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IN THE
WILD
BY EMILY SMITH
A LOOK AT ONE OF NATURE’S
MOST MISUNDERSTOOD CREATURES
AND THE FIGHT TO PROTECT THEM
The stories that most of us were tucked in with at night portray the shy, highly intelligent creatures as sinister. But in reality, wolves don’t stalk little girls with picnic baskets; they’re not interested in blowing down your house. No, the only menace in these woods walks on two legs. Hunted to the brink of extinction, gray wolves fell under government protection in the late 1960s. Now, just as their numbers are beginning to recover, they’re once again caught in the crosshairs. They were stripped of their endangered species status in the Great Lakes states and the Northern Rockies in 2011 and 2012. Almost immediately, six states established hunts. During Michigan’s first hunt last year, 22 wolves were killed. The state’s voters will decide in November whether to continue the hunt. Two wildlife referendums on the ballot will determine whether wolves again fall prey to trophy hunting and whether the legislature should limit citizens’ rights to vote on wildlife policy issues. HSUS Michigan senior state director Jill Fritz is confident common sense will prevail. “These issues are an affront to the wolves and to the citizens of Michigan,” says Fritz, urging voters to vote NO on both issues. “We’re talking about a very small, very fragile population of wolves that is just beginning to recover.” There were 687 gray wolves living in the Upper Peninsula when the
species was first delisted. Now, there are 636.

Nancy Warren lives in the UP and has been dispelling the “big, bad” myth as a wolf educator for more than 20 years. Wolves’ private lives, she says, closely resemble our own. They nurture, they teach, they bond—and they mourn.

When a male wolf she had been tracking for years died, Warren walked out to his territory to reflect. She sat in the quiet for a few moments, and then ...  

“Off in the distance, I could hear the mournful howl of a lone wolf,” she remembers. “It howled from several different directions, and it would howl, pause, howl again. It was clear that it was searching for ... a response from its mate that never came.”

Warren says she hates to think of the mournful sounds that might soon fill the air if Michigan continues the hunt. She and Fritz both hope that’s not the next chapter in this story. These animals—like all creatures, they say—deserve to live happily ever after.

+ LEARN HOW YOU CAN HELP an HSUS-supported coalition’s work in Michigan at keepwolvesprotected.com.
CALL OF THE WILD

Wolf howls are like human voices—each is unique, so pack members (and researchers) can tell them apart. The animals howl to introduce themselves, announce their territory, communicate with their group and express emotions that range from joy to grief. The calls also serve as an alarm clock, with alphas first using the sound to rouse fellow wolves from sleep and then continuing it to energize them for the day ahead. Researchers and biologists such as Haber believe the howling behavior bonds the group and allows its members to cooperate more effectively. Here, a gray wolf calls to his family in Glacier National Park, Montana.

ON THE iPAD:
Hear a pack in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula howl to announce their territory to newcomers.
When most alpha wolves mate, they stay together for life—making them more committed to their relationships than many humans. Wolves also bond tightly with their young, who as adults often remain with the pack or come home to visit. Everyone in the group has a role in caring for pups, who at about 10 months are fully mature and can hunt on their own. When Mom and Dad go out to hunt, a yearling or a subordinate pack member—a teenage babysitter of sorts—stays behind to keep the pups out of trouble. Above, pups in Alaska’s Denali National Park wait for their parents while their babysitter keeps an eye out from nearby, where she’s less likely to be pestered. The Alaskan pups at left were a flurry of activity—wrestling, tumbling and biting—until they appeared to hear the faint sound of the camera 100 yards away.

Adult wolves are about 4 to 6 feet long, stand about 3 feet tall at the shoulder and weigh between 50 and 130 pounds. They range in color from grizzled black to completely white.

Their life expectancy is roughly 8 years in the wild and 12 years or more in protected areas.

Elk, deer, moose and smaller animals such as rabbits and beavers make up their diet.

Researchers estimate that wolves’ sense of smell is 100 times stronger than humans’. They can detect prey from miles away.