



# Wolf Hybrids

By Claudine Wilkins and Jessica Rock, Founders of Animal Law Source™

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## **DEFINITION**

By definition, the wolf-dog hybrid is a cross between a domestic dog (*Canis familiaris*) and a wild Wolf (*Canis Lupus*). Wolves are the evolutionary ancestor of dogs. Dogs evolved from wolves through thousands of years of adaptation, living and being selectively bred and domesticated by humans. Because dogs and wolves are evolutionarily connected, dogs and wolves can breed together. Although this cross breeding can occur naturally, it is a rare occurrence in the wild due to the territorial and aggressive nature of wolves. Recently, the breeding of a dog with a wolf has become an accepted new phenomenon because wolf-hybrids are considered to be exotic and prestigious to own.

To circumvent the prohibition against keeping wolves as pets, enterprising people have gone underground and are breeding and selling wolf-dog hybrids in their backyards. Consequently, an increase in the number of hybrids are being possessed without the minimum public safeguards required for the common domestic dog.

## **TRAITS OF DOGS AND WOLVES**

Since wolf hybrids are a genetic mixture of wolves and dogs, they can seem to be similar on the surface. However, even though both may appear to be physically similar, there are many behavioral differences between wolves and dogs. Wolves raised in the wild appear to fear humans and will avoid contact whenever possible. Wolves raised in captivity are not as fearful of humans. This suggests that such fear may be learned rather than inherited. Dogs, on the other hand, socialize quite readily with humans, often preferring human company to that of other dogs. Wolves tend to protect their food from other predators and will attack if threatened. Most dogs would quickly starve to death if left to fend for themselves in the wild and rarely attack their owners unless provoked. Additionally, wolves rarely bark, something obviously not true for most dogs. Wolves live in packs and may travel thirty miles or more in search of food.

A wolf pack is generally a family group that consists of a single breeding alpha pair, and their offspring of different ages and sometimes a member adopted from another pack. An alpha female will bear, at most, one litter per year, of approximately 4-6 pups. Non-alpha wolves generally assist in rearing pups and do not themselves breed. Unrelated wolves may join a pack. By age three, members of the pack that they were born into usually disperse to find mates of their own. Wolves can reach ages of up to 13 years in the wild; but the average lifespan tends to be six to eight years or even lower. Wolves mate for life, but if one mate dies, the surviving wolf may look for a new mate. Wolves howl for a number of reasons, which include locating separated members of a pack and warning other packs to stay away.

## **HYBRID BREED STANDARDS**

Because no overall breed standard exists for Wolf-Dog hybrids in the U.S., breeders are allowed to mate **any** wolf with **any** dog. Wolf-dog ownership by private citizens can be very contentious resulting in various laws from state to state. In some states, hybrids are classified as “wild” animals which require owners to obey the same laws pertaining to any wild animal. (Alabama, Arkansas, California, Delaware, Florida, Idaho, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, South Dakota and Virginia.) In other states, hybrids are regulated as “dogs” needing only proper licenses and vaccinations. (Arizona, Colorado, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia and Wisconsin.) In a few states, the ownership of wolf-dog hybrids is restricted or prohibited. (Alaska, Connecticut, **Georgia**, Hawaii, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island and Wyoming.)

## **FEDERAL LAWS**

The **Federal Animal Welfare Act**, (7 U.S.C. 54, AWA), enforced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, defines hybrids as “domestic animals” and regulates them like any other domestic animal. The AWA was initially enacted to regulate the interstate sale, transportation and handling of animals used for research, experimentation, exhibition and use as pets. In 1990, an amendment to the bill called the **Pet Protection Act**, required shelters, pounds and research facilities to hold dogs (including wolf-dog hybrids) and cats for at least five days so that an owner could retrieve his/her pet. It also required Class B dealers to inform the provider of a cat or dog that the animal was to be used for research. However, even though the Act was amended many times after 1990, it remained primarily a regulatory means to require minimum standards of care and treatment be provided for certain animals bred for commercial sale, used in research, transported commercially or exhibited to the public. Because Wolf-Dog hybrids are considered “dogs” or a domestic animal under the Act, the provisions of the Act pertain to them.

