



Alpha Male

by Jamie Dutcher

Kamots

Of the first four pups that we raised during the summer of 1991, we noticed that the one we called Kamots was unfailingly the most alert, curious and self-assured of the bunch. There is no more scientific way to describe his demeanor. He simply behaved with confidence.

On certain occasions when the pups were from two to four weeks of age, we would separate one pup or another from the litter to socialize them and help them feel safe around humans. When we removed Kamots' brother, Lakota from his littermates, he became nervous, afraid to explore and anxious to get back among his siblings. It was not so much that Lakota was afraid of us, it seemed more that he feared that the other pups might not accept him back. When he was returned to the others, there would be several minutes of squabbling amongst the pups, as though Lakota were vying for his social position all over again.

Kamots, on the other hand, positively seemed to enjoy the chance to get out and explore. He would confidently inspect his human caretakers and investigate anything within reach of his inquisitive nose. He returned to his littermates calmly, free of doubt, his position assured.

As he grew, Kamots did not have to fight for the top spot. When he reached full size, he simply assumed the mantle. There was never any doubt in his mind or in the minds of the others that he should be anything other than the leader.

The alpha holds his tail and head high, he lifts his leg to urinate while subordinate males usually do not. He is continually vigilant, not

simply responding to obvious threats but maintaining a watchful eye at all times.

Ultimately, the position of alpha male had nothing to do with age, size, strength or aggression. It sprung from a source that we will never see and can barely hope to understand. It is a rule that the wolves themselves know, accept and live by.

Kamots was a marvelous leader. The confidence he had shown as a pup blossomed into a calm benevolence that was a joy to witness. There was an alertness about him not present in the other wolves, and his face often bore an expression that, at least to people, registered as concern. When a strange sound rang out in the surrounding forest Kamots was the first to prick up his ears and trot off to investigate. Perhaps the rest of the pack did not behave this way because they knew they didn't need to. They knew Kamots would keep them safe.

Despite his benevolence, his rule was supreme, and he did not hesitate to make it known. His command over a deer carcass and his possessive





displays were really quite terrifying to behold. The first time I saw Kamots distort his face in threat I was amazed. It was during a feeding, and I had shot slow motion footage of Kamots presiding over the kill. Lakota timidly attempted to approach the carcass and eat before his turn. Kamots raised his eyes from the meal and let out a loud growl, baring his teeth but keeping them fixed on the carcass. Despite the warning, Lakota pressed on. He seemed to think that if he could just make himself insignificant enough, he could sneak a bite or two before anyone noticed. In an instant, Kamots' features twisted into a mask of ferocity. He raised his lips high, exposing the full length of his teeth, his nose pulled back and his ears shot out to the sides like horns. His graceful muzzle became short and broad, making his jaws seem all the more powerful. With a savage snarl, he charged over the carcass at Lakota who scurried a few paces before flipping over onto his back with a yelp of submission. The question of who would eat when was quickly settled.

Law in a wolf pack can certainly be tough, but I never saw Kamots behave with anything that resembled viciousness. In this particular encounter, Kamots' teeth never made any real

contact with his brother, it was mostly show. Over the years, I have seen other wolves tear into a subordinate with an obvious intent to do physical harm. The abuse that one wolf can subject to another is often hard for human observers to bear. Kamots certainly removed many a tuft of hair and delivered many a stern bite, but once the order of things was restored, he quickly returned to his usual calm self.

All this responsibility and authority did not impinge upon his desire to play with the rest of the pack. In fact, he seemed to rejoice in temporarily abandoning his duties and indulging in a good frolic. He was just as apt to play with Lakota as to dominate him. At times his behavior was so benign, so puppyish, that it was impossible to imagine that this was the same creature who minutes earlier had displayed such ferocity over a meal. Holding a grudge, it seemed, was not in his character. Yet even at play, there was something about Kamots that suggested that he was the leader. Sometimes he would not fully engage in the frolicking but watch the others with a protective air. In games of tag, Kamots was usually the one doing the chasing, and, in general, he would win all battles of tug of war with sticks or bones.

