

True Confession: I gave my sister a wolf-dog hybrid

Evidence indicates that the domestication of wolves began between 10,000 and 100,000 years ago. This was the beginning of the genetic split between wolves and dogs.

Effect of genetic split

The genetic makeup of both the wolf and the dog is a random combination of the mother's and father's chromosomes, *random* being the key word. If the best of the wolf and the best of the dog could be combined, their half-wolf half-dog offspring would be better than either of the parents. However, since the chromosome combination is random and can't be controlled, the behavior of a wolf-dog hybrid is unpredictable. You don't know which traits the resulting offspring received. This is one of the most detrimental factors in the breeding of wolves and dogs — you don't know what you're going to get.

My sister's new dog

My sister wanted a puppy who would grow up to be a big dog who could protect himself on their very rural, 15-acre property populated with everything from moles to mountain lions. I found an ad for six-week-old, mixed-breed puppies that I was told were the result of an accidental mating between a Labrador retriever and a Great Pyrenees. The mother was the Lab, and the puppies certainly looked like what I thought a mix of those two breeds would look — large, solid black fur balls — so I picked the friendliest and most intelligent female.



There is a lot of underground wolf-dog breeding in the area where I found Bacca, which I didn't know at the time. I'm pretty sure Bacca didn't have a Great Pyrenees father and is probably at least one-quarter wolf, a hybrid wolf-dog for a father and a full-bred Labrador retriever for a mother. She lost her puppy fur quite early, so she looks like a Lab, but she doesn't always act like one.

Bacca's day-to-day life

For the most part, I'll let my sister tell Bacca's stories. I'll add notes occasionally about her behavior.

Environment

My sister lives in a very rural area, and she doesn't let her dogs run free until they're about a year old. However, at six months, she couldn't keep Bacca home. Bacca was an escape artist and already roaming the woods.

It takes a lot of very tall fencing to confine a wolf, even a pup. The bottom of the pen has to be solid, or it will dig under it. It has to be metal, or the wolf will eat through it. There are many dogs who are escape artists, but the most accomplished dog pales beside the average wolf.

As part of their maturing process, wolf pups begin to join in hunts at six to eight months, the age at which Bacca started roaming the woods. Soon Bacca was gone all day, only coming home to sleep.

Interaction and training

“Bacca was very hard to deal with as a puppy. It wasn’t like she had been the most affectionate dog ever, but now there wasn’t even a minimal relationship. At about eight to ten weeks, she stopped having much to do with humans.”

Perhaps the most striking developmental difference between dogs and wolves is that, whereas dogs can be socialized to humans within the first sixteen weeks of life, wolves must be removed from their mother for human socialization before fourteen days of age, or acceptance of humans is very unlikely (Klinghammer & Goodman, 1985).

Bacca was older than the outer limit for socialization of a wolf when we got her. If she was fathered by a wolf-dog hybrid, the fact that she could be socialized at all at that age is probably a result of her dog genes or that the human who owned her mother spent a lot of time interacting with the puppies beginning right after they were born.

“It took lots of patience, treats, training, and socialization, but finally we struck a truce. She firmly forced me to see that she would accept and even learn to enjoy human contact, and in return, I had to give her control over any animal that dared to come onto HER fifteen acres. It took quite a while to convince her that I was worth her attention. But when she finally did, she did it with her whole soul.”

Wolves seem to be smarter than most dogs and are a challenge to train because of their stubbornness and refusal to perform any activity without seeing the reward for it. Wolves respond to hand signals more than voiced commands. Dogs can be trained to respond to hand signals but respond to voice more naturally.

Wolves are very territorial, and the pack territory can cover a very large area, from 18 square miles to as large as 1,000 square miles. It is estimated that they will roam over at least 50% of their territory daily.

Owners and breeders of hybrids say that unlike dogs, a wolf-dog does not trust easily. Trust has to be earned.

