

Save Yourself the Heartache – Avoid This Crossbreed

This one is far better left unbred. Popular and lucrative, breeders often fail to mention the downsides - and there are many. By age 3, these animals are unhappy, stubbornly aggressive, urinate and defecate indoors, and do untold damage to everything you own. No wonder abandonment is so common.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The crossbreeding of wolves with dogs, creating wolfdogs to sell as pets, has been an unfortunate trend for several decades, and sadly, the fate of the vast majority of these animals is tragic
- There are many things about wolfdogs that make them unsuitable pets for most people once they reach sexual maturity at around age 3; simply put, the more “wolfie” the animal, the more challenging he will be to properly care for
- Wolfdogs can be considerably more stubborn, bold and aggressive than domestic dogs and in general, the wilder aspects of their natures can result in damage to homes and yards, and injury to smaller pets
- Proper care of a wolfdog requires more land and other resources than most pet owners have at their disposal
- Wolves and dogs shouldn't be crossbred; one is a wild animal who deserves to live in the wild — the other is a fully domesticated companion animal and a much better choice for prospective pet owners

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published July 05, 2018.

Sadly, for several decades now people who don't know better (and many who do know better but lack scruples) have been breeding domestic dogs with wolves, creating wolfdogs, also called wolf-dog hybrids.

According to Mission: Wolf, a nonprofit wolf educational sanctuary in Colorado, the practice got its start in the 1950s “... with a few well-intentioned people who, being genuinely concerned for the dwindling numbers of wild wolves, wanted to do something to ensure their survival.”¹

Unfortunately, the latest conservative estimate is that between 250,000 and 500,000 wolves and wolfdogs are living in captivity in the U.S. And per Mission: Wolf:

"While most will die within a year of their birth, new pups are constantly bred and sold. The wolf-dog business is a lucrative one ... depending on the advertised wolf percentage. New pups are sold to people looking for a guard dog, a family pet, a movie star or a fur source."

And while it's true that *canis lupus* (the wolf) and *canis lupus familiaris* (the domesticated dog) occasionally breed on their own in the wild, it's a rare occurrence. It's also true that dogs share most of their DNA with wolves; however, they've evolved over centuries of domestication to adapt to living with humans. The long process of domestication has

permanently altered the behavior, life cycle and physiology of dogs.

What most owners of wolfdog puppies don't realize (and aren't told by breeders) is their pup will very likely only look and act like a domestic dog for the first year or two of life. At around age three, wolfdogs develop into "part-wild, part-domestic, very confused" animals.

According to Mission: Wolf, nine out of 10 wolfdog puppies are lost to "... neglect, abuse, euthanasia, escape and misunderstanding," and the lone surviving pup often ends up homeless. There are just a handful of wolf and wolfdog sanctuaries and refuges in the U.S. Most have very limited resources and can't possibly take in all the wolfdogs acquired as pets by people who have no idea what they're getting into.

The people at Mission: Wolf get two to six phone calls and letters every week from owners who are having problems with a wolfdog and no longer want to keep it. The organization has turned away more than 10,000 animals since 1986.

Their 'Wolfiness' Makes Them Unsuitable for Most People

Both captive and wild wolves are a known quantity. They operate by instinct, and their behavior has been studied and documented for many decades by scientists and researchers. We've learned a great deal about the territorial nature of wolves, their social dynamics and their hunting behavior. We can even predict how they'll instinctively respond in different situations. However, like all wild animals, they can also behave unpredictably.

"People who own hybrids often find that their pet's behavior makes it a challenge to care for," according to the International Wolf Center. "The diversity of genetic composition even within one litter of hybrid pups leads to a wide range of appearances and behavior patterns among all hybrids, thus making their behavior inconsistent and more difficult to predict."²

Examples of the wilder nature of wolfdog hybrids and the problems that can arise for their owners:

- Most dogs become sexually mature at about 6 to 8 months of age, and while there are behavioral changes, they are less intense compared to wolves. The wolf reaches sexual maturity much later (anywhere from 1 to 4 years of age), and it brings a significant shift in hormone quantity and balance, often accompanied by equally significant behavioral changes.³ From the International Wolf Center:

"When a wolf reaches sexual maturity ... their role in the pack often changes from that of a pup to an adult expected to contribute to the pack. Status becomes much more important, and the animal may begin testing its packmates to achieve a higher-ranking position in the pack.

Testing or challenging of packmates can be transferred onto a human 'leader' when a wolf is kept in captivity, causing the animal to be perceived as stubborn, bold or even aggressive."