It was while filming Kamots at play that I observed one of the first undeniable illustrations of the concern that wolves have for one another. It was a gesture of kindness



Kamots secured his leadership and maintained it for nine years using a minimum of force and aggression



that just bowled me over. Kamots was charging around the meadow, celebrating the first major snowfall of the year. Something about new snow thrilled them to no end. After it was on the ground, they took it for granted, but while it was falling they greeted it like a gift from heaven. Even late in the year, when we would hurl curses at the sky for so much as another flake, the wolves acted as if it were some fresh new surprise. As the snow began to accumulate on the frozen ground, Kamots led the festivities. He ran back and forth through the meadow, not playing tag or chasing another wolf, just darting about in unbridled jubilation. Amani, still under a year old and not full size, wasn't quite sure what to make of the alpha carrying on like that. He sat down in the meadow and watched Kamots run in circles and disappear into the willows.

Kamots burst from the bushes at full speed and in his exuberance barreled right over his young pack mate. Amani did a cartwheel and sat up, blinking and covered in powder, not sure what had just happened to him. Kamots' body language was unmistakable. He slammed on the brakes, turned and hurried back to Amani, sniffing the little wolf up and down and giving him a few reassuring licks. I was profoundly touched by this display of concern; it was almost an apology.

Kamots secured his leadership and maintained it for nine years using a minimum of force and aggression. I believe it was his genuine regard for the pack that made him such a benevolent leader, and his confidence that made him such a secure one. From the time he reached adulthood, he knew he was the alpha, never imagining that things could be otherwise. He never showed evidence of feeling the least bit threatened, never tried to prove himself by bullying the others, and never seemed to doubt that the security of the pack should be left on his shoulders.

Alpha Female

by Jim Dutcher



THE WOLF IS A FREQUENT PRESENCE IN THE MYTHOLOGY OF MANY NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES, both original inhabitants of this continent and both suffering greatly after the arrival of Europeans. To honor their primal connection, we came up with the idea of giving the pups Native American names.

Of course, we never made any attempt to teach the wolves their names; we used them only as a means to tell them apart amongst ourselves.

Most of the names came easily, based on behavior or appearance, but there was a little black female that was a bit more difficult to name. Our small crew began calling her "Black Lassie." It was not the kind of name that stirred the imagination, but we did our best to accommodate them. Colors in the Nez Perce language are repeated, thus the word for black is chemukh-chemukh. Ayet is the Nez Perce word for girl. Thus Chemukh-Chemukh Ayet was the closest thing to Black Lassie we could come up with. After about five minutes, her name was simplified to Chemukh.



JAMIE AND I HAD ALWAYS BELIEVED THAT WYAKIN, Chemukh's littermate, was a shoo-in for alpha female. As a pup, she had always dominated Chemukh and continued to do so into the winter of their second year. In fact, Chemukh was so shy and submissive and was having such a difficult time assimilating into the pack that we thought she would more than likely assume the omega female position. In the first few weeks of 1996, she was still a timid little wolf, the last to eat and the first to be picked on.

As January came to a close, things changed abruptly, as though a switch had been flipped inside Chemukh's head. Her competitive instinct kicked into high gear, and she decided that it was time to assert herself. Wyakin seemed completely confused by Chemukh's sudden aggression, for although she had been the more dominant of the two, her overall disposition was really quite sweet and gentle. Chemukh, on the other hand, was dead serious.



Chemukh knew that the stakes were high and that she had to improve her status as quickly as possible.



THERE WAS ALWAYS A LOT OF GROWLING AND FLASHING OF FANGS. Chemukh suddenly began to push her way into the act and changed all that. She would throw herself in to the middle of the fray, grab hold of Lakota's thigh and shake her head violently. Even Amani, whose dominance over Lakota was most severe, never behaved in this way. It was as if Chemukh knew that the stakes were high and that she had to improve her status as quickly as possible.

