



4-19-2020

## A Life with Wolves

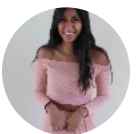
Sarah Brown



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# A Life With Wolves

From the author's Yellowstone home to sunny Southern California, wolves are making their presence felt



Sarah Brown

Apr 19 · 10 min read

*“In wildness is the salvation of the world. Perhaps this is the hidden meaning in the howl of the wolf, long known among the mountains, but seldom perceived among humankind.” - Henry David Thoreau*

By Sarah Brown

If you ask my family what animal I would be, if I could be one, they wouldn't hesitate to answer: a wolf. I've been in love with wolves since before I could walk. We live in the middle of Yellowstone National Park and I spent many early mornings of my childhood venturing into the Lamar Valley looking for wolves.

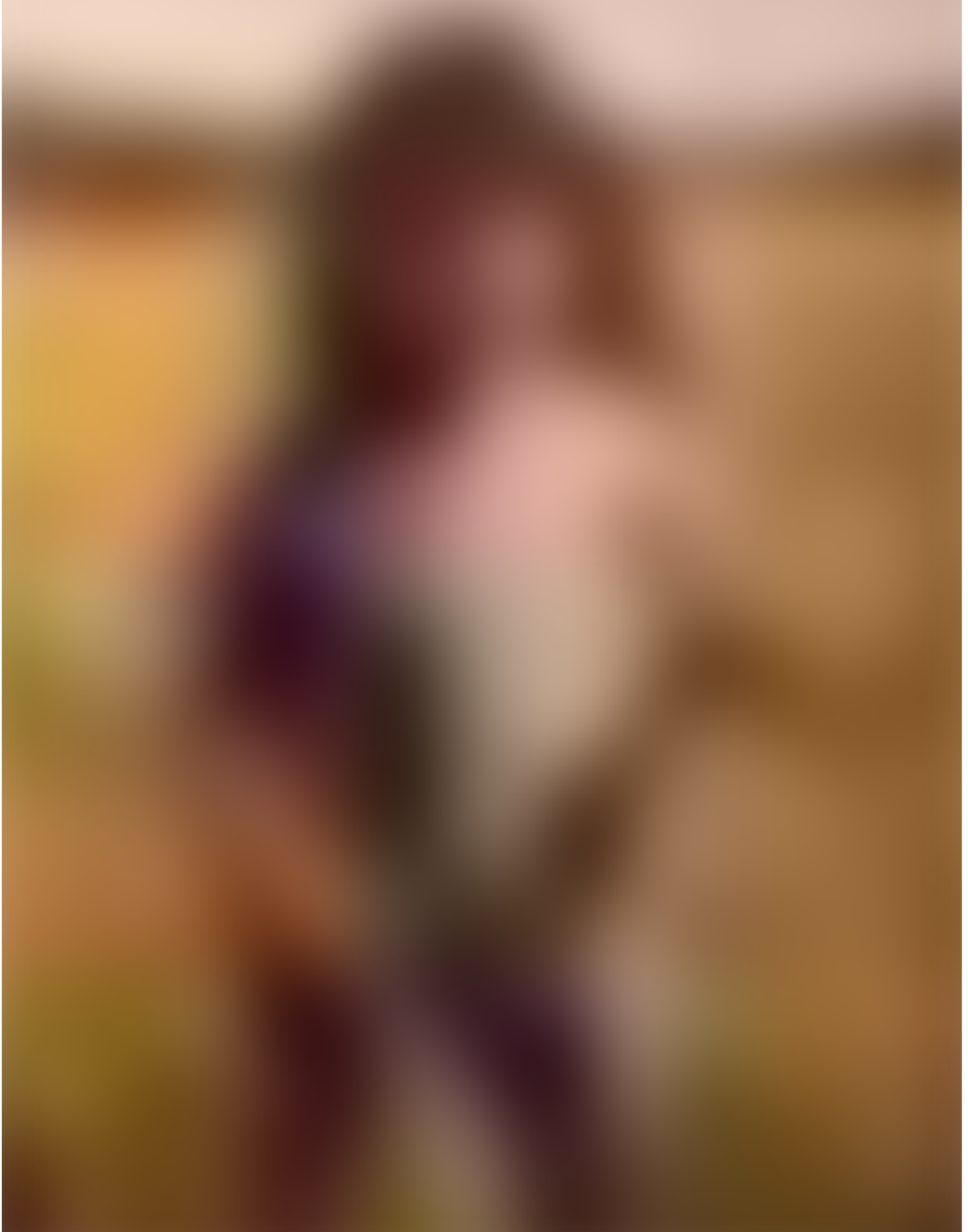
I remember that one cold morning when my Dad woke me up at 4:45 a.m. Despite not being a morning person, I was excited to get up this morning to go wolf watching. It was still dark out when we left the house. The sun started to rise slowly as we drove through Yellowstone. I watched as the scenery of tall snowcapped mountains and pine trees whizzed by our red minivan. It was a cool fall morning and aspen trees were shedding their golden and burnt-orange leaves, but the pine trees still held their needles. We soon came upon other people around the park with their spotting scopes looking for wolves.