Wolfdogs can develop anywhere along the spectrum between dogs and wolves in terms of maturation rates and behavioral changes.

- Domestication has made dogs relatively easy to houstrain. Wolves, on the other hand, possess a strong territorial instinct, and one of their inclinations is to draw boundaries around their food source by urinating

and defecating. In the wolfdog, this natural behavior can be acted out indoors.

- Wolves are extremely curious and constantly explore their environment, often with their teeth and claws. A wolfdog will very likely apply his investigative skills to his "territory" inside his owner's home, and can do an incredible amount of damage to furniture, appliances, walls and flooring.
- In the wild, wolves roam their home range, guarding their turf against other packs of wolves and invaders of other species, and urine-marking their territory frequently and profusely. That's why it is no surprise wolfdogs tend to be quite proficient at escaping enclosures and wandering off.
- Wolves are diggers and den builders, which means wolfdogs left alone in a backyard may destroy the flowerbed, the lawn and the patio furniture. They can also dig impressively deep holes, which is another way they are able to escape enclosures.
- Wolves are extraordinary predators, and in the wild they view animals other than their own kind as prey. Wolfdogs tend to view cats, small dogs and even small children in close proximity as prey. And the problems associated with wolfdog hybrids aren't limited to behavioral challenges. They also extend to the animals' spirit and quality of life. From Mission: Wolf:

"In response to the growing problem of homeless pet wolves and wolf-dogs, refuges and sanctuaries across the country have opened their gates and hearts to these animals.

In caring for and getting to know these animals, it does not take long to realize that, in most cases, no matter how hard you try to provide for these animals — giving them large enclosures, raw meat and canine companions — the animals are still not happy. They often pace incessantly or transfer aggression to other animals or handlers."

Very Few Pet Owners Can Meet the Space/Housing Requirements

Mission: Wolf has compiled a set of guidelines for people thinking about getting wolfdogs as pets. As you'll see, these recommendations immediately rule out anyone who believes they can have an indoor-only wolfdog or one who'll be content to hang out in their suburban backyard.

- **Space to roam and howl, preferably off the beaten path** — Wolfdogs need lots of wilderness and outdoor space to explore. They howl, so having close neighbors is usually not workable. Noisy neighborhoods, including traffic noise, create extreme stress for wolfdogs because they're naturally shy creatures.
- **Minimum enclosure requirements** — Wolfdogs need at least a full acre of enclosure space. If there are multiple wolfdogs, a bare minimum of a half-acre per animal is needed to minimize aggression between them. "Chain link fencing [9-gauge, 2-inch square] should adjoin to a ground barrier and extend upwards a minimum of 6 feet, with a 2-foot extension of lighter-weight fence at the top." The overall height of the fence should be a minimum of 8 feet.

Mission: Wolf uses double fences angled inward at the top so that animals who are able to climb or jump one fence won't have enough momentum to get over the second one.

A perimeter fence at least 5 feet tall should be installed 5 feet outside the primary fence surrounding the enclosure to prevent anyone from physically contacting the primary enclosure. All entrances/exits must have double gates at least 6 feet tall, with secure, lockable latches.

Ground barriers in the form of buried concrete with reinforced mesh should be placed 2 feet vertically into the ground and attached to the base of the primary chain link fence to prevent animals from digging themselves out of the enclosure.

Alternatively, you can install 4-foot wide ground mesh, laid flat on the ground extending into the enclosure and attached to the base of the chain link. Logs, rocks and 3 to 6 inches of soil should be placed on top of the mesh for weight and to protect the wolfdogs' feet.

The enclosure must have adequate drainage so the animals can find dry ground in wet weather. It must also contain a shelter that is large enough for them to get out of the rain, snow or direct sunlight. Keep in mind that wolfdogs are chewers, and they also like to climb up on things and look down on the action, so the shelter should be sturdy and safe enough for them to climb or jump up on.

It's also important to have some vegetation and ground cover in the enclosure, but no trees or bushes should be placed close to the fence, since wolfdogs will find a way to use them to escape.

For much more information about caring for wolfdogs, visit Mission: Wolf's [Wolf and Wolf-Dog Care](#) page, as well as their [Wolf-Dog Questionnaire](#) page.

