



# The HOWLING REPORTER



*A Very Special Farewell*

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# THANK YOU!

## 2020 WAS A TOUGH YEAR FOR THE ENTIRE WORLD AND WE ARE GRATEFUL YOU CHOSE TO SUPPORT US!

With your generosity and support, the rescues, volunteers, and staff were never in danger of going without necessary resources. Each year we close our doors to the public during January and February, reopening on March 1st, which meant in 2020 we were open for tours only a couple of weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to discontinue tours and close our gift shop to visitors. Tours and gift shop sales make up a substantial amount of our annual income, so we've had to tighten our belt even more to keep operations running smoothly.

Our Howling Supporters came through by donating loads of items through our Amazon wishlist, signing-up for memberships, sponsoring rescues, making direct donations, and doing so much more.

With the assistance of grants, we've been able to continue making necessary infrastructure improvements, like extending water lines to the furthest animal enclosures. This improvement means that our animal care crew no longer has to carry 5 gallon buckets of water uphill, in rocky terrain, several times a day!

Our rescues were flooded with enrichment donations, allowing us to provide fun and engaging events beyond our normal enrichment procedures. Most of the events were live streamed to our Facebook page and are still available if you'd like to see examples of your direct impact, and how stimulating these donations are for each of our deserving critters.

When people think of the challenges to small businesses during this pandemic they typically think of shops and restaurants, not realizing that animal shelters and sanctuaries are equally at risk of not being able to pay the bills. We realize how lucky we are to have the support of so many kind and generous animal lovers, from all over the world, and we want you to know that we appreciate how you've kept us in your hearts and minds even when you were experiencing difficulties of your own. It means the world to our rescues, volunteers, and staff. Thank you!

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*Multimedia & Outreach Coordinator and Interplanetary Defender*

### We'd Love to Hear From You!

All of the content in this magazine is created by our staff, volunteers, and interns.

We try to come up with content we think our readers would enjoy reading, but we might be missing something that would be interesting to you.

Please use the email address below to suggest ideas for articles or features that might be of interest to our Howling Supporters, or to provide any comments or suggestions!

[media@wildspiritwolfsanctuary.org](mailto:media@wildspiritwolfsanctuary.org)



Special thanks to our printer, The Printer's Press!

[www.printerspressinc.com](http://www.printerspressinc.com)

## ON THE Road to Rescue

By Molly Shaw

When it comes to a typical day of work there aren't many chances to "paws" and reflect on the impact of our daily work in the animal sanctuary world. Between dragging ourselves to the Communal Kitchen at 6:30 in the morning for that first cup of coffee, navigating a herd of sleepy Animal Care Team Members as we all throw frozen meatloaves into the back of an ATV trailer for feeding, and responding to animal scuffles or administrative questions on a large compound, there's not too much time to sit and think. But as luck would have it, we didn't know it yet but pretty soon we would have 46 hours in a car to reflect on what life was like at an Animal Sanctuary such as Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary.

At the beginning of December, our Executive Director Brittany and I embarked on a 46-hour rescue mission to pick up two new wolfdogs: Mika and Stigma. While I've driven across the country before I have to admit that it was never non-stop, and it was absolutely not with the intent of putting two carnivores into crates in the back part of my car. However, with the tactful Brittany McDonald leading the mission, I knew that this experience would be a great opportunity to learn about the rescue side of sanctuary work.

On the day that we left, and even a few leading up to it, my head was full of questions: How would we locate a vet to give the girls the needed vaccines for inter-state travel? Would we end up with two animals or would one be rehomed before we arrived? Can we drive 23 hours straight without getting so sick of each other that Brittany leaves me, her co-worker, at a dog park to fend for myself and maybe find a new home so that she can get a moment away from my chatting?

Luckily, we did it, and to answer the question about the girl's vaccines: both Mika and Stigma were successfully given their Distemper-Parvo vaccinations by myself and Brittany in the parking lot of a gas station. By carefully opening the crate doors, gently restraining the timid animals with the appropriate tools, and efficiently using teamwork, years of skill-development, and an insane amount of trust in each others restraint grip (it had to be stable enough to maintain control of their heads, but gentle enough not to hurt them) we successfully got our two new girls vaccinated. And the question about Brittany leaving me in a dog park to escape

my chattiness? Well, since I'm writing this article now, it's safe to say I found my way home!

Throughout the drive, Brittany and I talked about how we became involved in this field, the nuances of self-growth and professional development, and how proud we are of our team's adaptability in those moments where Brittany idles into the break room to announce a new rescue by exclaiming, without preamble, "We're going to Indiana! In two weeks!". Between building connections and finding similarities between myself and Brittany and the new scenery as we drove through Texas, I was kept intrigued enough to still feel the buzz of adrenaline this new experience had to offer, even after hours of driving.

As we made our way east, Brittany and I switched who was driving every 8 hours or so, stopping at Subway for sandwiches and a protein bowl, and then Walmart for sleeping bags, slippers, and to make copies of keys for the sanctuary (Guys, I am telling you, this is a job of forever multi-tasking). Our first night was spent in the back of Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary's box van, sleeping on top of aspen shavings and a metal floor, tucked into the back of a truck stop parking lot. In an attempt to get a few more hundred miles under our tires ASAP, I woke up at 4 am to start the next leg of our journey. We drank coffee, energy drinks, and convenience store goodies that Candy Kitchen, New Mexico is not privy to while we continued on our journey.

Rescues, from what I've learned, are often things that happen quickly and unexpectedly. There isn't typically too much time for extensive planning, and this can be associated with the inconsistent and ever-changing tides of the wolfdog pet industry. In this particular rescue circumstance, Mika and Stigma's breeder was going out of business and needed an alternative placement for all of their many animals in a very short time period. When it was agreed that we could take one animal, the placement of a second animal fell through, and we were happy to say that we had an available enclosure for a second female. However, leading up to the rescue, contact between the breeder and our Executive Director was a little spotty, and by the time we were 10 hours into our drive we still hadn't received confirmation of whether one or both animals still needed



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placement, and we didn't have a location to pick the animals up at. It was a tense day to have to recognize that maybe we would drive all the way to Indiana to end up with nothing but heavy exhaustion weighing on our limbs and 23 more hours to drive back home... People have lives and things come up, so with a positive mindset and refusing to see this fail, we trucked on. An hour later things, non-surprisingly, figured themselves out and we received a confirmation text from the breeder and were given the address of the Dollar General in small-town Indiana where we would be picking Mika and Stigma up from. The road was winding and I got car sick, but it was worth it when we pulled into the back of the parking lot at 8 pm.