We drove through the northeastern half of the park, but didn't see any wolves and finally threw in the towel and started to drive home. As we pulled into our small neighborhood nestled in Mammoth Hot Springs, we noticed elk grouping together in a defensive stance. We pulled over to the side and waited. A shadow of an animal crept right next to our car in the sagebrush. A black wolf crouched low to the ground. My dad and I parked across the road from the chapel in Mammoth Hot Springs and watched with our binoculars as an entire pack of wolves hunted the elk right in our backyard.

They moved so gracefully herding the elk into a large circle throughout the sagebrush. A medium-sized gray wolf darted right next to our car, stalking the elk. They were trying to weed out the weakest links. They started to push the herd further back into the sage brush away from the main road. I watched as the elk ran away with an entire pack on their heels.







The author circa early 2000s in Yellowstone National Park

There were days I would go into Yellowstone and come back having not seen one wolf. I would sulkily go to bed, only to wake up the next morning with three or four large gray wolves sitting casually on the hills behind my house.

It was common for me to see these wild creatures, especially in the winter. No matter how many I saw, though, my interest or love for wolves never waned. Wolves hold a place in the wild that no other keystone species can replace. They embody the West and are a vital factor in keeping ecosystems like Yellowstone National Park healthy.

I grew up in Mammoth Hot Springs, the headquarters station of Yellowstone National Park, what is now known as gray wolf country. Wolves were reintroduced to the mountain West under the Endangered Species Act in 1995, just three years before I was born.

Before then, wolves had been nearly extirpated from the West and were reduced to a few thousand holdouts in the northern reaches of Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin, and a travelers in northwestern Montana. Without wolves to cull the herds, elk and deer populations started to skyrocket in places like Yellowstone, exhausting the resources within the mountain ecosystem. With the elk and deer eating all the tree leaves and grasses, the smaller animals had nothing to eat, the waters in streams and rivers became unhealthy, killing fish.

The entire ecosystem was failing. Environmentalists believed the landscape was suffering without its apex predator: wolves were needed to save Yellowstone. It is by the luck of the draw, due to my father's employment in Yellowstone, that I was raised at ground zero of one of the most contentious and successful species reintroductions in modern history.

So, it might seem odd that after spending my formative years hearing the plaintive howls of wild wolves, and occasionally seeing them in my own backyard, I found myself driving three hours to visit with captive wolves in a remote corner of San Diego County, a few miles outside of Julian, California.

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**F**ounded in 1977, the California Wolf Center's mission is to educate the public about wolves, as well as rehabilitate and reintroduce wolves to the wild. It is the largest wolf conservation, education, and research program in the West. The Center works hard to dispel the stigma that wolves are a threat to humans. Using a collaborative approach with local livestock owners, farmers, and partnering with the Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Wolf Center has successfully reintroduced a large number of wolves into the wilderness.

The most unique aspect of the California Wolf Center is that, as of 2019, they house the largest captive group of Mexican gray wolves, also known as lobo wolves. Mexican gray wolves are a lesser known species of wolves that roam from the Southwest states all the way to Mexico. Similar to their cousins in the north, Mexican gray wolves were completely wiped out and declared extinct in the wild. Under the Endangered Species Act, seven of the remaining wolves of that species held in captivity were able to be bred and then reintroduced into Arizona and New Mexico in 1998. The program, a source of much controversy in those areas, is ongoing.





Frida and her pups | California Wolf Center

As of 2018, there are 131 known Mexican gray wolves in the wild in the U.S. and fewer than 30 in Mexico. The California Wolf Center is currently home to 28 Mexican gray wolves. This is the largest population at any of the recovery centers and all of these wolves are being observed for potential release into the wild.

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At the center, I met with Erin Hunt, the director of conservation. We sat in the back office of the main guest facility. A few desks lined the small space and large photos and paintings of wolves decorated the walls. A California native, Hunt discovered the California Wolf Center after attending college in San Diego. She fell in love with its mission and with the wolves.

Hunt explained that Mexican gray wolves are currently listed on the Endangered Species list as a subspecies of gray wolf. Hunt stated that having them on this list gives

the California Wolf Center even more impetus to reintroduce these wolves into the wild. She said, “It’s our legal obligation to ensure that they are meaningfully recovered into the wild before they can be delisted.” Having five different packs at the Center ensures a higher percentage of wolves can be released successfully into the wild and add to the species’ pool of breeding pairs, which is critical to improving the population’s genetic diversity.

