

Cherokee – last of the ‘California Boys’

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I HAVE WORKED AT WOLF HAVEN for over 12 years, during which time I’ve been honored to make many canine friends. Some are new, like Shadow, the pup we rescued last October, who brings such joy and exuberance to my day. Some friends, like Jesse, have been around for many years (since 2004) and have become my closest confidants. Only a few are still left who have been here since my beginning – those “elders” who helped me mature and grow as we moved through life together. One such friend was Cherokee, who recently passed away.

Cherokee was born in April of 1995 and spent the first four years of his life at a private facility in Southern California. The facility was home to over a dozen wolves and when the owner decided to downsize, she contacted Wolf Haven about placing several of her animals. Funds were raised and enclosures were modified to accommodate the six wolves that later made their way to us.

Cherokee arrived at Wolf Haven with his two brothers, two older sisters and an unrelated male in 1999. The group consisted of two separate packs – his two sisters and the unrelated male; plus Cherokee and his littermates, Stormy and Sequoia. At the time of his death, Cherokee was the only member of the group remaining. In the flux of wolves, wolfdogs and coyotes that occurred over the years, Cherokee remained a constant.

The three brothers, dubbed the “California Boys”, lived a pretty peaceful coexistence in an on-tour enclosure and were a huge hit with visitors. Brothers Stormy and Cherokee seemed to revel in the attention while brother Sequoia kept his distance. There was always a bit of sibling rivalry between Stormy and Cherokee, with Stormy assuming the role of alpha. That all changed in the winter of 2001 with the arrival of Miwok, an unrelated female who’d been ostracized from her pack. The boys had never had a female before and when Miwok was

introduced, the three were thrown into a tizzy – needless to say they had some things to work out! Stormy and Cherokee vied heavily for her attention (Sequoia watched them duke it out from the sidelines, though sometimes he was brought into the fray by none other than Miwok!) but ultimately it was Stormy who won out. The dynamics were like none we had seen before – Stormy had breeding rights that first year, he and Cherokee shared them the next year and the following year, Cherokee had exclusive breeding rights. Meanwhile, Miwok curried favor with all three, though her bond was strongest with Cherokee. Sadly both Sequoia and Stormy would later pass from cancer, leaving the pair alone, which only strengthened their bond.

In the summer of 2002, Miwok led Cherokee on the “Great Escape” (at least I believe Miwok was the brains behind the operation – she was the adventurous type). She managed to dig a narrow tunnel under and out of their enclosure (though still within the fully fenced sanctuary) and the two mischief-makers spent the night tearing up the enrichment garden and almost every hose in the sanctuary. Evidence of their revelry was everywhere. By the time I discovered the two fugitives in the morning, they were ready to go back to their enclosure and fortunately for all involved, the pair was easily

enticed by a trail of hot dogs.

Cherokee and Miwok were not only partners in crime, they were best buds and Cherokee’s world came to revolve around Miwok. He was like her shadow, and even in repose, he needed to be near her. Last winter, Miwok was diagnosed with throat cancer and throughout her illness, Cherokee stood by. He was her guardian and protector and kept constant vigil. Last October, after a tough fight, Miwok lost her battle and Cherokee was never the same. Though his appetite remained robust and he still came to the fence for attention from staff, you could see in his eyes that he was just going through the motions.

It was particularly evident on the day after Thanksgiving when we gave everyone their turkeys and fixin’s. Though he had been up in the morning, by the afternoon he seemed a bit “off.” There was nothing acutely noticeable and though he was slightly ataxic (uncoordinated movement) when he got up, there was no other symptom. He wanted nothing to do with his turkey and just watched us as we placed it in his enclosure. We checked on him several times throughout the day and though he had moved several times, each time we checked him he was sleeping.

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Cherokee, November 2010. PHOTO BY JULIE LAWRENCE.

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The following morning we found him lying next to his half eaten turkey and we knew the moment we saw him that he was gone. We knew in our hearts that this was not where he wanted to be any longer and so, like the always dignified, ever stoic wolf that he was, sometime during the night Cherokee silently slipped away – his last “great escape.”