Almost immediately after arriving, Stigma and Mika were transferred into our vehicle and after the quick fifteen-minute exchange of signatures and wolfdogs, we were back on the road and ready to head home. The girls were quiet, still, and covered in mud; that morning had brought rain and so the rescue van smelled like wet dog, poop, and stinky sanctuary workers (we were still wearing the same clothes that we had left in).

We drove through the night for a bit, talking to keep each other awake but also both trying to nap when the opportunity struck. With two animals in the back, one a very hands-off, non-social girl (Mika), and the other with the potential to be social during more normal circumstances, which these were not (Stigma), there wasn't a way to safely take them for walks. Our best bet was to drive nonstop and attempt to make their time in the box van as minimal as possible.

We hit a snowstorm in Texas that slowed us to a crawl at points, and soon heavy, thick snow began to pile up under our windshield wipers. We had to pull over and use our hands to remove the snow in order to see, but once that was gone and our field of vision was clear it was back on the road for us. With Brittany being from Minnesota, and myself from Upstate New York, winter driving is no biggie. If anything, it was a reminder of the different, but similarly tempered, home weather systems we came from.

By the time we arrived back on Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary property, it was 10:45 at night. From there we drove our giant transportation van to Stigma's new enclosure first. With no lights other than the van headlights and our smartphones—a classic Millennial move—we introduced Mika and Stigma to their new homes. Their new neighbors and sanctuary-mates all roared into a



group howl, welcoming our precious cargo to a new life full of enrichment, companionship, and understanding.

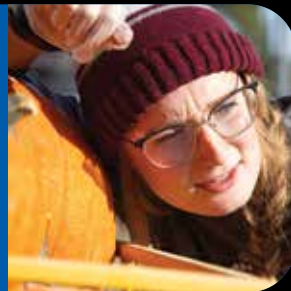
Rescue trips can look different each time we head on one, and this one was seemingly straightforward. We got there, retrieved our two new rescues, and quickly got home, but that isn't always the case. We're lucky enough to have a following of supporters that make these impromptu trips possible and to have the enclosures necessary to meet the demand that 2020 had for rehoming wolfdogs, but it does make me wonder when we'll need to expand. As laws change and wolfdog puppies grow, we will likely see the number of animals that need a more appropriate habitat situation stay steady. With your help, I am so thankful that we are able to say that Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary will be here when our next rescue is in need of daily care provided by trained Keepers and lifelong sanctuary. On top of that, we'll be here as a source of education on the proper care and treatment of wolfdogs. So next time you visit, e-mail, or watch us on our Facebook lives, don't be afraid to ask "Hey, what was the rescue mission like for that guy?" when a wolfdog catches your eye.

Read more about Mika and Stigma on page 18.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Molly Shaw is our Donor Relations & Development Coordinator, as well as an Animal Care Specialist.

She also has a special ability to communicate with pumpkins.



## Calling Artists of All Skill Levels!

### Our second annual ART PACK APRIL CONTEST

Every week during the month of April, we challenge artists of all ages and skill levels to create art inspired by our weekly "prompts", and share their original work to their social media networks!

Art Pack April is inspired by our late founder, Jacque Evans, who was herself an artist. Each year, we invite our Howling Supporters to celebrate their own creativity and share it with us and our fans.

One of last year's weekly winners, Mary Smith, was asked to design our 2020 Holiday card!

For details, visit:

[wildspiritwolfsanctuary.org/APA](http://wildspiritwolfsanctuary.org/APA)



With the end of November, Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary's Second Annual Howling Poetry Contest came to a close, and we are thrilled to announce our two winners!

In The Pups (Beginner) category, Maryanne Coppinger wins with her poem titled, "Ode to Bark." In The Wolves (Experienced) category, Deirdre Cochran wins with her poem titled, "The Wolves of Miller Hill."

Please join us in howling our huge congratulations to Maryanne and Deirdre, and we hope you enjoy their pieces as much as we did!

### The Wolves of Miller Hill

By Deirdre Cochran

Each day was an adventure.  
The "three" would meet.  
Who's to say if they had parents.  
There was no discipline.  
The forest was made for running, hiding, playing,  
exploring and mischievous deeds.  
We were wolves, a pack of childhood friends,  
bonded as family.  
Full moon bright, stealing time before the sunlight.  
Howling with shining eyes of color - amber, green  
and gold.  
Only to grow up and disappear.  
With one, loved silently and always searching for  
her, barefooted.

By the conclusion of the contest, 11 poems were submitted and \$55.00 was raised for the rescues! Poems were submitted from all over the United States as well as from the United Kingdom, and contestants were between the ages of 7 and 69.



Each November we provide our Howling Supporters with a photographic prompt to give them inspiration to write! This year our poets were inspired by our wonderful female wolfdog, Luna.

### Ode to Bark

By Maryanne Coppinger

Oh my tree  
My solid sacred partner in this wild place  
I lean on you, and you will scratch my itch  
I doze beneath your leafy arms for shade against  
the sun.  
Oh my tree  
I have marked you as my own  
Mine though others may want you  
I suppose I will share - but only with the birds.  
Oh my tree  
Your endless silence stands in contrast to my nightly  
howls  
And yet we are pals.  
Nothing comes between me and my tree.

Thank you so much to everyone who participated—whether you submitted a poem, liked our announcements, or shared our posts about the contest on Facebook or Instagram, each action helps support our rescues. Stayed tuned for new contests and interactive events planned for 2021, and we look forward to offering this creative opportunity once again next year!

# Big Pack in the Sky



## THUNDER

Male Arctic wolf, Thunder, was born on May 3rd, 2006, and passed away December 17th, 2020.

Thunder was one of the most sponsored rescues at the sanctuary, having captured the hearts of so many visitors with his beautiful coat and shy demeanor.

He was brought to the sanctuary as a pup, along with littermates, Alice, Sabine, Sugar, Storm, and Powder. Thunder and his siblings were hand-raised by volunteers and staff, meaning they needed to be bottle-fed and cleaned every two hours, which was exhausting work taken on by a committed group of people.

