

Tribute to Chinook

Sandra Lynch-Bakken,
Special Guest

AUTHOR OF
*ALONE WITH THE
PACK*, NOW AVAILABLE
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PAGE 40.

*Editor's note: Chinook was born at a private facility in Montana and went to the Heritage Zoo (now closed) in Nebraska when he was just over a month old. While there, Chinook was cared for primarily by the author. In 1999, the zoo came under new management and they decided to phase out their wolf exhibit. The Wolf Haven gift shop carries *Alone Within the Pack*, a book written by Sandra Lynch-Bakken.*

HOW DOES ONE BEGIN to sum up, in a few paragraphs, the life of an animal that stirred the emotions of so many? Not just the privileged humans who cared for him, and the countless visitors who observed him, but the wolves that shared his space.

I am certain each of us has their own special story or memory of Chinook, for he was generous with his affection and willing to give us a closer glimpse into a wolf's life, so we might better understand this majestic species. Writing this article is no easy task, but I will do my best to pay homage to a wolf called Chinook.

It was April 26, 1996 when this black wolf entered the world. In the litter of three, he was the largest, and by the age of six weeks weighed a healthy 9 lbs. To this day I recall vividly his first night spent with me at the Grand Island Zoo, in Nebraska. Since he was too young to be introduced to the unrelated adult pack, he stayed in our zoo house. He woke often throughout the midnight hours and whimpered. I went to him and offered everything I thought his growing body required; more food, water and blankets. After several failed attempts to settle him down, I discovered what he truly needed was the warmth and security of my body, as he contently tucked himself in next to me and fell asleep in my bed.

DURING HIS EARLY YEARS of life Chinook developed a strong bond with the other wolf pup, Montana. They were inseparable. They slept nudged together. They often gnawed on the same broken tree branch, chased after the same scolding red squirrel, and found equal pleasure in rolling in fresh duck droppings. As Chinook grew, he stayed true to his wolf lineage and became a bold, regal wolf respected by the other five pack members, and ultimately held the position of alpha leader of the Heritage Pack where he sired two pups. Eventually he and the other wolves would find a permanent home at Wolf Haven, when the Grand Island Zoo closed.

Chinook's steadfast affinity for both wolves and



Chinook. PHOTO BY JULIE LAWRENCE.

humans was a facet of who he was and that fondness is what the visitors were treated to as they started their guided tour around the sanctuary. He required little coaxing to come to the fence, thereby offering the visitor a moment to revel within the close vicinity of a wolf, and take with them a bit of magic that always accompanies a wolf stare.

This past spring, Wendy Spencer, the curator at Wolf Haven notified me of Chinook's failing health. Her recommendation was that if I wanted to see him I should come soon, because she could not guarantee how much longer he would be with us. I got on a plane the very next week.

Whenever I visit Wolf Haven, it is like coming home. Everyone is so welcoming. And of course knowing that just behind the wooden fence lives a species that I consider one of nature's perfections, makes me question why I waited so long to revisit.

It was mid-morning when Wendy walked me over to Chinook's enclosure. She indicated how his appetite had lessened, and when he did eat it was only bratwurst. Wendy said it was fine - if that was what he wanted, that is what he would get. I thought, "What a kind sentiment!"

From under the large oak, Chinook lifted his head slightly

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as we approached. His face appeared grayer than I remembered, and as Wendy had warned, he was much thinner. I tried not to be shocked by his appearance, but conceded he was looking old. I called his name, and slowly he got up. It was obvious his joints hurt him, but that did not deter him from making the labored journey toward us. That was Chinook's trademark, so willing to give of himself to satisfy those around him.

I wanted to believe it was my familiar voice, and his desire to greet an old friend that urged him to abandon the comfort of the hollowed out dirt mound under the healing April sun. But what I suspect got him up and moving was the smell of the food Wendy was holding. Regardless of what brought him to the fence, I was thrilled to have his company. I offered up a customary finger massage as he leaned against the wire, his fur poking through. For a moment, time stood still, and I lingered in the joy of touching a wolf. Yes, Chinook was now fourteen years old and possibly dying, but he still possessed the dignity and gentleness that made him a leader.

For the remainder of that day, and into the next I sat by his cage and simply watched. Periodically he would get up and come over to me, and I would touch his head, or scratch his side. That was enough to satisfy us both, and then he would return to his spot inside his deck pen, or under the tree. The hours that passed allowed me to reflect back on his life, and all we had shared together. Our evening walks around the zoo grounds, often me carrying him when his little legs tired. His insatiable appetite for play, particularly the game of tag with Montana and Cheyenne. His exuberant greetings as he grew larger, which often knocked me off-balance. The tolerance he exhibited as I sat at his and Tina's den entrance waiting for the birth of their



Chinook. PHOTO BY JULIE LAWRENCE.

young. His trusting acceptance of my holding his newborn pups, Tonkawa and Denali. So many cherished moments that continue to carry me through to this day.

Far too quickly however, my two days with Chinook were nearing an end, and I was down to a few hours before boarding my plane to return home to Vancouver Island. As I sat by his cage, the drizzling rain added to my mounting sadness. I did not know how I was going to leave him knowing this was my final visit. I talked to him while he lay inside his deck pen, his aging body gaining some protection from the dampness. He seemed to listen intently, as I thanked him for all he had given me, and told him that soon his spirit would join Tonkawa and Montana's, as well as the other wolves that had since passed. Suddenly, something beautiful happened. From every direction came the sound of howls. The air exploded with their song, and Chinook's lagged lament fused with the rest into a wonderful symphony. I could not have wished for a more perfect way to say goodbye.

Two months later, under a blush-rose July sky and guarded over by a red-tailed hawk in the nearby grandfather tree, Chinook passed on. In Wendy's words "he went peacefully," with her and Daniel at his side.

In the end, just as the Chinook winds warm the air after a cold spell, Chinook the wolf warmed the hearts of those that stood in his presence.

