

Too close for comfort: The problem of habituated wolves

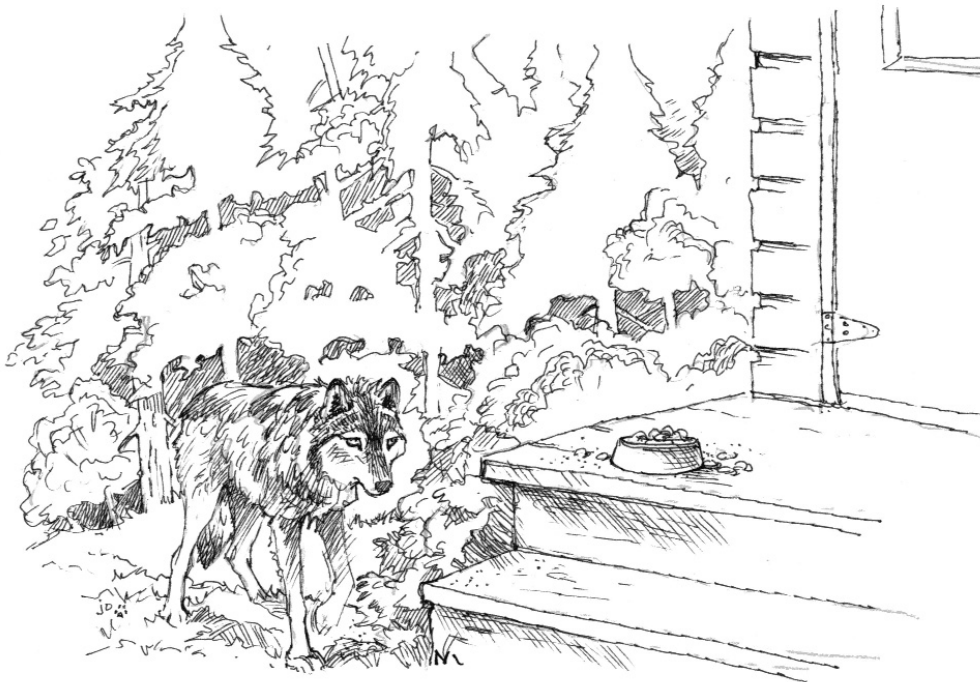
A woman living outside of Ely, Minnesota, took pity on a mother wolf and her pups during summer 2001. The woman frequently left food on her porch for the wolves and enjoyed watching them when they came for the food. Later, when the woman was out of town for a time, the neighbors observed a wolf continuously lurking in their own yard. Uncomfortable with the wolf's presence, the neighbors called in Wildlife Services to remove the wolf. In this case, the woman was advised to stop feeding the wolves, and the wolves eventually went away. More and more, however, wolves that get too close to humans are killed to avoid negative interactions between wolves and humans.

Under normal circumstances, most wolves seem to fear humans. Wolves are shy animals by nature

and tend to avoid human-inhabited areas. However, wolves can lose that fear by having frequent and increasingly closer contact with humans, and by receiving food rewards for their boldness. When wolves have less fear of humans, they are more likely to approach humans or human-built structures, such as homes or roadways, in search of food.

The greatest danger when wolves are near to humans is to the wolves. Wolves who approach roadways seeking food handouts from cars are more likely to be hit by cars. And when wolves become incorrigible in their pursuit of food around people, they are likely to be killed by wildlife officials to preempt the wolves from harming humans.

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Multiple locations in North America report having problems with habituated wolves in recent years. Twenty-one incidents of presumed healthy wolves attacking humans in North America occurred in the 20th century. None of these cases involved a human death, but 18 of those incidents were perpetrated by habituated wolves. The other 3 cases involved humans who had domestic dogs with them in wolf country. Wolves are known to be aggressive toward domestic dogs and usually try to kill them when given the opportunity.

The lessons to be learned from these incidences are:

- **Don't feed wild wolves—ever.** Don't leave food outdoors, including pet food. Don't offer food to wildlife from a vehicle or a residence.
- **Do everything you can to avoid habituating wolves to humans.** Don't let wolves get close to you; don't let them learn to be comfortable in human-inhabited areas. If a wolf approaches, try to scare it off by making loud noises and making yourself appear larger with coats or other objects.

Habituating wolves is similar to feeding any wild species. Baiting deer also baits the predators who follow the deer. Putting out birdseed may attract birds, but it also attracts mice, snakes, foxes, coyotes, wolves and bears. Feeding animals creates an unnatural density of that species, and when humans are added to the mix, conflicts are bound to occur.

If you desire to view wildlife, do it on their terms, not yours. Watch from a respectful distance; use binoculars or a spotting scope if necessary. Learn about wildlife behavior. Your actions should not in any way change an animal's natural behavior. Have some self-restraint so that wildlife can continue to live freely.

Two reports on wolf-human encounters can be found at www.wolf.org.

Linnell, John, ed., *The Fear of Wolves: A Review of Wolf Attacks on Humans*.

McNay, Mark, ed., *A Case History of Wolf-Human Encounters in Alaska and Canada*.

Sources:

Smith, D. W., and D. R. Stahler. 2003. *Management of Habituated Wolves in Yellowstone National Park*. Yellowstone Center for Resources, 15 pp.

Strauss, Kevin. "Don't Feed the Wolves, Say Experts." *Ely Timberjay*, August 18, 2001.

Bishop, Norm. Letter to the editor. *Bozeman Chronicle*, August 4, 2003.



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For more information visit the International Wolf Center's Web site at www.wolf.org



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