of the dog has been *Canis lupus familiaris*, a subspecies of the wolf.

Does this mean you have a wolf in your living room? No. Your dog is still believed to be a domesticated version of its wild relative, but the close relationship means you can expect your dog's behavior to be motivated by instincts from its ancestors.

During summer 2002, the International Wolf Center, in cooperation with Vermilion Community College's Natural Resource Department in Ely, Minnesota, conducted daily educational programs titled "Canine Cousins."

Students enrolled in the college's wolf behavior class served as the dog handlers for the program, which featured visiting dogs to demonstrate behaviors. Both puppies and adult dogs were included to compare dog and wolf behaviors at various ages. While the dogs and the students were demonstrating behaviors inside the building, the ambassador wolf pack looked on through the large observation windows, curious about the visiting dogs. At times, the wolves demonstrated territorial behavioral traits, pawing at the windows.

Some of the behaviors featured in the Canine Cousins program included:

- Social pack behavior
- Territorial defense and marking behavior
- Predatory behavior and hunting techniques
- Communication through body language and vocalization
- Specialized behaviors associated with specific dog breeds

By learning more about the behavior of wolves and dogs, Center visitors developed a better understanding of dogs and the motivations behind their behavior. ■



Top right: Members of the ambassador pack at play

Bottom: Lori Schmidt with Jake, a visiting Canine Cousin, and members of the ambassador pack

International Wolf Center