Thunder was well-known as a member of "Forest Pack", named for one of his companions, as their enclosure was featured along the tour path. Forest passed away in July and Thunder's sister, Alice, currently lives alone, but we're hoping to find her a companion, very soon.

## RIOT

High-content female wolfdog, Riot, was born around May, 2006, and passed away December 20th, 2020.

Riot was a sweet, silly, spunky girl who lived with her companion, Cinder. A favorite with many staff and volunteers over the years due to her personality and quirky behaviors, she will be missed very much.

Riot had a couple of companions before being introduced to Cinder, but for Cinder it was love at first sight! He seemed overwhelmed to have a friend and couldn't stop "love biting" her head. His enthusiasm was a bit annoying to Riot at first, but after she told him off a few times, Cinder managed to calm down a bit. The new couple got along well, but we noticed that Riot was not able to fully settle down in this new habitat. We thought it best to move them both back to Riot's old habitat, next to the neighbors she had known for over 10 years. Cinder saw that Riot was comfortable being leashed to go for a walk, and he allowed us to leash him, too, for the first time! The two walked nicely back to their new home and enjoyed each other immensely, until Riot's passing.



## PRINCESS

Female New Guinea singing dog, Princess, was born on November 28th, 2010, and passed away October 22nd, 2020.

Tour guests often got to see Princess with her habitat-mates, Reba and Bono. Shortly before passing, shy Princess was moved to her own habitat where staff could closely monitor her end of life care without worrying about Bono and Reba playing too rough or attempting to steal her daily medications.

Before her relocation into a new enclosure Princess loved getting new toys, but she had to find ways to keep her habitat-mates from stealing them! She also liked going for walks and rolling in anything smelly she came across.

Though very shy with new Caregivers, once she opened up this sweet girl loved attention and would happily scent roll on hair and give kisses.

## ARGO

Male high-content wolfdog, Argo, was born on June 5th, 2006, and passed away November 3rd, 2020.

Argo lived with high-content wolfdog Cheyenne, whose companionship he very much enjoyed until her passing on September 15th, 2020

One of his favorite pastimes was to sneak up behind his Caretakers and deliver a playful bite on his or her rear end. His Caretakers usually found this much less entertaining than he did!

Argo loved breakfast delivery, med-ball delivery, or delivery of anything resembling food. He did a happy run in a big loop until breakfast arrived. He also loved chasing ravens and fence fighting with his neighbors, Cinder and Riot.



## ONI

Female mid-content wolfdog, Oni, was born on February 16th, 2011, and passed away November 15th, 2020.

Oni came to Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary in November of 2015 when she was 4 years old. She was introduced to a number of male rescues, but never really found her match until she was introduced to mid-content wolfdog, Zeus.

Playful, energetic Oni brought out a more social and playful side of Zeus, and the two ran around together, wrestled, and socialized with their neighbors through the fence.

Shy enough that she wouldn't allow being touched, but very curious, she would follow closely behind her Caretaker as they cleaned. Once they "saw" her, she'd play bow and run away like a rocket!

# Picture This: A young country girl who dreams of being a wildlife photographer..

for National Geographic and idolizes Steve Irwin by the time she's 8 years old. Her parents used to joke that she would own a zoo one day and threatened to kick her out of the house if she brought home one more stray animal. Society told her she needed a "good" job, a well paying job, in order to be happy and successful. She went to college and then to graduate school stacking up those student loans to become a clinical social worker, but it never made her as happy as society said she should be. So she dropped everything and moved across the country to intern as free labor at a wolf sanctuary and start over.

I've been here at Wild Spirit for almost 4 months now and this place and the people make me feel like I've been here for years. This isn't just a wolf sanctuary or a place to work or even somewhere to have an experience. This is a place where strangers become family and animals become cherished treasures. With little over 2 months left I've been thinking back on my time here and where I'll be going thanks to the people who've helped me in this journey.

This intern program is actually a brand new concept for Wild Spirit. Prior to myself and Vic, there were only long term volunteers who worked alongside staff. As someone who has done many internships throughout the years, I felt this would be an excellent chance to help develop a program that could become a sought after internship opportunity for students and young adults entering the animal care field. The process has not been an easy one, as we would all soon discover that building a 6 month program from scratch, while also revamping the entire animal care department, on top of caring for 52 animals, is no small feat. Nonetheless the team created a space that allowed us to have hands on experiences that we probably wouldn't have been offered anywhere else. Since I didn't go to school for animal sciences or zoo keeping, I assumed my chances at being an animal care specialist were over. I never would have thought that I would

be caring for so many incredible animals and learning how to socialize with them, using operant conditioning, and participate in vet care. Though don't be fooled, it hasn't all been fun and reindeer games.

When I arrived here we were informed that one of the parts of the internship would be preparing food for the animals, including sorting through and processing elk and deer parts that were leftover from local hunters. As a vegetarian who has a difficult time holding back tears when I need to kill a spider, I was extremely worried that I'd fail at this part of the job. Fast forward 3 months and

animals that are meant to live their lives apart from humans. Some animals here have showed zero interest in me and I have learned to respect that, even though I want nothing more than to squish their faces and tell them how much I love them. There were a few, however, that found a place in my heart so quickly I almost forgot they were wild animals. I would be lying if I said Quinn wasn't the first who took up that space in me. The first time I was allowed to meet him and his sister Lyca, I was greeted with big beautiful wolf smiles and a scent rub that nearly knocked me off my feet. I instantly felt a connection that made me feel like he was saying "dis my hooman now" and I was more than happy to take on that role. Having the opportunity to be their primary Caretaker has allowed this bond to grow further and I have been so grateful for my time spent with them.

The next animal that has made a forever paw print on my heart is Naia. Naia is a high-content wolfdog who is still very much in her puppy phase. As the youngster of the Wild Spirit pack, she had a playful demeanor and level of "naughtiness" I couldn't help but be intrigued by. Her behaviors with me went from timid playfulness to boundary pushing real fast. Since I am still learning various canine behaviors and how to properly use operant conditioning, I was pretty stumped trying to create a healthy dynamic between us. Thankfully the team came up with a training plan that would teach Naia proper boundaries and help me learn how to establish them myself. Now when I go to visit sweet Naia she greets me with an invitation to

give her belly rubs and then does zoomies around her enclosure (we're still working on giving "no teeth" face kisses).

