



Tracking the Pack

The Establishment of the Omega Position

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Since Nyssa's death (see "Tracking the Pack" in the Winter 2005 issue), the International Wolf Center's Exhibit Pack has undergone some changes. Initially, the pack was very subdued, interacted little, and howled more than usual for several weeks after the loss of its omega pack member. As summer arrived, the wolves returned to early-morning bouts of stalking, chasing and displaying dominance to establish their position within the rank order characteristic of these social animals. The wolves swam in the pond, dove for minnows and chased ravens and each other in ambush scenarios likely stimulated by their predatory drive. As wolves in the wild do, they slept during the warmest part of the day to avoid overheating. Wolf care staff didn't observe any behavior that indicated a new omega position had been established, but behavior during this time of the year is generally less aggressive.

As fall and winter approached, behaviors changed. Researchers have long documented the influence of hormones on a wolf's behavior as the breeding season approaches. Even in an exhibit where wolves are spayed and neu-

tered, these hormonal influences are present—no doubt subdued but present. In October 2005, Shadow and Malik began posturing for dominance. These behaviors included hip slams, resting their chin on the back of the other wolf, holding their tails high when interacting, and slow and deliberate circling of each other. By November, the posturing included riding up on each other, in which one would put its forelegs on the back of the other in attempts to force submission. Scruff biting increased, and chases ensued, with the less confident wolf running away with pinned ears, a tucked tail and often a full hackle response, in which the hair on its neck,

back, rump and tail would stand up.

Shadow has clearly been more dominant in encounters with Malik since they were pups, but what has changed their interaction this year is the presence of Grizzer, now mature. When Shadow faces Malik, Grizzer rides up on Malik and attempts a scruff bite. For the first time in the Center's Exhibit Pack, there are three males all vying for status. One of the wolves will be at the bottom of the order, termed the omega position, and indications are that Malik will become the lowest-ranking wolf of the Exhibit Pack. Why not Maya, since she's the most submissive? She is the only female, and Shadow seems to guard her from the dominance

behaviors instigated by the other wolves. Thus she maintains a higher ranking in the pack.

These ritualized dominance behaviors can be noisy and quite intense but are generally short and don't result in injury. In fact, biologists believe that by clearly showing dominance in such ritualized displays, pack members avoid more significant fights. These behaviors are instinctual, derived from life in the wild and present in the captive wolves that serve as ambassadors. ■



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Steve Lokker