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, woldogs 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.

Continued on page 23
Grant funds have been slim and hard to come by in the past two years, but times are a-changin’. We plan to request grant funding to help us with sanctuary ground work, upgrade our education programming (such as the development of a virtual tour) and make major equipment purchases.

So what can you do as a member of the Wolf Haven International pack? First of all, we are deeply grateful for the financial support you have provided, which enables us to carry on our mission. In addition to writing that check or making that monthly donation on your credit card, you can also help spread the word about our work by forwarding e-messages from Wolf Haven, contacting us when you become aware of event opportunities and encouraging your employer to get involved with Wolf Haven. You are the inside person in your company and can help get Wolf Haven International in the door.

We love to do presentations, Lunch N’Learns, attend company functions, and host company events such as private Howl-Ins and picnics at our facility. Feel free to email or call me directly with information on ways to get your employer involved.

We are heading into our “skinniest” time of year, financially. Until the end of March, we are open during weekends only, and are closed entirely during the month of February, during breeding season. Although this creates a financial challenge, it is also a great time of year to fundraise, do grant research, make new contacts and get out and about. Please feel free to contact any of us at any time via phone, email or mail. We love your suggestions and enthusiasm.

Many howls to you.

**MIWOK TRIBUTE**

continued from page 19

take the water stick and on the days we had to scrub buckets and tubs, it took three people just to get her bucket. One of us had to stand watch while her tub was refilling, because she always tried to steal the hose. Sometimes she came up to the fence and I thought maybe she wanted to say ‘Hi’. But when I knelt down to let her sniff my hand through the fence, she would bare her teeth, without making a sound – and it stopped me in my tracks.

She did warm up to me a little in the coming years; sometimes taking a treat from my hands through the fence. While Cherokee came to the fence for scratches, Miwok would stay back. Then in early 2010, it all changed when she started to get sick. At first she would readily take her pills and with all the extra treats she actually started to gain weight. I often thought to myself, the doctors must be wrong. She looked good, but I was the one that was wrong. As her health started to decline, Miwok changed her behavior toward us. She would come to the fence for her pills and take them ever so gently, even licking my fingers at times; it was as if she knew we were trying to help her. Her eyes would look right into mine. She also started to present for scratches, just for a second or so at first, but then she would linger while I told her how brave and beautiful she was.

She was such a stoic animal and I felt so privileged to have been one of the people that got to take care of her. I would sit with her on more than one occasion, just to be near her and she humbled me. I will never forget you, beautiful girl.

**CHEROKEE TRIBUTE**

continued from page 20

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.”