



## Tracking the Pack

### A World Run by Wolf Rules

by Lori Schmidt, Wolf Curator,  
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On the morning of May 11, 2005, the wolf care staff encountered a day like no other. Upon arrival, staff member Jen Westlund prepared for the morning wolf check. She noticed that Nyssa, who was lying upright in a wooded area of the enclosure, wouldn't come to the fence. We put the other members of the pack into an adjacent holding area, and Jen and I went into the enclosure. It was immediately evident that Nyssa had suffered trauma; we crated her and transported her to the vet clinic. After a thorough examination, the veterinarian deter-

mined that her wounds were beyond repair and the damage left no options but euthanasia.

Nyssa had grown into a strong, healthy and independent adult. She weighed in at 95 pounds during the May medical exam, compared to Maya's 79.5 pounds, but size doesn't always mean status. Natural wolf behavior includes a rank order with dominant wolves aggressively forcing lower wolves to submit. Nyssa was the lowest-ranking wolf in the pack, and Maya actively showed her more dominant status. The events of May 11 stand as a reminder of the instinctual



International Wolf Center

Several staff observed this wild wolf crossing the highway in front of the Center within days of the incident that led to Nyssa's death. The presence of a wild wolf could have triggered the aggression toward Nyssa.

social dynamics that dictate life in a wolf pack. The wolves were being wolves in a world that is clearly run by wolf rules.

Wolf-on-wolf aggression is one of the top two causes of natural mortality to wolves in the wild. Wolves compete aggressively for dominance, territory, access to food and opportunities to breed. Most of the time, but not always, the aggression is ritualized to avoid serious injury, but if some factor heightens the aggression, wolf fights can be fatal. We may never know what triggered this incident, but one factor may have been that Maya and Nyssa had been spayed five days earlier and still had stitches from the surgery. Although the sutures were healing well on both females, an exuberant run or jump across the pond

could have popped a stitch and caused bleeding, drawing the wolves' attention to the suture site.

The Center's exhibit is unique compared to other facilities because wild wolves live near the Center. Several staff observed a wild wolf crossing the highway in front of the Center within days of the incident. Wolves are very territorial; the presence of another, strange adult wolf and an inability to deal with the threat from behind the enclosure fence would have likely agitated the captive wolves. The wolves could have redirected their aggression to the lowest pack member.

The philosophy of the Center is to "teach the world about wolves." The actions of the captive pack continue to do just that. ■



Sherry Jokinen

Nyssa had grown into a strong, healthy and independent adult, but she was the lowest-ranking member of the pack.