

Guide to Proper Identification of Wolves and Wolfdogs

Many breeders and owners claim to have “wolves” or “wolfdogs” (aka “wolf hybrids”), and shelters, Animal Control agencies, and vets often need to identify unknown canids — but very few people are actually familiar with the differences between dogs and wolves, and how to spot a true wolf or wolfdog.

This pamphlet lists some of the major distinctions between wolves and the dog breeds most commonly mistaken for wolves and used in wolfdog breeding (German Shepherds [GSDs], and northern breeds like Huskies, Malamutes, Native American Indian Dogs, Northern Inuit Dogs, etc.). See further in the document for photos illustrating some of the differences described.

Wolfdogs will exhibit a mixture of wolf and dog traits, depending on their wolf content, and their “wolf” traits may be more subtle than in pure wolves.

IMPORTANT:

In our experience, around 75% to 90% of the animals claimed to be wolves/wolfdogs are actually mislabeled dogs. **If there’s any doubt, it’s probably a dog!** (Note too that the vast majority of captive animals that do have wolf ancestry are wolfdogs, rather than pure wolves.)

Misrepresenting a dog as a wolf or wolfdog seriously endangers the animal, by increasing the chances of it being euthanized should laws change or should it ever need a new home.

We therefore urge breeders and owners not to misrepresent their dogs; and vets, shelters, and Animal Control agencies not to identify an unknown canid as a wolf or wolfdog without compelling evidence — even if the animal was designated as such by its breeder or its current or previous owner.

Be aware that there are **NO** reliable DNA tests available to distinguish dogs from wolves/wolfdogs.



He may look quite wolfy, but this is a Tamaskan dog. Labeling him as a wolf would put his life in danger

(Wikimedia Commons, uploaded by user Poachersfarm, CC-by-sa 3.0)

Very strong evidence of significant **DOG** ancestry:

- Animal is easily-trainable, at ease with strangers, or actively seeks human company
- Barks frequently or repetitively; or exhibits a loud, harsh, doglike bark
- Lacks intense or highly-developed body language with other canids
- Displays no significant prey drive
- Displays no resource guarding or food aggressive tendencies
- If an adult: animal is immediately outgoing and friendly with, and gets along well with, a wide variety of previously unfamiliar dogs
- Round eyes
- Eyes set relatively straight in the head (as opposed to slanted eyes)
- Eyes are any color **other** than yellow, gold, amber, or pale green
- Ears are large, tall, pointed, thin, floppy, or not well-furred inside and out
- Ears set far back on the head or very narrowly or widely spaced
- Head is not wedge-shaped
- Short, blunt, blocky, square, or overly wide muzzle
- Muzzle with pronounced bump just before the nose
- Pronounced forehead
- Domed, bulbous, or very rounded skull
- Lack of very clear/prominent cheek ruffs during winter
- Small or moderate-sized teeth
- Small or moderate-sized head relative to body
- Wide, broad, barrel, or deep chest
- Straight-set elbows or elbows that face outward
- Rear legs not “cow-hocked”
- Short legs
- Any white or clear toenails
- Dewclaws on rear legs
- Small or moderate-sized, compact, or rounded paws
- Back slopes downward toward tail when animal is standing erect
- Tail held with curl or curve; or sickle-shaped tail
- Very long or very short tail
- Tail that is not bushy and bottlebrush-like
- White tail tip
- Lack of precaudal spot (dark mark near base of the tail), even in a white or black animal
- Single-layered coat during winter
- Fur is feathered, soft, very long, or very short
- Lack of “cape” or mane of longer hairs around neck/shoulders and along back
- Lack of banding on each individual hair (even in superficially “white” or “black” animals)
- Abrupt coat markings, asymmetrical coat markings, patches, or spots
- “Widow’s peak” or “open” face mask