As I write about my final pair of animals I'm burdened with a level of sadness that unfortunately comes with this work. Cinder and Riot are high-content wolfdogs who, truth be told, I didn't feel any significant pull towards when I started working here. My first introduction day with them was such

I'm holding a brain in my hand, inspecting it with morbid curiosity. In reality I found myself respecting the process and appreciating that we have the means to use all of an animal and not have it go to waste. Plus the joy you see from a wolf when they get a giant rib cage or elk head and they prance around showing it off to their neighbors makes it all worth it.

Speaking of wolves, I never would have believed the kinds of relationships you can form with



Shaina taking New Guinea singing dog, Bowie, for an enrichment walk, and feeding him one his favorite treats... CHEESE!

a shock to me because I suddenly had no desire to leave them and knew that I wanted them to be one of my primary enclosures to work with. Soon after, I took on the role of primary Caretaker, an opportunity that allowed me to grow closer to them each day. Our beloved Riot passed on last night with the animal care team by her side and the pack howling as she joined the Big Pack In The Sky. I can only thank her for the time that she gave me and hope that I can continue giving Cinder the love that he deserves for the remainder of my time here.

Contemplating what is going to come next for me has been a challenge since my experience at Wild Spirit has been so rewarding it's difficult to imagine there even is an "after this". I have no doubt now that this is the path I want to take and that working in the animal care field is my true passion. After many hours of consideration I have decided to continue my learning as an apprentice at Lincoln Children's Zoo working with their ambassador animal program. I could not be more excited to move forward in my career journey and I cannot express enough my gratitude to Wild Spirit and the team who have molded me into this new and improved version of myself. Not only will my connections with the animals be a forever memory, but so will the laughs and the tears (seriously, so many tears) that brought us all together to form this beautiful wolf loving family.

## CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Feb 14, 2021

*Give Your Heart to the Wolves*

Enrichment Event

Facebook Livestream @ 10:00AM MST

The month of April

*Art Pack April*

See page 4 for information

April 17, 2021

*Spring Baskets*

Enrichment Event

Facebook Livestream @ 10:00AM MST

### What are Enrichment Events?

Enrichment Events are special scheduled activities meant to enhance the lives of our rescues and allow our Howling Supporters to become involved.

Captive bred animals need fun activities to keep them active and engaged, and we are constantly coming up with new and interesting things for our rescues.

For example, some of our animals love to get leashed-up and go for walks around the sanctuary, while others prefer to have an elk head put in their enclosure to play with. These opportunities for new adventures, featuring new smells, textures, tastes, and experiences help to stimulate the senses, keeping our critters happy!

We make every effort to livestream Enrichment Events for the public to enjoy, showing you how rescues interact with the various themed items they are given, and to ask questions or our staff and interns.

You can find us on Facebook at:

[www.facebook.com/thewildspiritwolfsanctuary](https://www.facebook.com/thewildspiritwolfsanctuary)

You can sponsor a rescue's enrichment by visiting our online gift shop!

[wildspiritwolfsanctuary.org/giftshop](https://wildspiritwolfsanctuary.org/giftshop)



# A Very Special Farewell

## ROMEEO

The Legendary Red Fox  
2006 to 2020



Known the world over, loved and appreciated by countless fans, Romeo will be missed by so many.

In his years living at the sanctuary, Romeo was the first of our rescues that tour groups would encounter. He loved the attention almost as much as our guests loved visiting with him.

Romeo was pretty old for a fox, having turned 14 years-old in April, 2020. Most red foxes will live 2 to 5 years in the wild, and 10 to 12 years in captivity.

At around two months old, Romeo was found by the side of the road, his mother hit by a passing vehicle. He was taken in by the person who found him, but she realized it was more work than she could handle to raise him properly and surrendered him to the Department of Natural Resources. Eventually Romeo was old enough to be released into a national park, but he was too friendly to humans for his own safety. He was sent to live at a zoo, and when that zoo ran into financial difficulties, Romeo was brought to his forever home, living in a



It may surprise you that the most popular rescue at a wolf sanctuary was a red fox, but it was so true!



habitat built exclusively for him.

Almost every volunteer would train with low-maintenance Romeo before being allowed to work with wolves and wolfdogs, and almost every volunteer fell in love with him.

There have been many rescues who have come and gone but none have been as adored by our visitors as our quirky little, "Romes", sunning on his rock or log, eager to meet new friends.

We love and miss you, little buddy!



# WELCOME, IRWIN!

Naia and the sanctuary team are so happy to have you here!



Irwin arrived just before the last Howling Reporter went to print, and we're excited to share him with our readers who haven't seen him on our web site already!

Before life at Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary, high-content wolfdog Irwin was born to a breeder in Ohio and sold as a pet to a private owner. He remained in his original home for the first several years of his life, raised up alongside the family's black lab, who raised Irwin like one of her own. Unfortunately, a day came in which Irwin demonstrated some undesirable behaviors toward his owner, who quickly realized that he was not the pet she hoped he would be. As a result, she began searching for a new home for him.

After several sanctuaries turned down requests for his rescue, Irwin was placed with a second owner in a private home in Oklahoma. Unfortunately, after more than a year in his new home, Irwin once again demonstrated some unpredictable behaviors, resulting once more in the need for sanctuary placement. Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary was initially contacted and asked to take him in, but at that time, we did not have any single females that staff believed he might be compatible with. As a result, his request for rescue was declined.

Months later, however, we found a potential opening for handsome Irwin. As fate would have it, our lovely high-content wolfdog Naia had been removed from her shared habitat with Arctic wolf, Flurry, as the two had become incompatible as Naia grew older. As such, we began to consider a new companion for her and Irwin came to mind immediately. Being much younger than Flurry and with higher energy and (ideally) greater patience with Naia, we hoped that the two might be a great fit!

Irwin and Naia spent several weeks in adjacent enclosures, sharing a fenceline, and seemed to be interested in each other. When they were finally introduced during a couple of carefully supervised, "playdates", our greatest hopes were confirmed and the two now live together, permanently. It's a very satisfying part of our mission when we can pair two animals that connect and enrich each other's lives.

Irwin and Naia live in a large enclosure along our public tour path, so when we open again to visitors, perhaps you'll have the opportunity to see the happy pair in-person!

