

The Nanny Chronicles

by ELLEN DIETZ

“Nannies” were recruited by the International Wolf Center’s Wolf Curator Lori Schmidt to help care for three new wolf pups that were brought to the Center in May 2004.

Nannies fed and cleaned up after the pups, comforted them and did myriad other chores to help the Center’s wolf care team. Each team of three or four nannies worked eight-hour shifts every day for a week. I worked as a nanny when the pups were 3 to 4 weeks old.



Caroline David

*Friday, May 28
12:00 noon*

Opening the door of the wolf lab, I see three brand-new faces sleeping among the straw, scattered here and there in the straw. No one minds. The sleepy ones are Grizzer, his sister Maya, and the littlest packmate, Nyssa. The indoor pen is a couple of chain-link fence sections in a corner of the wolf lab, with fir boughs woven along the bottom. Inside is a collection of birch logs, stumps and small slabs of basalt, meant to mimic the northwoods world these pups will inhabit in the next few months. A few stuffed toys surf the sea of straw. I step into the pen and immediately feel the weight of responsibility. For the next week, I’ll be caring for these fragile lives, a surrogate mom in khakis.

*Sunday, May 30
6:00 a.m.*

Jan, Caroline and I begin the first shift. The pen has just been cleaned and lined with fresh straw, and the pups are wide awake from the excitement. They tumble over each other, explore the birch logs and



Above: Long after midnight, with chores done and the pups asleep, nannies share stories from their own lives. Left to right: Donna Prichard, Caroline David, and Jan Makowski.

climb around the stumps. Of all the objects in the pen, packmates make the best chew toys. They stumble over to each other, and wrestle, jaw spar and chew at each other's legs, ears, flanks, necks and tails. No role is determined at this young age, and they take turns being the aggressor and the tormented. Their play doesn't last long. Soon they are fast asleep. They will do a lot of sleeping this week. Growing is hard work.

It's feeding time. We will replay this scenario countless times over the next week, like a videotape in a continuous loop. The recipe is one part Esbilac, two parts bottled water, and a rounded teaspoon of corn syrup, supplemented daily with Knox gelatin and vitamins. Our tiniest pup, just 3 weeks old and weighing only 3 pounds, will take 45 minutes to consume a mere 2.5 ounces of formula, often sleeping and eating at the same time. Eagerly the other two latch onto their bottles, gurgling, slurping, swallowing as fast as they can. Who knew pups could eat, coo and whine all at the same time? Sweet little Maya downs 6 ounces in less than 5 minutes, and her robust brother keeps pace with her. After every meal, their swollen bellies drag them off balance. Grizz partly toddles, partly crawls to a cool corner, belches, heaves a small sigh, and immediately falls asleep to the rhythm of his own dreams.

Tuesday, June 1
Midnight

Time spent with the pups is feast or famine. Either all three are craving food and attention, or they are sound asleep. At this stage, the pups' lives consist mainly of eating and sleeping, punctuated by bouts of play. Among their favorite toys is my hair. Pant legs and shoestrings also make good chew toys.

When the pups quiet down again after feeding, I take the bottles, measuring cups, spoons, whisk and pans to the kitchen, then return to the lab to sterilize the bottles in the microwave. Blurred by exhaustion, I must be careful to use the right microwave. On one is the sign "Human food and puppy food," and on the other is "Adult wolf food." The adult wolves have the stomach for roadkill and raw hamburger, but I don't. Until the pups are vaccinated at 6 weeks old, they will eat from sterilized bottles. By the end of the summer, though, they too will be dining on roadkill. Given the hour and the thought, I opt for a hermetically sealed trail bar. Then I return to the pen and chat quietly with my team until it's time to get up and do it all over again.

Tuesday, June 1
5:30p.m.