- Nose, lips, gums, paw pads, or eyeliner are any color **other** than **solid** black
- If a dark animal: coat remains solid black or darkly-colored throughout life, rather than turning mostly white/gray as animal ages
- Coat is shed hair-by-hair rather than in large clumps; or coat is easily matted and requires brushing in order to help animal shed properly; or animal sheds more than once a year
- Trot is jerky, bouncy, uneven, or “hitched”
- Born outside the months of March-May
- Fertile or sexually receptive year-round or twice a year, or outside of mid to late winter

NOT evidence of recent wolf ancestry – found in both dogs and wolves:

- Animal is aggressive, difficult to train, aloof, highly reactive, highly fearful of or uncomfortable around strangers, or avoids human company
- Animal is high-energy, destructive, skilled at escaping, digs frequently, shows resource guarding or food aggressive tendencies, or has a high prey drive
- Howls
- Yellow, gold, amber, or green eyes
- Almond-shaped eyes
- Black toenails (some arctic wolves have tan/taupe nails)
- Bottlebrush-like tail, reaching to hocks, held straight
- Large teeth
- Black tail tip
- Precaudal spot (dark mark near base of the tail)
- Double-layered coat, shed once per year
- Banding on each individual hair
- “Agouti” or “sable” coat pattern
- Black nose, lips, gums, paw pads, and eyeliner
- Born between March-May

Suggestive evidence of recent **WOLF** ancestry:

*Note: Almost any “wolf” trait can be found in **some** dog. An extremely destructive canine with a narrow chest might just be a neurotic off-standard GSD. The traits listed below are most conclusive when a number of them co-occur in the same animal. “Wolf” **behavioral** traits (except for #3 below) in the absence of any “wolf” **physical** traits should be considered very poor evidence of wolf ancestry.*

- Exhibits an **extremely** intense and relentless prey drive, sometimes including stalking behavior directed toward elderly, infirm, or mentally or physically handicapped people
- Animal is **extraordinarily** destructive (e.g., ripping tables to shreds, tearing down walls, destroying plumbing fixtures, etc.)
- Animal reaches sexual maturity around 2-3 years old and **dramatically** changes in personality, suddenly becoming impossible to handle or aggressively challenging owner(s) for dominance
- Eyes set at a slanted angle on the head

- Ears are rather small, triangular, with rounded tips, and **very** thick and well-furred inside and out (NOTE: some dogs have ears of the right shape, but rarely as furry and thick as in wolves)
- Head is very large, wedge-shaped, with long tapering muzzle, and no pronounced forehead (NOTE: some dogs **do** have wedge-shaped heads, and a few have no pronounced forehead)
- Very prominent cheek ruffs, especially during the winter (NOTE: some dogs have cheek ruffs, but rarely as pronounced as in wolves)
- Extremely narrow chest and very long legs, with elbows turned inwards causing paws to splay out and legs to scrunch together (NOTE: some dogs have narrow chests and/or long legs, though normally not to the same extent as in wolves)
- Extremely large, wide paws with long, bony middle toes and some webbing between toes
- “Cape” or mane of longer hairs around neck/shoulders and down along back
- If a black animal: “phases out” considerably as it ages, becoming **mostly** or **entirely** white/gray
- Sheds once a year, blowing undercoat in large uneven clumps, giving animal a ragged/mangy appearance for several weeks; very pronounced difference between summer and winter coat
- If a healthy weight: no obvious “tummy tuck” between ribs and inguinal region
- Smooth, effortless trot
- Animal “single-tracks” (walks by crossing one front leg in front of the other)

EYES:



Wolf – note “slanted” angle of eyes



Dog (Husky) – note eyes are set straight in head, and are blue

(Wikimedia Commons, uploaded by user Roland-eugen, CC-by-sa 2.0/de)

EARS:



Wolf – note size, shape, thickness, furriness, and position on head



Dog (Husky) – note size, shape, thinness, less furred, and position on head

(Flickr, uploaded by user Sue & Martin Curtis, CC-by-sa 3.0)

HEAD:



