



Little Wolf is an interactive exhibit whose activities take children through a day in the life of a wolf.



Two members of the Center's resident pack resting in the wolf enclosure

Any fan of wolves will surely enjoy a trip to the headquarters of the International Wolf Center in Ely, Minnesota. There is no such thing as a “typical” visit, as each season has its own special delights and educational opportunities. This article can only suggest some of what you can expect if you make your own visit to the world’s foremost wolf educational facility.

Most visits begin with a drive through the Superior National Forest. This is the only habitat in the lower 48 states continuously occupied by wolves throughout recorded history, the place where several pioneers in wolf research did much of their work. Each year a few lucky visitors spot wild wolves on their drive to the Center.

At any season of the year, the beauty of the drive through this forest can be reason enough to make the trip. Visitors typically come in on Highway 1, a lyrically curving blacktop that glides past tumbling streams and rock-bound lakes. On my trip in mid-October, the

LET'S VISIT THE INTERNATIONAL

by STEVE GROOMS



Steve Grooms

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Mary Ortiz, International Wolf Center

blazing gold of aspens and birches was starkly contrasted by the pure white of an early snowfall.

The Center is located just east of the town of Ely. The building's triangular windows resemble the eyes and ears of wolves. The facility, beautiful without being lavish, blends traditional north woods elements with modern touches. The award-winning building seems to surge athletically like a wolf from the entrance up a ramp toward the 1.5-acre enclosure that is home to the Center's resident wolf pack. But the first wolves you are likely to see are bronze. Just outside the building is a handsome sculpture by Denver artist Rik Sargent, which features five wolves in dramatic full flight.

Each year the Center hosts about 50,000 visitors. They come from all

states and from lands such as Japan, Russia and the Scandinavian countries. The average visitor stay is a remarkable two hours. In other words, the Center is not a tourist diversion like an "alligator park" where road-weary travelers shuffle by, mindlessly licking ice cream cones. Some visitors stay in Ely several days or a week to take advantage of the programs and recreational opportunities available at the Center and around Ely. Increasingly, visitors come to Ely specifically to enjoy the Center and to participate in its adventure vacations (see sidebar).

Let's walk through the Center. Passing through the main entrance, we turn up the big ramp. Just to our left lies a hall housing the famous *Wolves and Humans* exhibit created in 1985 by the Science Museum of

Minnesota. More than 2.5 million people have been enthralled by this exhibit as it was featured in museums around the United States and Canada. Dramatic animal mounts depict key wolf activities. Other displays tell the anguished story of humans' persecution of wolves throughout history, while interactive howling exhibits and computer games allow the visitor to participate in the learning experience.

Up the ramp a few feet farther is the theater. Here visitors can enjoy some of the finest films ever produced about wolves, about their restoration to Yellowstone National Park and about the Center's resident pack. The theater is a welcome place to relax while learning more about wolves.

A splendid recent attraction is *Little Wolf*, an interactive exhibit whose activities take children through a day in the life of a wolf. Kids can crawl through the recesses of a wolf den and play games that teach lessons about wolf behavior. Thanks to *Little Wolf*, kids play happily while their parents absorb adult-oriented informational programs.

WOLF CENTER



One of the Center's arctic wolves drinking from the enclosure's pond

Mary Ortiz, International Wolf Center

Many of those programs are presented in the auditorium. Stadium seating gives a good view of the educational specialists as they present talks such as "Wolf 101" and "Conflicts to Coexistence." These friendly wolf educators cheerfully answer questions of all sorts. For the casual visitor, this is the main educational opportunity at the Center. Some visitors are surprised to find that the wolf educators are there to educate the public about wolves, not necessarily to promote wolves.

As visitors absorb the presentations, the Center's ambassador wolves

conduct their activities behind the massive plate-glass wall separating the auditorium from the wolf enclosure. On my last visit, educational director Jen Westlund discussed the features of a wolf pelt while the Center's wolves strolled behind her on the other side of the glass, modeling the real thing.

The popular presentation "What's For Dinner" is the highlight of each weekend. After a staff member discusses how wolves hunt and eat, wolf curator Lori Schmidt delivers a road-killed deer carcass to the resident pack. Pack interactions at feeding time are fascinating and unpredictable.

Many visitors come specifically to study the Center's wolf pack. There are currently five wolves in residence, although three (MacKenzie, Lucas and Lakota) have recently been "retired" from ambassadorial duties. The retirement of these older gray wolves was hastened by the treatment they were receiving from Malik and Shadow, two young arctic wolves added to the pack in 2000. That leaves only Malik and Shadow on display.

Although they live in captivity, these are wolves. Anyone watching them carefully will see ways in which they differ from dogs. Because they are wolves, not domesticated pets, their interactions with each other have a dynamism that is unique to wolves. Visitors commonly sit by the windows and simply watch the resident wolves for an hour or two.

On the way out of the Center, many visitors pause at the Wolf Den. This unique gift store sells hundreds of high-quality items such as CDs, posters, books, stuffed wolves and apparel chosen to enhance the Center's mission.

Early in its life, the Center often served casual visitors who dropped by to see what it was about. Now, after some 10 years of teaching people about wolves, the Center has become a destination in its own right, still with the mission of helping people understand the world's most misunderstood and fascinating large predator.

Steve Grooms has been writing about wolf management since 1976. He is the author of the book The Return of the Wolf, and serves on International Wolf magazine's advisory committee.

If You Go

The logical starting point for a visit is the Center Web site: www.wolf.org. Click on the "Visit" link. Continually updated information there will tell you how to visit the Center and what to expect at different times of year. You'll find information on group arrangements, too.

Although you can easily spend just an hour or two at the Center, serious visits last longer and require finding accommodations in Ely. A map and link to the chamber of commerce are on the Center's site under "Travel Information" but can be accessed directly at www.ely.org.

Adventure Vacations

Visitors are increasingly drawn to the Center's adventure vacations. These special programs combine adventure, learning and sometimes exercise. One of the most popular adventures is traveling country roads at night with a guide to howl to wild wolves, often getting a thrilling reply from them. Other adventure vacations teach visitors how wolf biologists study wolves. Winter mushing expeditions offer exciting family dogsledding fun. The Center's Web site (www.wolf.org) has details on the timing, arrangements and cost of these unique vacations.