The **Endangered Species Act**, originally inspired by the plight of the bald eagle, states that U.S. Departments of Interior, Agriculture, and Defense must protect listed species and their habitats. Once a species is determined to be threatened or endangered, and published on the ESA's list of such species, many statutory prohibitions and federal regulations take effect to protect that species. (See 16 U.S.C. §1536(a)(2), requiring federal agencies to insure any federal action “is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any endangered species or threatened species”); Id. §1538 (prohibiting a variety of acts relating to endangered and threatened species). If a species is classified as “endangered,” it means it is in danger of becoming extinct throughout all or a significant portion of its range; if it is deemed “threatened,” it is considered at risk of becoming endangered within the foreseeable future. The wolf is classified as endangered throughout its habitat in the lower 48 states, except for Minnesota, where it's listed as threatened, and in Montana, Idaho, Washington and parts of Oregon, where there are no Endangered Species Act protections, according to the Humane Society. (Jun 30, 2015). The wolf-dog hybrid may also be considered endangered if it is defined as a “wild” animal under state law (Georgia).

**The Equal Protection challenge** -- that a ban discriminates against hybrid owners and denies them equal protection of the laws -- must withstand the rational basis test. The law must rationally relate to a legitimate government purpose in order to be considered constitutional. Courts could readily uphold a hybrid ban because the additional governmental objective of protecting the wolf as an endangered animal reinforces governmental interest in the ban.

Hybrid owners could also assert that a ban violates their **Due Process rights** by depriving them of their property without just compensation. Determining whether a pet owner deserves compensation involves the use of a balancing test which weighs the public's interest in safety against any harm which the owner may suffer. Barring even the lack of an approved rabies vaccine, a hybrid ban would withstand such challenges in the same manner as the various pit bull bans.

### **GEORGIA LAW**

Wolves are considered "wild" animals in Georgia and are not allowed as pets. A wild animal is defined as "any animal which is not wildlife and is not normally a domestic species in the state. This term specifically includes any hybrid or cross between any combination of a wild animal, wildlife and a domestic animal. Offspring from all subsequent generations of such crosses or hybrids are wild animals." (Title 27, Chapter 5, Ga. Code Ann. §27-5-5). Hybrids, or combinations of domestic animals, wildlife, or regulated wild animals and all subsequent generations are regulated in Georgia and may not be held without a license. Wolf-hybrids are not a legal pet in Georgia. (Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Law Enforcement Division). In all states, whether specifically designated in the state regulations or not, if a wolf or wolf hybrid causes property damage or harm of any sort to a human or another person's animal, the owner is liable for the costs of any damages and possible prosecution by both the victim and prosecuting authorities. (Wildlife Educ. and Research Found., Current State Regulations Pertaining to Wolves and Wolf Hybrids, THE WOLF HYBRID TIMES, April 1991, at 17).

### **RABIES VACCINE**

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has neither approved nor licensed a rabies vaccine for wolves or wolf-dog hybrids. Most veterinarians, however, agree that the existing killed virus vaccines will work on wolves and hybrids, and vaccinate the animals accordingly. These practitioners may later find themselves faced with liability for vaccinating a hybrid that subsequently becomes rabid. This risk causes some veterinarians to refuse to vaccinate hybrids. Those who do vaccinate cannot rely on the unproven theory that the killed virus vaccines will work, and must protect themselves by having the owners sign a statement acknowledging their understanding that the efficacy of the vaccine remains unknown and that the state Department of Health will not recognize the animal as having been vaccinated. Thus, vaccinating a hybrid against rabies will not provide any warranty that the animal will not contract the disease. Because there is no acceptable rabies vaccination for a wolf-dog hybrid, under Georgia law, if someone is bitten, the animal could be euthanized.

## REFERENCES

[www.wildearthguardians.org](http://www.wildearthguardians.org)

[www.wolf.org/-info/wolves-and-humans/wolf-dog-hybrids](http://www.wolf.org/-info/wolves-and-humans/wolf-dog-hybrids)

The Wolf Dunn, an online resource for information on wolf/dog hybrids.

[www.nal.usda.gov/awic/animal-welfare-act](http://www.nal.usda.gov/awic/animal-welfare-act)

23 Rutgers Law Journal 633 (Spring 1992) "The Hybrids Howl: Legislator Listen – These Animals Aren't Crying Wolf"

*Credit to Kaye Klapper*



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