Bacca's prey

“Bacca brings home game she has killed — once even a deer leg. She brings home all sorts of non-food items too. Once she brought home a tire and on another occasion, a hammock, which she displayed in the front yard. We have a spot where we pile all of Bacca's non-animal kills. If a neighbor is missing something, we'll check Bacca's pile. It's probably there.”



Bringing home kills is typical wolf behavior.

A deer leg is not so strange for a wolf. They typically attack the hindquarters, flanks, and shoulders of their prey and prefer to eat the hind limbs and internal organs. They are also very curious and will play with strange items . . . like a hammock or a tire.

“We keep a running tally of the types of animals she has killed: bird, catfish, field mice, squirrel, woodchuck, snake, opossum, raccoon, coyote, mole, rabbit, great blue heron (she didn't seem to care that they are a federally protected species), chicken, and possibly a young deer. These are just the ones she brought home.”

As scavengers, wolves will eat anything they catch. Typical prey are deer and small animals, beaver, squirrels, rabbits, small rodents, and birds. Dogs, on the other hand, often only play with their “prey,” perhaps because their need to eat is satisfied by their human companion.

“She will not share her kills (except with me) until she is done with them. When she walks away, we know she is finished and we can get it. Once she did offer a squirrel to a stray puppy (approximately two to three months old).”

Refusing to share her kills is not wolf-like behavior. But then, having a kill is not typical dog behavior.

A wolf pack seems to become very excited at the birth of pups. Although the mother will not let any of the pack members near the puppies until they're about two months of age, except perhaps the female wolf she has pressed into service to help her, the pups are valued and allowed a lot of latitude in their behavior.

The fact that Bacca is a female, albeit spayed, could have had something to do with her behavior toward the young puppy. Dogs, especially females, have been known to “help” a young puppy, but on the whole, dogs are not as protective of their food as wolves or hybrids are.

Hunting — prey, challenges, mishaps, and successes

“Her favorite meal is anything that moves, but she seems to have the most fun with the squirrels. At about eight or nine months old, she actually chased one up a tree using its

lower branches to climb. She lost her balance, fell, and didn't move for about five seconds, which was all the time the squirrel needed to escape. Bacca got up and didn't resume the chase. She limped back to the house, defeated, and actually ate her dry, crumbly dog food.

"The next morning her limp was worse, so we loaded her in the car for a trip to the vet (quite a holiday for the wildlife). Bacca had sustained damage to her front leg, and the canine orthopedic surgeon suggested a more controlled environment with much less activity and absolutely no more tree climbing. No problem, Doc.

"Bacca wasn't about to let her tree-climbing skill go to waste. As usual, she was chasing anything that moved, this time a squirrel, and the squirrel was searching for any tree that would give him cover.

"The squirrel went up a tree trunk and so did Bacca. There were no low branches for her to use to climb, so she would turn her head sideways, bite the tree, then use her front claws, especially her dewclaws, and dig in her back claws to propel herself up another ten or so inches. She repeated this over and over. It was an amazing sight. We have found her claw and teeth marks as much as six feet high in other trees.

"Birds are fun when the squirrels are elsewhere. It is crazy what she can do. She and I were in the Trekker heading across our land. Suddenly she sprang out of it and had a bird in her mouth before she hit the ground.

"I think Bacca figured out that pine trees make the perfect place for birds to nest. She would sit and watch the birds flying in and out of the branches. I thought it was a passive activity, but it seems she was actually timing the birds and learning their patterns. After watching for a while, she casually walked toward the tree. Suddenly she vaulted and caught a bird in mid-flight.

"I've noticed that lately she is approaching her squirrel kills differently. Sometimes, depending on where the squirrel is, she doesn't run for the squirrel. She runs toward the tree she thinks the squirrel is heading for to intercept it, and she is usually right. It's almost like the way she does her bird kills — she sits and waits until she thinks she has a pattern figured out then goes for it.

