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Wolves in North America

Slinking stealthily through the underbrush, trotting warily across the prairie, lurking hungrily wherever wild game might be found, the lean, gaunt, and ravenously destructive wolf was encountered everywhere by the intrepid explorers and colonizers of North America. The dismal howl of this "shark of the plain" was heard wherever the pioneer pitched his camp or built his cabin. Hiram M. Chittenden described the wolf as the "most ignoble" inhabitant of the plains, personifying "cowardice, beggary, craftiness, deceit, mercilessness," and all the other evil qualities that constitute the term "*wolfishness*."

Most dreaded of the many species of wolves was the gray or timber wolf. Originally this fierce member of the canine family was found throughout the timbered States east of the Rockies but not in California and the area immediately adjoining. In other words the habitat of the gray wolf was from Florida to Alaska and from northern Mexico to Hudson Bay. The gray wolf was also called

the lobo, the loafer, and the buffalo wolf. The scientific name, *Canis nubilus*, was given to the big gray wolves of the interior by Dr. Thomas Say, zoölogist of the Stephen H. Long expedition of 1819-1820, while wintering at Engineers' Cantonment in present-day Nebraska a short distance above modern Council Bluffs. Indeed naturalists declare that a gray wolf of this kind was "first taken" near Council Bluffs, Iowa, by Dr. Say. After giving a detailed description of the coloring of the *Canis nubilus* which measured 4 feet $4\frac{3}{4}$ inches, Dr. Say concludes:

The aspect of this animal is far more fierce and formidable than either the common red wolf, or the prairie wolf, and is of a more robust form. The length of the ears and tail distinguish it at once from the former, and its greatly superior size, besides the minor characters of colour, &c., separate it from the prairie wolf. As the black wolf (*C. lycaon*,) is described to be of a deep and uniform black colour, and his physiognomy is represented to be nearly the same as that of the common wolf, it is beyond a doubt different from this species. It has the mane of the *mexicanus*. It diffuses a strong and disagreeable odour, which scented the clothing of Messrs. Peale and Dougherty, who transported the animal several miles from where they killed it to the cantonment.

The timber wolf was usually patterned in gray, its upper parts being sprinkled with a black or dusky color. This coloring was the same in both sexes and did not vary much with the seasons. Frequently, however, there was considerable var-

iation in the color among the individual animals. Larger, heavier, and far more powerful than the coyote, the gray wolf displayed all the common characteristics of the canine. The males were larger than the females, measuring some 64 inches in length and weighing from 75 to 100 pounds. Exceptionally large timber wolves sometimes weighed as much as 150 pounds. The females, on the other hand, averaged about 56 inches in length and weighed only from 60 to 80 pounds.

The gray wolf was a carnivorous animal, feeding on deer, moose, caribou, jack rabbits, prairie dogs, and all the smaller animals and birds it could catch. When necessary it resorted to carrion and fish. The gray wolf's carnivorous habits also caused it to prey on all kinds of domestic stock — poultry, hogs, sheep, cattle, and even draft animals. So powerful was this wolf that naturalists considered the adult to be without natural enemies — none daring to attack it. Young wolves, however, were sometimes carried off by eagles.

Smaller than the gray wolf but far more numerous was the coyote or prairie wolf. At least a dozen species of this canine have been identified by naturalists. Dr. Thomas Say designated the coyotes as the *Canis latrans* because of their weird howl. "Their bark," Dr. Say records, "is much more distinctly like that of the domestic dog, than of any other animal; in fact the first two or three notes could not be distinguished from the bark of

a small terrier, but these notes are succeeded by a lengthened scream." The coyotes hunted on the plains by day; during the night they frequently ventured very near the encampment in quest of food. "They are by far the most numerous of our wolves," Dr. Say recorded, "and often unite in packs for the purpose of chasing deer, which they very frequently succeed in running down, and killing."

The coyote or prairie wolf was considerably smaller than the gray wolf, measuring only about 42 to 48 inches in length and weighing from 35 to 40 pounds. It resembled a shepherd dog in many external characteristics: its pelage was fairly long and heavy, particularly during the winter, and its tail large and bushy. The color of both sexes was very much alike and there was only a slight seasonal variation. For food the prairie wolf ate small mammals, birds, lizards, snakes, insects, fruit, and carrion. The speed and wariness of the coyote generally saved it from the large carnivores which would prey on it if they could. Young coyotes frequently became the prey of the gray wolf, the golden eagle, and the great horned owl. The prairie wolf ranged westward from Lake Michigan to the Pacific Coast and from Alberta Province to southern Mexico. It may still be found in Iowa, in northern Illinois, and in most of Wisconsin.