Dr. Isla Fishburn's Comments on Wolfdogs

I have the pleasure of lecturing with and befriending a wolfdog expert, Dr. Isla Fishburn of [Kachina Canine](#). Dr. Fishburn has extensive experience with wolfdogs, and helping committed owners learn how to best care for these displaced hybrids. Here are her thoughts:

"Having worked with captive wolves, wolf hybrids and wolfdogs (in the [U.K.] you need a DWA license to own a wolf hybrid — F1 or F2 but not a wolfdog) for several years these animals have certainly taught me a lot about some of the more ancestral and primitive behaviors that we continue to see in our more domestic dogs.

Whenever I get asked, 'What is having a wolfdog like compared to other dog breeds?' I, at first, find it a difficult question to answer. That's because as a zoologist I really struggle to get my head around why someone would actively choose to live with a dog but then not choose to study that animal in detail. The number of times I hear 'well, it's a dog — It should know what to do,' is really upsetting for me.

There is an argument that we should not have wolfdogs as pets and to some extent, I agree. However, there also needs to be a greater awareness for dogs in general and that includes the harsh reality that many of us should not even have any dog as a pet. At least, not until we make the commitment and responsibility to learn and understand what it means to have a dog — to understand its biology, its emotions, its health, diet ... I could go on.

Herein lies the problem. Being responsible for the life of another animal, a different species than us, is far too easy to access. This instantly reduces the respect and consideration that one may, in hindsight, realize upon buying a wolfdog.

Sure, I have worked with other breeds that have high prey drive, dig up carpets to den, show anger and aggression, and all the other behaviors that any dog can show as a canine. Yet, what makes wolfdogs harder? What makes them more difficult so that most are abandoned before they hit their first birthday? Is it that they are more aggressive, more territorial and more fierce?

Sure, some can be, but it would be unfair to group all wolfdogs into this category — it's about the individual biography and biology of each dog. We all know that one Labrador who would happily eat you from the inside out given half a chance!

So, why are wolfdogs different and why do I rarely recommend these beautiful animals to most homes? It is largely because of a total misunderstanding of what these animals need — of what any dog needs. However, most domestic dogs are far more forgiving than wolfdogs.

In many dogs, domestication has successfully diluted down the primitive instincts that we can still observe in some dogs. It is these instincts that tend to be fully present in wolfdogs, starting as young pups.

We might be prepared to bring our young 'Fido' home and share our house and possessions with him. We might forgive him for having a little nibble of the chair leg ... but if 'Fido' has a nibble of your entire front room ... well that is just unforgivable and the dog is deemed uncontrollable!

You see, when you have a wolfdog, the animal doesn't fit in with you and your keeping up appearances (and why should any dog, for that matter) but, rather, you fit in with your wolfdog.

This includes the digging, the chewing, the destroying, the mouthing ... oh! The mouthing! This is such an important aspect of communication that we can be rather successful in preventing in domestic dogs, but not so with wolfdogs, especially when they are young (but it can continue throughout adult life). I often get called out or am told that a wolfdog has been handed in due to the intense mouthing they do.

As our wolfdogs grow, the sheer size of them can overpower the ability for a human to manage them safely and respectfully — prey drive, same gender conflicts, primitive instincts to den, protect, mate, destroy ... yet more mouthing but now from the jaws of an adult rather than puppy!

When a wolfdog begins to reach sexual maturity this is when people really can struggle. The worst thing that anyone can do with any animal is then subject it to force — but with wolfdogs most people do.

Use force on a wolfdog and it will most commonly (but not always) use force back. It's the same for most predators, right. But with the sheer size, strength and bone density of a wolfdog, they are able to cause so much more damage. It is the capability of a wolfdog to do harm when placed with the wrong human to teach them that causes many issues.

To then be deemed, labeled or regarded as a dangerous, out of control or an aggressive animal is both unfair and unjust. Yet, given the animal will now respond this way and given its size and therefore difficulty to manage by most, the animal is then awaiting a death sentence.

That is, unless, the animal is fortunate enough to find peace and understanding at a sanctuary or experienced home where all pressure is off.

My purpose is to safeguard those animals that do not have a voice. My purpose is to provide an understanding for canine health and longevity. My purpose is to ensure that wolfdogs remain a specialist animal with specialist care and co-exist with humans in environments that nurture their needs, respectfully and without expectation.

I feel very fortunate to be one of those lucky people to co-exist with wolfdogs, but you will rarely see me recommend these magnificent individuals to many."

Sources and References

[Colorado Public Radio News, May 1, 2018](#)

¹ [Mission: Wolf](#)

^{2,3} [International Wolf Center](#)