"I guess she reviewed her squirrel 'kill stats' and figured she could apply her bird methods to squirrels. It's almost frightening that she could process that much information and then use it.

"We have a big pond that is stocked with catfish, and on hot days, she will head down there and go swimming. She loves water. I guess it's the Lab in her. She won't catch a Frisbee while it's in the air, but she'll watch it from the edge of the dock and once it lands, she'll dive in and retrieve it — again, probably a Lab trait she inherited from her mother.

“At some point in her water play, she discovered that there was something she could chase in the water. I watched as she stood in the pond. All I could see was her backbone and tail sticking up. Slowly her nose came out of the water and lowered back into it. She was taking a breath. Every movement was slow and methodical. Suddenly there was frenzied thrashing accompanied by flying water, and Bacca trotted out of the water with a catfish. She settled into the hayfield for a snack and a nap.”

Wolves are very smart and very efficient predators. It's not surprising that they would learn from their mistakes and change their method of hunting to fit the situation.

Bacca's behavior

“Bacca barks a lot. She barks to let the world know that she has been let out in the morning, a deliveryman is on the road, the neighbors' dogs are out, or to manipulate our other two dogs, which she does with incredible success every time.”

Some dogs bark at anything and everything. Wolves are best associated with howling; however, they bark, whine and whimper, growl, snarl, and moan more than they howl. Bacca didn't howl much until one of my sister's other dogs demonstrated it. (My four-pound papillon must have channeled her wild side as she howled right along with the recording of wolf howls I found at NOVA online, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/wolves/howl.html>.)



“But Bacca has a whole other side to her. Her blind faith in her pack of five (three dogs and two humans) is inspiring. If one barks a warning, she is at their side barking her best bark. She shares her dry crumbly dog food with anyone who wants it, and she comes into the bathroom every morning to get a neck scratching. She trusts her humans completely and follows us blindly.”

A few other comparisons of wolves and wolf-dogs with dogs

Wolves like to dig but so do some dogs. Wolves, however, will dig many shallow and not-so-shallow holes in their territory, whether for relief from the heat, for resting, or perhaps as hiding places. Bacca has dug quite a few shallow holes around my sister's property.

As pups, wolves wrestle, pounce, growl, and fight as part of their play. They chew on each other's faces and try to drag each other around. Adult wolves do not do this, and an adult that plays will be excluded from the group. Dogs, on the other hand, will usually retain their playfulness as adults.



When no longer juveniles, wolves become more aggressive. As she matured, Bacca became much more aggressive with her prey and her protection of my sister and their property.



With humans, adult wolves have to act like juvenile wolves to become a part of the human family. Eventually these juvenile-behaving wolves became dogs who have lost the aggressiveness of adult wolves.

Both dogs and wolves express extreme welcoming behavior. Humans interpret their dog's behavior as love. The wolf's behavior is directed toward the pack and helps strengthen their very strong bonds.

Wolves have an undercoat and so do Labrador retrievers. Wolves have slightly webbed toes and so does Bacca; however, neither has toes as webbed as those of a Lab. Bacca's front feet turn slightly outward as do those of wolves.

Wolves are more active in the winter. Their undercoat keeps them warm. Probably for the same reason, they are much less active in the summer. Bacca is also very active in the winter and "has learned the value of central air and lies on top of the vents" during the summer. Dogs who can get away with it have also adopted this summertime behavior.

The end result

"I'm not sure how we learned to tolerate and finally appreciate her instinct, her intelligence, and her skill with hunting her own food. I never thought I would allow a 'killer' to join our pack, but every animal has its place, I guess.

"She freely hands over her spoils to me if requested and never seems to question why I would take something from her. If I am sad, she is the first one at my side. If I am brushing the dogs' coats, she will weasel her way in between me and the dog I'm brushing to be the one closest to me.

"While we love all of our dogs, past and present, she is the one that will stand out as our dog of two extremes. She really is a great dog."