Life is about taking risks, meeting new people, and learning everything you can, but that's often easier said than done. It can be hard to make choices that will change your life drastically no matter how badly you might want the experience waiting at the other end. It's even harder when those choices require you to move you across the country to a state you've never been, to live and work at a tiny sanctuary in the middle of a secluded valley. But it was those choices that led me here, to spend six months as an intern at Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary.

Despite months of anticipation, nothing could totally prepare me for what moving out to New Mexico and working at a wolf sanctuary would be like. Sure, I imagined some of the daily tasks would be similar to what I had experienced at the dog rescue I worked at prior to arriving: lots of cleaning, maintenance, and animal care. It is similar in some ways, but after just three months this experience has proven to be way more than I could have imagined it would be. Wild Spirit offers more than just a job opportunity. From enjoying the lifestyle, the family, the day-to-day strenuous, yet rewarding work... It's everything I want from this field.

Before moving to New Mexico, my experience working with animals was limited. While I had spent three years working at a dog rescue in Vermont, before that I had very little experience with animals outside of my own pets. In fact, growing up, animal care simply wasn't a passion of mine—just a job—but that changed after realizing how much I loved the animals I met in the years spent working at the shelter. What's more, working with domestic dogs taught me a lot about canines and about myself as well, and it became apparent that working with animals is what I was built to do. I love working up a sweat, the long hours, the way my body adapts to the physical labor, and knowing that every moment of it was to make sure the dogs could have the best lives possible. But as much as I loved that experience, I eventually reached a point at the shelter where I had learned all that I could, and I longed for something a little different and with a broader impact.

I found Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary through a coworker who briefly passed through the rescue and shared their experience with me. From there, the idea to apply sat in the back of my mind for about a year and a half before I started seriously looking into it. Even then, the decision became somewhat of an "if" concept for me: if I apply, if I get accepted, if this is what I really want. If this would truly be the career path I wanted to take. Those were just a few of the questions that cycled through my mind as I contemplated whether to apply. I knew this could be life-changing for me, which is scary. I'd never even been off the East Coast and the thought of moving all the way to New Mexico for six months was intimidating. But after months of being too nervous to apply, I got to a point with myself where I realized that if I didn't do something, the shelter would be it for me. I wanted to do more than that so I took the jump and applied. Waiting for the response,



the interview, and the acceptance was exciting. I checked my e-mail almost hourly and when I finally got the position I felt like I could breathe for the first time in ages.

When I initially applied to Wild Spirit it was with the intention of working in a long-term volunteer position, but during my interview I was offered a position in a newly developing internship program. I easily accepted, thrilled at the change in opportunity. And actually, making the move out here wasn't too hard! I didn't mind leaving home and I had spent months away before, just never this far away. Adjusting to the climate and lifestyle took me a while, especially the elevation, which made the physical work harder in the beginning. The seclusion can become lonely and the nearest town is over an hour away, but the people I work with make it bearable. Off work hours, we're always coming up with things to do, like movie nights, painting together, and other group activities. It really helps make the sanctuary and team feel like a home and family.

The first two weeks I was here, I had a period of just learning all of the safety precautions and protocols. Learning this was hugely important if I wanted to begin interacting with the canids, and even though I'm familiar with all sorts of domestic dogs and their behaviors, I was learning new things immediately. The canids here are similar in many ways to domestic dogs, but at the same time, vastly different. Learning these differences is key in becoming a confident Caretaker. It also just had me more and more enthused to start meeting the animals.

Two of the first rescues I met were Cinder—a high-content wolfdog who showed an interest in me very early on—and his companion, high-content wolfdog, Riot. Despite my excitement at meeting these two huge wolfdogs, crouching down in their enclosure was nerve-wracking because I knew at that point that they were very different from domestic dogs, and I had to work on controlling my own anxiousness, especially if I wanted them

to feel comfortable coming up to me. While Riot came up and let me pet her right away, shy Cinder took a less direct approach, coming up behind me and rubbing his face all over my head, back, and neck—a behavior called "scent rolling". I had never experienced scent rolling with the domestic dogs and it was honestly amazing to be that close to an animal who was acting on pure instincts. It's one of my favorite memories so far and probably will be what I remember forever as my first interaction with one of these amazing animals.

The internship program itself is still heavily in development, so myself and the other intern, Shaina, are the first two that get to try everything out. I love giving feedback and ideas and I always feel listened to and appreciated. Coming up with new experiences to give future interns a range of new skills is fun, and even when something isn't quite working out, the team loves hearing what we think and trying new things. I can't wait for interns in the future to come out here and be able to grow with this program.

In my three years at the shelter there's a lot I learned, but there's even more that I didn't. In the three months I've been here so far, I've been able to do practice blood draws, administer injectable medication, and I've been able to observe all sorts of new behaviors and learn how to read them. I'm working on obtaining my Fear Free Shelter certification and I have an extensive internship project I work on in my down time. On top of this, the team is still coming up with practice labs for the interns to do as learning experiences, and new ways to help build confidence as a Caretaker.

I'm so beyond thrilled that I came out here. New Mexico is beautiful and everything this sanctuary does for the wolves and the community is wonderful to be a part of. I won't ever forget this experience; it's changing me in the best ways. I can't imagine myself leaving in April but when I do, I know Wild Spirit will always have a very special place in my memories.

# Brittany Answers Matchmaking Questions

In recent months, Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary has seen a number of changes among our rescues including difficult endings, but also new beginnings.

When I first arrived at the sanctuary in June of 2020, over 75% of our animals fell into the "senior" age category with many already near the final stages of their life. Since then we have said goodbye to 11 dearly beloved rescues—a process that simply does not get easier with time. But instead of focusing on the darkness that comes with death, we seek instead, to find a silver lining. With each passing that has taken place, we have been able to give a new life to 7 rescues from across the country, and new companionship to those that lost their partners.

For some rescues, the loss of a companion is like losing a "mate" while others have lost actual siblings. Regardless of the relationship, wolves and wolfdogs are social creatures that mourn loss much like people do; yet there will usually come a day in which the desire for new companionship takes place. When that day comes, it's our job to find them the perfect match. This is a task that requires a number of considerations and when staff agreed to the intake of high-content wolfdog Irwin in October—hopeful that he would make a good match for high-content wolfdog, Naia—the process drew the interest of one of our staff, who had a number of questions on the subject, laid out in the interview to follow.