Wolf – note muzzle length and shape; and wedge shape of head



Wolf – note muzzle length and shape, and lack of pronounced forehead



Dog (Husky) – note more pronounced forehead, rounder skull, and blockier/blunter/shorter muzzle

(Wikimedia Commons, uploaded by user Utopialand, CC-by-sa 3.0)



Wolf – note cheek ruffs

CHEST / LEGS:



Wolves and high content wolfdogs – note very narrow chests, very long legs, legs and elbows close together, elbows turned inward, feet splayed out, and rear legs cow-hocked

Dog (Husky/GSD mix) – note broader chest, shorter legs, and elbows angled outward

PAWS:



Wolf



Wolf – note tan/taupe nails (not white/clear), even on white animal



Wolf

(Wikimedia Commons, uploaded by user Patrick Jacob, CC- by-sa 3.0)



Dog (Husky) – note smaller size, more compact, and white nails

(Wikimedia Commons, uploaded by user Makro Freak, CC-by-sa 2.5)

Note on Coyotes

Coyotes are frequently mistaken for wolves, but can be distinguished by their smaller size (around half the weight of most North American wolves); larger, more pointed ears; more slender, pointed snout; shorter legs; longer tail; smaller paws; consistent grayish-brown coloration (almost no white or black coyotes) with more reddish/copper/cinnamon tinge to the fur, especially on the legs and muzzle; and only a narrow band of white fur around the upper lip:



Note large, pointed ears; long tail; slender, pointed snout; and red tinge to legs and face

(Jim Peaco, NPS)



Note slender, pointed snout; red tinge to snout; and narrow band of white around lip

(Uploaded to sxc.hu by user Christopher Bruno)



Again, note ears; snout; tail; and coat color/pattern, including narrow white band on lip

Wild wolves are not present in Texas, so a wild wolflike canid seen in the state (assuming it is not an escaped wolfdog or a wolflike dog), is likely to be merely an unusually large coyote.

Some coyote-dog hybrids (coydogs) exist, though they are less “trendy” than wolfdogs. Many supposed “coydogs” are also misidentified/misrepresented dogs.

Note on Red / Mexican Gray / Arctic Wolves

Some breeders claim to use red wolves or Mexican gray wolves, but this is probably *always* false. There are only a few hundred individuals of each (sub)species left in the world, and they are either in well-regulated captive breeding programs (for reintroduction), in zoos, or in wildlife refuges. Breeders simply have no way of obtaining such animals. There are also very, very few arctic wolves in captivity, so the vast majority of claimed “arctic wolves” or “arctic wolf” mixes are misrepresented dogs (though a few are white phase wolfdogs of other subspecies).

Some other supposed subspecies/subtypes of wolves, claimed by breeders to be in their lines, are simply invented (e.g., “northern tundra wolf,” “swamp wolf,” “buffalo wolf,” etc.).

Further Resources

Print

Jessica Addams and Andrew Miller. *Between Dog and Wolf: Understanding the Connection and the Confusion*. Dogwise Publishing, 2012.

Web

Wolf Park: <http://www.wolfpark.org/animals/hybrids/>

Wolfdog Education and Information: <http://www.texx-wolf-tails.webs.com/>

Yamnuska Wolfdog Sanctuary: <http://www.yamnuskawolfdogsanctuary.com/resources/wolf-to-woof/physical-differences-between-wolves-and-dogs/>

Prepared by

Saint Francis Wolf Sanctuary

P.O. Box 877 · Montgomery, Texas · 77356
info@wolvesofsaintfrancis.org · 936-597-WOLF (9653)



A 501(c)(3) nonprofit charity dedicated to providing a loving, exceptional home to rescued wolves and wolfdogs and to educating the public about these animals.

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**For more information, or for
help identifying an unknown
animal, please don't hesitate to
contact us:**

<http://www.wolvesofsaintfrancis.org/wolfdog-help.htm>

info@wolvesofsaintfrancis.org