The wolf packs at the California Wolf Center are significant because they are multigenerational and the younger wolves learn from their parents how to raise pups. This gives the wolves an advantage if they are released into the wild to have their own pups and eventually their own packs. According to Hunt, the Center has several habitats that work for the multigenerational packs.

Family structure is very important to wolves. Every wolf in the program is considered as a potential release candidate. The Center’s most genetically valued pack is not exhibited to the public and is recommended for breeding in 2020. These pups will be considered for “cross fostering.”





Cross fostering is the process in which a field team from the California Wolf Center and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reintroduce new wolf pups into the wild. The field team goes into the native habitat of the wild Mexican gray wolves, in Arizona and New Mexico, taking pups that are born in captivity and switching them with a few in the wild. The last successful group of Mexican gray wolves was cross fostered in 2017.

An interesting, and somewhat unique, thing about wolves is that they are programmed to take care of pups; even if the pups are not biologically related, they will accept them almost all of the time. Each year that pups are cross fostered and older wolves are released into the wild, the population of the Mexican gray wolves grows. The goal is to have the population grow enough that the wolves will be ecologically effective, meaning they will resume their role as one of the top predators in the ecosystem and have a large enough population to be self-sustaining.



Phoenix and Frida | California Wolf Center

One of the biggest challenges for the reintroduction of wolves is lack of human tolerance towards wolves as a species. Wolves have been constantly villainized as the “The Big Bad Wolf.” The reality is that wolves are more scared of humans than humans are of them. They will do everything they can to stay out of a human’s sight. The last recorded fatal wolf attack in the United States was in 2010. That was one out two recorded wolf attacks in U.S. history. The chances of wolves attacking humans are very low.

A much bigger challenge arises when wolves are looking for food and there’s a massive amount of livestock on their doorsteps. Of course a top predator would be tempted, wouldn’t you?

Livestock loss due to wolves is the main reason why wolves were almost completely eliminated and why their reintroduction has created significant blowback. Local ranchers and farmers battle to keep wolves away from their livestock. Statistically speaking, wolves are a much lower threat to livestock compared to illnesses, natural causes of death and other predators. According to a U.S. Department of Agriculture study of livestock owners, about 12 percent lose livestock to wolves once a year and nine percent lose livestock once a month. Almost 80 percent of the livestock owners studied never encounter wolves at all. According to USDA reports, 90–95 percent of cattle deaths are from non-predators. The other 5–10 percent is from predators, including wolves. Even with those statistics, wolves are still listed below coyotes, foxes, and feral dogs for livestock predation.

The California Wolf Center takes a unique approach to this issue. The Center and many other nonprofits affiliated with the Species Survival Plan (SSP) understand the anxieties ranchers and other livestock owners have when it comes to reintroducing predators. They have created a plan to work alongside the ranchers to monitor the wolves that have been released back into the wild, to help the natural ecosystem thrive and to keep the rancher’s livestock safe.

The California Wolf Center along with another non-profit originally started at the CWC, The Working Circle Proactive Stewardship (WCPS), have come up with plans and programs to help ranchers and livestock owners coexist with wild wolves, mitigate against conflicts before they happen and provide resources if and when they do. The plans cater to individual livestock owners and the neighboring wolf packs.

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I don't usually see wolves in captivity, but my impression of the Mexican gray wolves I saw at the centers is that these are still wild wolves. I was brought to the enclosure adjacent to the visitor center. There were a few moments of silence, but suddenly, I was face-to-face with a medium sized wolf. He was smaller than a gray wolf but bigger than most dogs. His eyes gazed directly into mine. His look was intense, but also playful. His two comrades slowly crept up towards the fence. They were both skittish, but curious. Their coats were glossy and full because of the cooler winter weather. The first wolf was quite a bit larger than the others. He seemed to be the leader of the pack.

The first wolf nipped at one of his brothers, as if to signal that it was time to leave and the other two ran further back into the enclosure, far enough away that they could not be seen. The wolf turned to look back at me one last time and then disappeared into the forested enclosure, following his pack. I felt a familiar sense of wonder and humility observing this stunning creature.

“We still have work to do.” -Erin Hunt

Conservation of wildlife in our ecosystem is increasingly important with climate change and habitats shrinking by the day. This wolf is a reminder that the work of the California Wolf Center is not done. As Hunt said, “We need to do a lot of work to continue building relationships and improve social tolerance in areas where wolves are recovering.”

When the wolves were reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park, the ecosystem thrived. Understanding how to work with these animals instead of killing them is key to maintaining a healthy environment for all of us. The California Wolf Center is a good example of the steps we should be taking to keep nature wild, so that the howl of the wolf can be always be heard in the Wild West for generations to come.



Mexican Gray Wolf F1539 | Credit California Wolf Center

- Wolves
- California Wolf Center
- Mexican Gray Wolf
- Whittier College