## **Why do you keep the wolves in pairs instead of a pack or packs?**

The way we match our animals in captivity—specifically in a sanctuary—is much different than what occurs naturally for wolves living in the wild, so to answer this question I must first provide an explanation of what a wolf pack actually is and how their specific social dynamics allow them to live successfully as a group over long periods of time.

For wolves in the wild, the formation of a pack begins with two members: a male and female of breeding age who have selected one another as lifelong mates. Following their courtship, the breeding pair will begin to grow their pack through successive litters of offspring that will live with their parents until reaching sexual maturity at approximately 2-4 years of age. Once they've reached this critical stage most—if not all—will leave their familial pack to find mates and start families of their own.

It's important to note that part of the reason wild wolf packs are so successful is because they are true families, with trust, respect, loyalty, and fantastic communication and conflict resolution skills. Furthermore, when conflicts do arise that cannot be peacefully resolved, members faced with strife are free to leave. Both of these factors, however, are difficult to replicate in captivity, especially in a sanctuary in which we do not participate in breeding programs and therefore don't have the option to produce true familial packs. This means that in most cases, any packs we might create would be made up of essentially strangers and that alone lowers the chances of successful cohabitation over time. Not only would issues with social dynamics and tensions be greatly increased, but because our animals live within the confines of a fence line, the freedom to leave the group is limited, if not completely impossible, and in a worst case scenario

this could lead to serious injury or even death for members of the pack. All in all, we feel that the creation of pairs instead of packs is the safest option, and the one most likely to lead to long-term success.

## **Are there any exceptions to this?**

Yes. Historically Wild Spirit has had several instances in which related individuals were rescued together, or when a number of similarly-aged pups were brought in around the same time. In these cases we have allowed the animals to live in artificial packs made up of a combination of related and sometimes unrelated individuals. However, we have often seen that even then, tensions can run higher due to the nature of their captive setting, and as a result we have been forced to separate individuals over time.



Male high-content wolfdog, *Irwin*, attached to Executive Director Brittany McDonald, immediately after his arrival in October, 2020. *Irwin* now lives with female high-content wolfdog, *Naia*.

It is also possible to have artificial packs made up of entirely unrelated individuals and this has been done successfully at various facilities; however, it is not the recommended strategy for successful cohabitation, especially considering individuals cannot leave the group when conflicts arise.

## **Are the pairs always male and female? Why or why not?**

Male to female pairings are often the most successful due to the fact that wolves are biologically predisposed to choose a mate and stay with them for life. However, this is not always the case when it comes to pairs in captivity. In some instances pairs can be made up of male-male pairings (which are surprisingly successful), but female-female pairings are rare and pose the greatest chance of failure due

to the risks caused by same-sex aggression, most commonly seen in females.

## **Is the male always dominant in a pair?**

No, dominance is not a gender-specific trait and in fact, it is actually many of the female animals at Wild Spirit that take on the more "dominant" role in their relationships. However, it's important to note that dominance is not a fixed personality trait and how an animal interacts with any other animal will vary depending on both of their personalities and how they respond to one another accordingly.

## **How do you decide which wolves will be matched together? What factors do you consider?**

The process of pairing two or more animals together is both a science and an art. As with any relationship there are certain elements that are key to success such as communication, respect, and social compatibility. But there are a number of additional factors that must also be considered in order to ensure the best match possible. Age, sex, energy level, health and fitness, personality traits, whether either animal is social with humans or not, resource-based tendencies, and more all go into the process of finding the perfect fit.

One of my favorite considerations is how a rescue's response toward humans might change with the introduction of a new companion and whether we can eliminate things like stress, fear, and anxiety through a pairing.

Interestingly, when we have a pair of animals that are both social we can often see more issues with human interactions than we do when either one or both animals are shy or fearful. This is because two social animals will often vie for the attention of their Caretaker at the same time, creating micro-conflicts as they compete for what is, essentially, a shared resource.

On the opposite end of this equation, the pairing of two non-social animals almost always results in lower chances of socialization with humans down the road, as both animals will usually prefer the company of one another to that of a Caretaker. That's not to say that shy animals don't have the potential to grow closer to people over time, but the odds are less than what we tend to see with the third and final method of pairing, which includes matching a shy animal with one who is more social. As you will soon read, this "opposites attract" method of pairing is often met with great success and strongly encouraged if all other factors seem promising; more often than not, the presence of a confident and social animal will bring about similar courage in one that was once more aloof, resulting not only in greater

handleability down the road, but more importantly, in a massive increase in happiness and comfort for animals that were once more fearful, shy, or aloof.

## **How do you introduce a potential partner? What are the steps and what are you looking for? How do you know if they will be a good or bad match?**

As often as possible we prefer to house potential companions in enclosures that share a fence line before ever fully introducing them. This way we can observe how they interact through a safe barrier at any given point throughout the day. We can see how they respond during feedings or when enrichment is being given, and even how they respond to one another during daily interactions with various animal Caretakers.

Often times when a new rescue is brought in they exhibit several days (or sometimes weeks) of stressful behaviors while they adjust to the major life changes that come with being rehomed and living in a sanctuary. They will often pace, hide, or fence-fight with other animals. Because of this, we rarely see truly authentic interactions with potential companions in the beginning (if any interactions are seen at all). Therefore, it's helpful to give new rescues time to settle in and de-stress before accurate assessments of compatibility can be made.

