

Wolves and Human Safety

Fact Sheet 8.003

People and Predator Series | Colorado Wolves

By the *Center for Human-Carnivore Coexistence* (5/20)

Are wolves dangerous to humans?

The perception of wolves as a danger to people has a long history in human society. In reality, the risk of wolves attacking or killing people is low. Wolves typically avoid people, buildings, and roads and encounters are rare.¹ For example, a study published in 2002 reviewed wolf-human interactions in Alaska and Canada, where over 60,000 wolves live.² Between 1900-2000, a 100-year period, the study found only 16 cases where wild, healthy wolves bit people. In six cases, bites were severe. No bites were life-threatening. Another 12 cases involved aggression by known or suspected rabid wolves. In North America, there are no documented accounts of humans killed by wild wolves between 1900-2000.²⁻⁴

Worldwide, in those rare cases where wolves have attacked or killed people, most attacks have been by rabid wolves.^{4,5} Wolves are unlikely to be a long-term reservoir host for rabies, but they can catch it from other species (see Disease Information Sheet).⁵ Most incidents of rabies occur in other wildlife such as raccoons, skunks, foxes, and

bats.⁶ A decrease in the incidence of rabies worldwide has led to the decrease in the number of rabid wolf attacks.⁴



Little Red Riding Hood
Illustration by J. W. Smith

Another factor associated with wolf attack is habituation - losing fear of humans.⁴ Habituation can occur when wolves are fed by people or within some protected areas. Wolf attacks have also occurred when wolves are provoked, such as when humans trapped or cornered them or entered a den with pups. Attacks are also associated with highly-modified environments, for example where there is little to no natural prey and when wolves are dependent on human food sources.⁴



Key Points

- Like many large carnivores, wolves are generally afraid of humans and will avoid people, buildings, and roads if possible.
- The risk of wolves attacking or killing people is low. As with other wildlife, it is best not to feed wolves and to keep them at a respectful distance.
- Wolves may kill pets if they encounter them, although such events are infrequent. To reduce the chance of conflict with dogs, avoid turning dogs loose in areas with wolves, and keep dogs leashed or under voice control.

There also have been recent reports of wolves attacking people.⁷ Wolves may have killed a Canadian man in 2005.⁸ Wolves killed a woman jogging alone in a remote part of Alaska in 2010.⁹ In summer 2019, a wolf attacked a tent camper in Banff National Park.¹⁰ Such encounters foster the perception that wolves are far more dangerous to humans than they are.⁷ Attacks are still exceedingly rare. For example, no wolf has attacked a human in Yellowstone National Park since wolves returned in 1995.¹¹ Yellowstone receives 4 million visitors per year, including tent campers.¹² About 100 wolves live in Yellowstone and are exposed to people, with few issues.¹¹

Overall, wolves represent little threat to humans, unless people habituate them by providing them with food.^{2-4,7,11} As with other wildlife including other carnivores such as bears, it is best not to feed wolves and to keep them at a respectful distance.

Are wolves dangerous to pets?

Wolves may kill pets if they encounter them, as can other large carnivores such as mountain lions and coyotes. The most common conflicts between wolves and pets involve domestic dogs.^{5,13-15} Like other wild carnivores, wolves will guard their territories. Unleashed dogs that roam into wolf territories might be considered as intruders or competitors. Wolves are likely most aggressive near their den or rendezvous (“meeting”) sites and when protecting recent kills.

Wolves killing dogs, however, is infrequent.¹³ Typically, most dogs killed by wolves are hunting dogs in pursuit of wildlife such as bears, mountain lions, and wolves themselves.^{5,13-15} In some areas, the risk of wolf attacks on dogs is a source of conflict between wolves and hunters and can be an important motivation for the

illegal killing of wolves. Wolves typically avoid residential areas and are thus less of a threat to dogs there.



There are ways to reduce the chance of conflict between wolves and dogs.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ Wolves are generally afraid of people and will avoid them, so staying as close to dogs as possible will make it less likely that wolves will attack dogs. Hunting with dogs is inherently risky in wolf country. Avoidance of wolves is the best way to minimize conflict. If you hunt with dogs in wolf country, learn to recognize wolf sign such as scat, tracks, and howls. If you see or hear sign, don't turn your dogs loose. Bells or beepers on dogs might also help protect dogs. For hikers in wolf country, dogs should be leashed or under strict voice control. This will not only protect dogs, but also protect the wildlife that dogs might chase, disturb, or kill.¹⁹

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