We pull the late afternoon shift after our midnight shift. The pups are relatively inactive at this time of day, but they look up to greet us. I look straight at Grizz, whose eyes light up when he sees me. He yawns a wide puppy yawn and settles his chin back down into the straw. A short while later, he and his companions wake, stretch, yawn and amble over to see us. Grizz comes for a hello and begins a high puppy whine, a puppy's way of seeking comfort. I cuddle him, and he settles down but only momentarily. He nibbles on my shoulder a bit, then shifts his attention to my hair. He pulls at a big chunk of hair, dives in farther and clips my ear, then stops when I yelp. He resettles himself in my lap and dozes off. His fur is already beginning to become wiry, the guard hairs begin-

ning to reach out beyond the downy puppy coat. His smell is acrid, quite unlike dog puppies'. It reminds me that he is, after all, a wild creature. He sleeps in my lap until his sister spies him, toddles over and pounces on him. A new game is on.

Wednesday, June 2
10:00 a.m.

I can't believe we're back here already. Odd shifts have robbed our orderly perception of time. To keep track of the day, we must write it on the lab's white board. We find ourselves ruled by a different rhythm. It is the rhythm of life, not the clock or the calendar. Our lives have come to revolve around the pups' needs. I find myself eating less, sleeping less and caring less about the happenings outside this little world. By the end of the week I'm stumbling around just like the pups, but where their poor motor control is a function of age, mine stems from sleep deprivation.

Finally it occurs to me why I am so drawn to Grizzer. The look on his face is the same look my German



Toys of different shapes and textures stimulate the pups' senses and reflexes.

shepherd had as a pup. Suspicious, curious, needy, solitary, shy. The promise of deep intelligence rests in his eyes. From the first time we studied each other, we had an immediate understanding that there would be no animosity, no patronizing. We accepted each other as individuals with independent spirits that could be shared but not compromised. Other nannies took on roles of nurturer, guide, boss or playmate, all according to our personalities. My role was quiet friend, delighting in sharing and discovery. I giggle to think this attitude would probably make me the omega in every pack.

Grizzer has been aimlessly wandering in the straw and now begins his puppy whine. I answer him with a small soprano howl. He stops short, plants his feet, juts his chin forward and joins me with his first howl. I am as delighted as a proud parent, and Grizz, standing a little taller and more confident, toddles off to pounce on his sister.

*Friday, June 4
3:15 a.m.*

I've spent the night in puppy mode, crawling around in the straw, snoozing alongside the pups, being climbed on and having my hair pulled. Even though Nyssa is outweighed by her packmates, she has no idea how small she is. More and more frequently, she initiates play, crawling up onto a pup and clamping her nearly toothless jaws onto their ears and around their legs. Without a protective cloak of fur, I am at a disadvantage to even the beginnings of their puppy teeth, which are already sharp. Chins are a frequent object of curiosity, and we all have the scrapes and scratches to prove it.

It's nearing 6 a.m., and we're coming to the end of our time as nannies. The pups react to our energies, somehow understanding that another change is about to happen. Grizz crawls over to me, fighting

sleep, and reaches out to put his chin in my hand. As soon as he's settled, he falls asleep. I cannot bear to take my hand away. We stay like this for many moments. He wills himself awake long enough to curl up against me as I lie stretched out in the straw. He wiggles and squirms and rearranges his position until he has shifted himself to rest nose to nose with me. I inhale his scent and give myself over to contentment. This is why I wanted to be a nanny: to find trust and comfort in a wild creature. All the work, the sleep deprivation, the menial chores, the scrapes and scratches, the distance from home—all of it is a small price for this experience. I have connected with a wild canine. I don't know if he'll remember me, and it doesn't matter if he does. I will remember him. ■

Ellen Dietz lives with her husband, two dogs and a bird in Bloomington, Illinois. Though her recent explorations have taken her to canyons, deserts and mountains, she is always happiest at home, playing in the yard with her dogs.

Right: Frequently a pup would drop off to sleep during play. Maya is already asleep, and soon Grizzer will be also.



Ellen Dietz



Caroline David

Above: One of the best parts of being a nanny is snuggle time.

Left: The pups would eagerly latch onto their bottles, gurgling, slurping, swallowing as fast as they could.



Caroline David