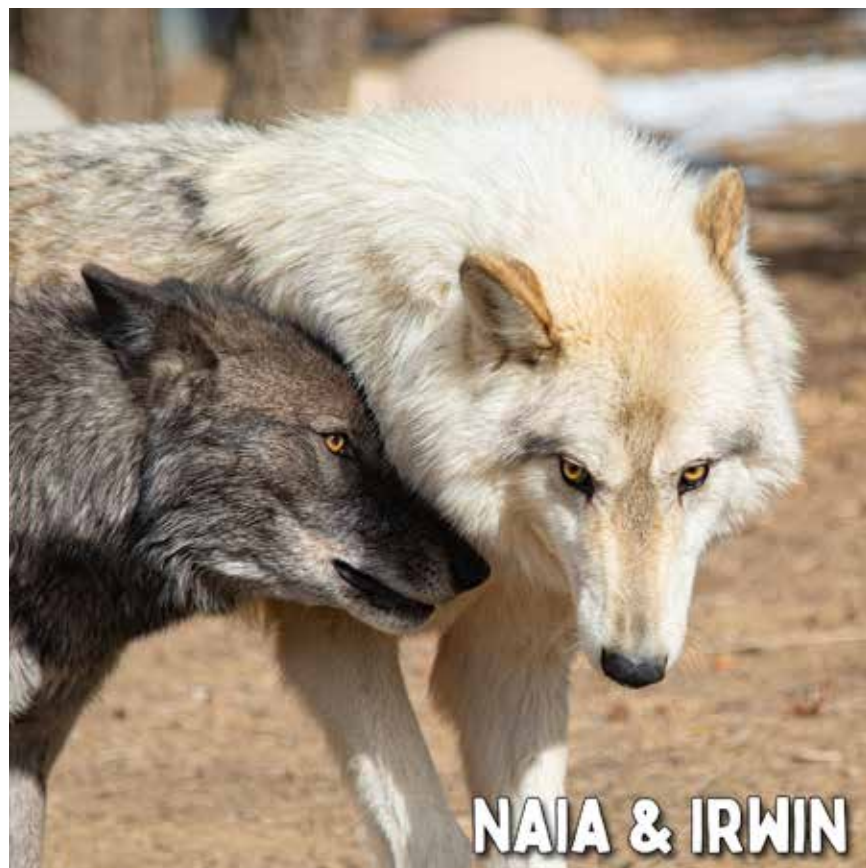
Once animals are at a point in which they are positively engaging with one another through the fence (i.e. rubbing on the chainlink, play-bowing, whimpering, lip-licking, etc.), we will move on to the next phase of introductions. This process can look different depending on

the handleability of the rescues, but most often involves a full-on introduction with no barriers in place. For rescues that can be walked on leash, we will first assess body language and behaviors when that animal is placed into the other animal's "sub-enclosure" (an off-shoot of the actual enclosure that contains our entry gates). While this may seem no different than any other interaction through the fence line, this isn't always the case; the sub-enclosure is literally a part of each animal's "territory", so how they respond to a stranger inside can tell us a lot, while still maintaining safety.

Assuming there are no concerning observations made with an animal inside the sub-enclosure (i.e. excessive snarling, snapping, or lunging), we will then allow total access inside the enclosure. This step is one that often requires all hands on deck from the Animal Care Team in order to ensure that the animals can be quickly and safely separated should the interactions take a turn for the worse. Prior to ever introducing animals fully, team members will gather any necessary emergency equipment

**“The way we match our animals in captivity—specifically in a sanctuary—is much different than what occurs naturally for wolves living in the wild...”**





***bonds tend to be fairly stable?***

Relationships between two animals are usually very stable, especially if they were well-suited to one another in the first place. However, as previously mentioned, when it comes to groups of three or more living together in captivity, it becomes much more common for tensions to arise and for dynamics to change over the course of time.

In some instances there are other factors that might threaten the success of a relationship, such as massive differences in age and energy levels, or changes to the social dynamic that occur as a result of one or both animals reaching sexual maturity. For example, even siblings who have grown up together might reach adulthood and grow to despise one another, as we have seen here with sisters Lyca and Leia.

***Do you choose rescue animals based on the need to create pairs?***

Not always. If we don't have any single animals but have the space for a new intake, we can more readily take someone in without considering how they might work in a pairing. But any time we have a single animal, the need for companionship plays a much greater role in influencing our decision.

***Are there some wolves that prefer to be alone?***

Yes, though as highly social animals, this is extremely rare. I personally believe that an animal that demonstrates what might seem like a preference for solitude is more often an animal who hasn't yet been offered a suitable match. This is when it becomes really important to understand what each individual requires in a "better half" and to search for new rescues that possess those qualities.

***What kind of pack behaviors do you still see even though the wolves are not living all in the same enclosure?***

Communication is the biggest one that comes to mind. Despite living separately and consisting of multiple different species, all of the rescues communicate with one another constantly. Every morning without fail, for example, they greet staff with barks, howls, and yips, and use similar vocalizations to let one another know when we're beginning our feeding routines, walks, or enrichment activities. In addition, the rescues often call out to one another in the event of an animal's passing—a demonstration that cannot possibly be described with words, but goes to show that regardless of blood, the animals that call the sanctuary home truly are a "family".

We also see a number cooperative behaviors often used in wolf packs, even among pairs. Arctic wolf, Teton, and his late sister, Shasta, for example, were well-known for working together to ambush unsuspecting wildlife that ventured inside their enclosure. On more than one occasion these two managed to catch ravens, squirrels, and other animals using their unique ambush strategies.

and go over the game plan (which can vary depending on the animals). Fire extinguishers, air horns, whistles, bowls, and hoses or buckets of water are just a few of the items that we like to have on hand in case a fight occurs. These tools provide multiple safe and hands-off options for separating animals without risk to us or them.

Thankfully, because of the extensive observations made before an introduction, true fights are extremely rare; however, it is not uncommon to see animals establish their boundaries with a higher degree of intensity during their first few introductions. For example, we will often see rigid body posturing, snarling, and even snapping from some animals, while others will demonstrate completely submissive gestures such as tail tucking and cowering. Animals may even engage in small tiffs as they test one another's boundaries and work to understand how each prefers to communicate. To someone with limited knowledge of wolf behaviors these displays can look quite concerning and most people might think to intervene; however, it is extremely important for us to allow the rescues to engage one another in these ways in order to provide us with an authentic interpretation of their compatibility.

Once two animals are in an enclosure together we continue to observe their interactions and step in only if absolutely necessary. We allow the animals to interact and depending on their level of interest will usually separate them after about 15-20 minutes. At that point, the "visitor" is returned to his or her own enclosure until the next play-date. We repeat the introduction process several times for longer durations before finally deciding to leave them together overnight, and usually beyond this step, indefinitely.

***Do pairs ever stop getting along after a period of time or do the***

***What is the most recent "matchmaking" at Wild Spirit and what were the steps? Who were the animals and how are they doing?***

Actually, we recently had two successful pairings that happened on the same day! The first was a highly-anticipated match between high-content wolfdogs Naia and Irwin, and the second involved high-content wolfdogs Dakota and Sox. Interestingly enough, each pair's story is quite opposite one another in regards to the role that our human Caretakers played in the match-making. While Irwin was chosen for Naia—a decision that resulted in a match made in heaven—Sox was the one to choose Dakota, making it very clear that she had a preference for him, even from several enclosures away.

