WOLF HAVEN

By Diana Mivelli

Why they do it is unclear. When they do it is unpredictable. Once one resident at Wolf Haven International begins howling, the others soon join in. The singular occasion can last mere minutes, yet it will live on in the memory of any visitor.

In Tenino, Washington--just 13 miles from the state capitol--you will find the 35-year old, donor-sustained wolf sanctuary serving the needs of its 56 residents--wolves, wolf dogs, and two coyotes.

"This is not a zoo or tourist site. This is a sanctuary whose primary mission is to rescue captive-born, and displaced wolves," said Kim Young, director of communications, who's been with the not-for-profit organization for 8-1/2 years.

Visitors are asked to behave and respect that this is someone's home.

Care is taken to recreate the natural surroundings in the wild. The enclosures are circular and measure from 1/3 to 2-1/2 acres. The enclosures stand eight feet high, with an additional three-foot bent top, as well as additional skirting staked underground.

"Wolves can climb; that's why that's tilted [points to top of fencing]. They can jump really high. They can dig very well," said Young.

Wolf Haven staff keep the enclosures heavily vegetated, including ground cover, to keep things as natural as possible. The residents can opt to lie in the tall grasses or seek refuge in their deck pens and out of the snow, sun, and rain, although they don't seem to mind the rain.

"Wolves are great escape artists--one of the reasons why so many people who think they can own them find out that they can't. Or, they do own them and the wolf has a miserable life because they keep it chained or in a crate," said Young.

Wolf Haven educates the public on the perils of wolf and wolf dog ownership. People don't think about what might happen to the animal if their circumstances change, if they get old and can't care for this large animal anymore, or if they move. Shelters usually don't take them because it's too big of a risk, and many are euthanized by the age of 2 or 3.

Wolf packs are families. They come in all sizes and typically consist of a breeding male and a breeding female and one or more generations of non-breeding offspring, but they don't come to the sanctuary that way.

"We rescue a wolf from Minnesota, a wolf from California, a wolf from Washington. They aren't blood relatives. You can't force this artificial family; plus they can't disperse like in the wild. When the family gets big enough, the younger ones are going to take off and start their own family. They can't do that here." Wolf Haven matches the rescued wolves for compatibility in the enclosures.

The animals all have a story. Take, for instance, enclosure-mates London and Lexi. London was purchased by a Hollywood trainer who wanted to use him in movies as the stereotypical feral wolf.

"And, he didn't take to training because wolves aren't really trainable, so he was rescued by a pitbull rescue, and she notified us."

Lexi came from a tourist attraction in Alaska where the owner had wolves and wolf dogs, each on individual eight-foot drag chains. The animals couldn't touch one another. He charged $5 to let the public watch while he fed them. Eventually, the state shut the place down. Wolf Haven rescued several animals from that place and Lexi is the last of those animals at the sanctuary.

In the wild, wolves live four to six years; at Wolf Haven, they live to early- or mid-teens, and sometimes, into their late teens. The oldest wolf at the sanctuary lived to be five days shy of 20. The oldest current resident is 17-year-old Diablo, a Mexican wolf.

At the sanctuary, they don't face the same risks as in the wild, where they "could easily get killed by prey. They could be kicked in the head by an elk they're trying to take down. Wolves are territorial so they can kill one another if they venture into one another's territory. They could get mange. They could get any type of illness," said Young.

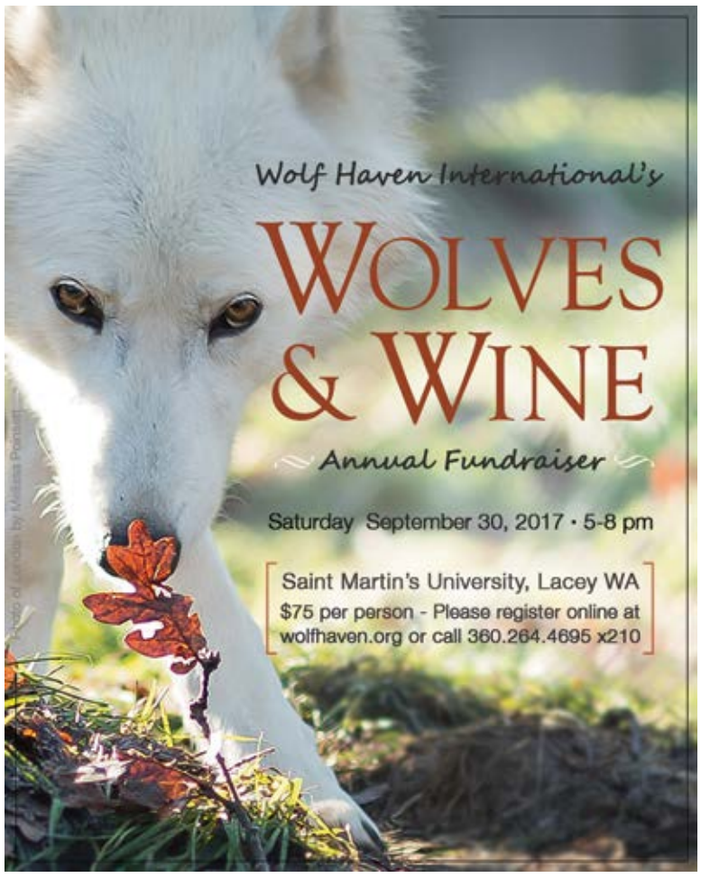
The most common cause of death at Wolf Haven is cancer, and it usually strikes during the residents' mid-teens.

The animals receive medical care and are checked on several times a day. The Animal Care Staff will enter the enclosures only if they have a very good reason. The staff mostly leave the residents alone. They throw the food over the fence into the enclosures, in an effort to minimize exposure to humans. The animals' welfare is always at the forefront.

"It's our attempt at giving them the kind of life they really deserve, but have never had," said Young.

Visitors to the sanctuary will typically see 10-12 wolves in 5-6 enclosures. There are many more enclosures the public doesn't see. By nature, wolves are wary of humans and don't seek them out. The animals on the public route have shown the most acceptance of routinely being seen by people.

Wolf Haven sits on 82 acres of land that includes woodlands, wetlands, and rare mounded prairie. More than 190 plant species grow on that prairie. More than 54 bird types and 48 species of butterflies have also been identified. Additionally, more than 332 Mazama Pocket Gophers have been relocated from development sites to the prairie at Wolf Haven where they can be protected. The gophers thrive in loose, well-drained prairie soils. The government estimates 95 percent of the gopher's habitat has been lost due to development and has listed them as a threatened species.

There are several ways for the public to support Wolf Haven: become a member ($35 per year); symbolically adopt one of the wolves; and attend the annual fundraiser Wolves & Wine, scheduled for Saturday, September 30, 2017.

For more information about Wolf Haven, visit their site at wolfhaven.org