

Animal Care emergency update

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My heart is heavy as I begin my “Natasha” article, for this was not the article I thought I would be writing. Perhaps it was naïve certainty, or rather just sincere hope, that for this spring issue of WOLF TRACKS I would be writing about her remarkable recovery, rather than her passing.

As you may recall from the last issue of WOLF TRACKS, two-and-a half year old Natasha became critically ill in mid-December. At the time of the winter publication, we had begun treating her for what we believed to be a kidney infection. However, after two weeks of antibiotics, steroids and fluids with little to no improvement, Natasha underwent a more



Natasha, by Julie Lawrence.

“Six days after treatment started, Natasha crashed again”

comprehensive battery of tests. Given the presentation of her symptoms, and her waxing and waning in response to treatment, she was tested first for autoimmune disease, which came back negative; then Addison’s disease (or *hypoadrenocorticism*), an uncommon disease of the adrenal glands. The results came back positive, and finally, we had a conclusive diagnosis. Along with that diagnosis came a tremendous sense of relief, for Addison’s is a disease that can be medically managed with life-long monthly hormone replacement therapy, and patients usually carry a good to excellent prognosis following stabilization and treatment.

However, even with the diagnosis we still had a very sick wolf to tend to. Often an “Addisonian crisis” (which can result from heightened stress levels) is life threatening or even fatal, and the last 14 days had left Natasha’s little body in a severely compromised state. Since Addison’s is often not immediately tested for due to myriad, non-specific signs that are seen in other more common medical disorders, such as gastrointestinal

and renal diseases, we had a lot of ground to make up in order to get her healthy once again. Dr. Brown started Natasha on hormone replacement immediately and on January 13 at 10:30 in the morning, Animal Care staff successfully delivered 2.5 ml of Percortan™ via intramuscular injection. There was a collective sigh of relief from all of us who had kept steadfast vigil over Natasha, for we felt that at last we had reached a turning point. Patients usually respond well to hormone treatment, and we were cautiously optimistic that the following day would bring marked improvement. It wasn’t until two days later that we began to see a glimmer of hope... It wasn’t the turn around we were hoping for, but she did eat a little cooked chicken and rice and took on quite a bit of water. “Baby steps” we told ourselves. Another two days later and she was up and moving around her deck pen, rubbing along the chain link fence for scratches. She appeared bright, alert and more responsive than she had been since this all began. She was still alarmingly thin, taking on more water than normal (*polydipsia*), frequently urinating (*polyuria*), and she still had abnormal stool.

Six days after treatment started, Natasha crashed again. Animal Care staff found her much the same as before, unresponsive and stumbling around her deck pen. She collapsed into her bed of straw and allowed us to easily crate her for transport. Once at the clinic, fluids were administered while blood was drawn. Blood work yielded no clues, as most values were within normal limits, belying a very dire situation. The only thing to do at that point was to administer heavy duty steroids and antibiotics and hope for the best.

Back at Wolf Haven, the round-the-clock vigil continued. Rather than return her to her deck pen, she stayed in the Animal Care office in a small holding area. Later that evening we administered more IV fluids and because she hadn’t eaten in days, we also tried orally giving her as much liquid diet as she would take. She tolerated 120 cc’s of Rebound™, so again we were cautiously optimistic. Yet any hope that we harbored quickly vanished, as

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with the morning came no improvement... In fact, she appeared worse. The sense of helplessness was palpable, for Natasha was slipping away before our very eyes. We consulted with Dr. Brown early that morning and gave him the disappointing news. He in turn had some disappointing news for us: because of her continued decline, he was growing increasingly suspicious that cancer (perhaps intestinal) was the primary cause and Addison's was only secondary.

We had a difficult decision to make. Further exploratory procedures would perhaps confirm Dr. Brown's suspicions, but at what cost to Natasha? Because she was so ill, the anesthesia alone would be very risky. And if it turned out to be cancer what, if anything, would we be able to do? The thought of losing Natasha was unbearable, but at the same time we had to keep in mind that even though she remained tractable, this whole process had undoubtedly caused her great stress (which in turn further exacerbated her Addison's). As her caretakers, we needed to be mindful of what was best for her, rather than what might be best for us. After much discussion, we came to the painful realization that prolonging Natasha's life would do her no justice.

On Saturday, January 21, 2006, Natasha's ordeal peacefully ended. A post-mortem examination revealed little, and tissue samples sent to the laboratory for further analysis offered nothing conclusive. As Dr. Brown wrote in the necropsy report "...a very difficult case to tie together."

Because of her young age, Natasha's passing was all the more poignant. I try hard not to remember her as she was in those final days, but rather remember her romping around her enclosure with her brother, Rocco, engaging in a game of canine "tag" or biting at his ear, head or tail – doing whatever she could to foil his attempts at hogging all the attention or treats from Animal Care. To Animal Care staff, she became our surrogate little sister and we too would conspire with Natasha to occupy the gregarious Rocco in order for her to sneak a little something extra on the side.

Beautiful Natasha... though your journey through this lifetime was brief, Little Sister, I hope there were days of joy and I wish you a better life in spirit.



still present and tending to her needs, and then quickly go back to into hiding. When the coast was clear, she would sneak to the front of her enclosure, stand upon her little hill, and survey the sanctuary to locate the whereabouts of her "pesky" keeper. At other times, when one of us would approach from the opposite direction from where she was surveying, we would try to let her know by calling out her name. But with her increasing age Aurora's hearing was beginning to wane, so she would start to descend her little observational knob in order to go about her business and suddenly realize that there was one of those pesky keepers in her midst. She would then gallop to the back of her enclosure to hide once again. Occasionally she would remain while we were at her enclosure, but always with her all-seeing eye upon us.

On Sunday March 12, I was doing morning rounds as usual when I approached Aurora's enclosure and could not see her. At first I thought maybe she was just up to her usual fun and games, but something about this morning didn't feel like fun at all. I decided to go into her enclosure to see if I could catch a glimpse of the elusive lady. I found Aurora inside her shelter that morning, and it appeared that our little friend had passed away in her sleep during the night, just shy of her 17th birthday.

I'll miss playing hide-and-seek with you my little friend, but until I find you again, please know that you were, and still are, deeply loved.



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I know that what they were doing was intentional not just instinctual. Like any human duo, on occasion they would break harmony on accident and immediately tune right back into one another again, without breaking focus. Their songs drew from many inspirations: their neighbors howling, sirens, trains, etc... At times it seemed they would sing for no apparent reason other than to hear their own beautiful song carry across the crisp air of their sanctuary.

One of the most heart wrenching songs I have ever heard was Brita's first solo. Her song encompassed her pain and sent it soaring throughout the sanctuary. It was hard for Brita to cope with the loss of her sister and I personally think that Brita's song was cathartic for her, helping her deal with that loss. I also think that Brita was honoring Grey with the songs they were so fond of singing together.

You will be missed by all who knew you Grey. Your gentle mystique will live on in every spirit you've ever touched and in every song your sister sings... I only hope that her chorus reaches you so that you both may sing together once again.