When Irwin was first brought home he was placed into an enclosure next door to Naia, which allowed the team to assess their interactions safely. We quickly noticed that the two enjoyed spending time next to one another and would often flirt and play through their fence line. It was quite obvious that they would be a successful pairing, especially after their first play-date inside Irwin's enclosure.

In Sox's case, however, she was taken in with no planned pairing in mind. Prior to life at the sanctuary, Sox's owner witnessed a massive shift in her personality around 3 years of age. The reason for this shift is unknown, but for whatever reason Sox began demonstrating endless stress and anxiety-induced behaviors. Despite her owner's best efforts to identify and resolve the issue—even attempting multiple different pairings to provide companionship—nothing seemed to work.

We knew when we agreed to take Sox in that pairing her wouldn't necessarily be difficult, based on the fact that she had previously lived with a number of other animals without issue; but here at Wild Spirit our goal isn't to merely arrange safe cohabitations, but to find animals that mutually benefit one another through their relationship. In Sox's case, we believed that the best match for her could be an animal like Arctic wolf Flurry, who we thought might be able to bring Sox out of her shell with his outstanding confidence and love of human interaction. But with Sox being completely hands off, our options for slow introductions between these two were limited.

In the end, an introduction between Sox and Flurry never took place. Instead, on a fateful day in November, upon seeing the handsome Dakota roaming through the one-acre enclosure a short distance away, Sox began whimpering at him, letting Caretakers know that she had found her "mate". Days later the pair had their first play-date—a process that needed to be greatly modified due to Sox's anxious behaviors—where we observed how Dakota's presence calmed Sox and gave her the confidence she needed to feel comfortable in her new home. Fast forward to a few days later: Sox and Dakota officially moved in together, were re-homed to an even larger enclosure with brand new neighbors, and Sox is now feeling so at home that she has started approaching Caretakers at the fence line for her daily medballs, growing so brave that she is even coming up to say hello with sniffs and nose-boops!



Male low-content wolfdog, Kenai, and mid-content female, Stigma behind him. This was their first official meeting, and Stigma was absolutely thrilled to have Kenai as a guest!

We are all so excited for these new pairings and what they mean for all four rescues involved. With the perfect matches, we are creating lifelong bonds that will bring each animal increased health and happiness for many years to come.

In the months to follow the Wild Spirit team has several additional pairings planned and we hope you'll stay tuned on our website and social media platforms for an insider look at all of our happy couples-to-be! A huge thank you to Stephanie for inspiring this article and allowing me the opportunity to give our supporters insight into the art of canine match-making.

## More About Mika & Stigma

### MIKA

Mika is incredibly shy and difficult to photograph because she paces when people are around. We'd love to have more photos of her, but we allow her to be left alone as much as possible so that she doesn't get more anxious.

Mika recently moved in with high-content wolfdog, Cinder.

Mika is an upper-mid-content wolfdog. She is 9 years old and her birthday is April 10th, 2012. She arrived at the sanctuary in December, 2020.

Mika was originally owned by a well-known wolfdog breeder in Indiana along with nearly 20 other animals. However, for personal reasons, her owner decided to move to a different state in which wolfdog ownership is illegal. As a result, she was forced to find new homes for all of her animals. While many of her collection were highly sought-out due to their unique coloration or other desirable traits, some of the older or less social animals were unwanted.

While working at a previous wolf sanctuary in Texas, Wild Spirit's Executive Director, Brittany McDonald, arranged for the rescue of two female wolfdogs, both of which were Mika's offspring!



### STIGMA

Stigma is a mid-content wolfdog. She is 5 years old and her birthday is January 3rd, 2016. She arrived at the sanctuary, along with Mika, in December, 2020.

She lived in an enclosure next to low-content wolfdog, Kenai, and the two showed interest, interacting along their shared fenceline. On New Year's Day, 2021, Stigma and Kenai had their first formal introduction in Stigma's enclosure. Stigma was overjoyed, following Kenai all over her enclosure. Kenai was more interested in checking out Stigma's enclosure and meeting her neighbors, Flicker and Lobo!

After a couple more "playdates", it became clear that the two were a good fit, and now they live together.

Stigma is affectionately known as "Bean Blossom." This nickname was assigned by team members Brittany and Molly moments after she was loaded into the transport van, and it was repeated the entire drive home. Needless to say, it stuck.

If you haven't already, read Molly's article, "On the Road to Rescue", on page 3; it's a fun story about the trip to rescue Mika and Stigma.

## Meet Sox!

Sox is a female high-content wolfdog, and she's 4 years-old. Before being taken in by Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary, Sox lived with her breeder who owned a number of her relatives, including her mother, father, and various siblings, as well as other wolfdogs. Sox spent a portion of time living with many of the animals at her original home but none of them were the right fit for her.

Upon arriving at the sanctuary, however, Sox was paired up with high-content wolfdog Dakota, a senior animal who was recently removed from a pack of three due to changes in the social dynamics. While Sox is shy and nervous, Dakota is incredibly social and confident, and we quickly saw a difference in her disposition after he moved in! While it was helpful for Sox to socialize with Dakota, the two weren't perfectly matched, so Dakota moved out and now lives with Arctic wolf, Alice.

Sox absolutely loves whole-prey enrichment items, especially large ungulate skulls, which she has been known to obliterate within hours! While many of the rescues have a love of bones and a knack for destruction, no one is quite as adept as Sox!

As one of our most shy and nervous rescues, Sox is not a big fan of people, especially in groups. However, she gains confidence every day and we hope that one day soon she won't find humans quite so scary.

Sox was so named because of the white "stocking-like" markings on all four of her legs! In addition, the white tip on her tail (known as a "fox tail") is also unique, as high-content wolfdogs almost always have black-tipped tails.

Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary's Executive Director, Brittany McDonald, was originally contacted about Sox not for placement but for advice on some unusual and concerning behaviors she had begun demonstrating, which her breeder believed might have been neurologic.

Due to the nature of what Sox was exhibiting, Brittany offered a number of suggestions, including placement with Wild Spirit where she felt confidently that Sox could be fully "rehabilitated." Sox's breeder agreed to the placement and days later she was in her new home.



## Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary

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Dakota is a 15 year-old male, high-content wolfdog