From out of the wild and into our hearts – Tenino Montana

Joe Engel, Animal Care Specialist

On Tuesday, May 1, 2001, Wolf Haven International lost one of its most unique and popular residents. After a long battle with sinus cancer, a decision was made to euthanize Tenino Montana.

We first knew her as wolf #10. A gangly wary-eyed yearling, huddled fearfully in the back of her transport kennel. Fresh from the wild, she had no way of comprehendng any of this – from the wrongness of the livestock she had preyed on, to the sharpness of the dart that brought her down, and to the confines of our sanctuary. It was a lot to ask a young wolf to take in, especially one who'd been through as much as she had.

Tenino was one of six pups born in the Ninemile Valley, near Missoula, Montana, in April 1990. Her mother and father were pioneers - fundamental wolves in Montana wolf recovery. Her's was the first known pack to have a den in this area in over 60 years. In spite of this status, by the time Tenino was six months old, her parents would both be dead. Her mother was lost to a poacher's bullet and her father killed by a car. She and her brothers and sisters had to learn to fend for themselves. Un schooled in hunting for herself, she made a grave mistake. Instead of wild game, she killed livestock.

While most wild, healthy wolves avoid contact with humans and livestock, Tenino never learned to hunt proper prey. For many wolves this would result in a quick death sentence, but for wolf #10, fate was kinder. Biologists following her progress sought sanctuary for her. In June 1991 she came to live at Wolf Haven International. Though it is unwise and unfair to expect wild animals to live in captivity, her youth made everyone hopeful that she could adjust to living within Wolf Haven's boundaries. And, quite frankly, she had run out of options.

She was originally paired with Joe Montana. Like her, he had been born in the wild, though he was stolen from his den by a hybrid breeder long before he was a yearling. The adjustment period, for both wolves, was a long and arduous one. As to be expected, Tenino behaved quite differently compared with wolves that have been raised in captivity. Her first couple of months saw more than a few attempts at escape, and for a time it was feared captivity was too much for her. Unsure of people and unaccustomed to living in an enclosure, Tenino wanted little to do with the animal care staff at first. She faded into the trees whenever people approached, watching cautiously from behind the underbrush. As time went by,
little by little, the animal care staff started
seeing more of her - at times in a woman's
hesitation before she disappeared into the
shadows, and at others as a face sticking out
of the bushes. Tenino, slowly but surely,
began to interact with her new surroundings.

From the beginning, it was clear that
she had never lost her wild instincts (the
many raven's that inhabit the sanctuary can
test to this). Tenino's ability to dispatch
ravens (who steal the wolves' meat) merited
respect from her captive-raised neighbors.
Even the manner in which she moved
distinguished her from the other wolves in
the sanctuary. The fluidity in her gait and
graceful athleticism personified her wild
origins.

As the years passed, Tenino grew more
comfortable here with us. Known for being a
serious creature, she began to lighten up,
play-bowing at the staff she recognized and
excited over what the morning's treat might
be. She would be, at times, almost goofy.
This playful demeanor was a far cry from the
frightened yearling we had first encountered.
Whether the pair were running and playing,
or simply lying beside one another in the
grass, it was obvious that her affection for
Joe ran deep. In time the pair developed a
strong bond.

Tenino outlived Joe and was eventually
introduced to her second companion,
Ramses. Ramses, like Tenino, had survived
the loss of a mate. Whether it was this
common bond, or just luck, the pair
formed a special relationship.

Earlier this year Tenino began
showing signs of illness. A prolonged
bouts with sinus congestion and
listless behavior hinted at a more serious
prognosis. By May 1, 2001, the time had
come to bring an end to her suffering.
Cancer had gotten the best of her. Tenino
passed away peacefully at the age of ten
years. For the people that knew her,
directly or indirectly, she will be sorely
missed.

If you would like to purchase an 8x10
signed special edition color photograph of
Tenino Montana (seen on the previous page)
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Hungry for Home is a touching story
of a cunning wolf mother and her
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Tenino Montana's Ninemile wolf pack is
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