There are plenty of wonderful things to say about wolves, about the way they communicate and care for each other. Unfortunately, the competition for the alpha female is not one of those things. There is no way to

sugarcoat it. It is a brutal competition for the right to pass on one's genes. The males are comparatively laid back, sorting out their status through threats and bluff. The females draw blood.

TO SAY THAT THE ALPHA MALE CHOOSES HIS MATE IS REALLY AN OVER-SIMPLIFICATION. In our observation, one female eliminated the competition, placing herself, for all intents and purposes, as the only choice for the alpha male to make. Chemukh did this in a variety of ways, the least pleasant of which was to attack Wyakin's hindquarters, making it, I'm sure, rather painful for her to breed.

Jamie and I did try to remain clinical and unemotional but it was difficult to watch. Plus, we could not help but play favorites. We really hoped that, in the end, sweet Wyakin would come forward to take the alpha position, but sadly, sweetness does not an alpha female make. Wyakin, as spirited as she was, was not up to the challenge. Chemukh was unrelenting in her offensive and, when she came into heat a few days before Wyakin, that really sealed their fates.

Kamots quickly fell under Chemukh's siren spell. His affections were secured, and we watched Chemukh transform from a snarling hellcat to a demure little princess. Suddenly the two were inseparable. Kamots followed her closely, sniffing and licking her. They sat for hours side by side, licking one another's faces and grooming one another.

Chemukh had completed her job attracting Kamots and now his duties were just beginning. Females remain in heat for roughly seven days and the other males in the pack were not about to control their own urges. It was up to Kamots to keep all other suitors away from his mate. If any of the males so much as wandered close to Chemukh, Kamots would attack them with such force as to make his threats over an elk carcass look downright playful. The interloper would let out a shriek of submission and retreat in a crouch. Kamots never really hurt another male but he left little doubt that this was very serious business.

Kamots quickly fell under Chemukh's siren spell.

For a solid week, the torturous desire among the males was palpable. We have never heard the wolves more vocal. Over and over, throughout the day and night, they would erupt into a chorus of urgent and plaintive howls. Matsi, Amani and Motomo paced back and forth just far enough away from Chemukh to avoid incurring Kamots' wrath. From time to time, they would snarl and bicker with each other, looking every bit like greasers at a high

school dance. Lakota was so aware that tempers were short that he left the scene entirely and waited for the frenzy to blow over. Wahots hung close by in rapt fascination, but as close to the bottom of the social heap as he was, he didn't dare make waves. In this volatile time, the mid-ranking members of the pack didn't need much provocation to turn them aggressive.

All this excitement enabled us to see another side of Wahots' personality. It was strange and wonderful to witness just how much pack hierarchy means to a wolf, even a subordinate like Wahots. He kept a close eye on Chemukh, watching her as she repeatedly mated with Kamots. Unlike the other males, his behavior revealed more curiosity than desire. Kamots had been guarding his mate practically without rest for

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a week and was completely exhausted. When another wolf distracted him, Motomo saw a window of opportunity, threw caution to the wind, and attempted to mate with Chemukh. Chemukh, wasn't really willing, but she wasn't exactly fighting Motomo off either. Oddly enough, this proved terribly upsetting to Wahots who let out a plaintive bark-howl. It

was the strangest sound we ever heard him make, a call of severe distress. The noise immediately caught Kamots' attention. He turned, and launched himself at Motomo, growling terribly as he made his attack. The dark wolf practically did a backward somersault off Chemukh and scurried for cover.

That night, Jamie and I were huddled in our bed, staving off the February cold and trying to get some sleep among the choir of desperate wolves. Finally at about 2:00 a.m. the pack calmed down and we began to drift off to sleep. Suddenly, Wahots' same bizarre cry tore us from our sleep. It was followed quickly by the sound of heavy paws galloping across crusted snow, and then a terrible crashing and snarling as Kamots collided with a wolf, probably Motomo once again.

We had become so familiar with these wolves that even in the darkness, without leaving the comfort of our tent, we could



picture precisely what was happening. To our amazement, it seemed as though Wahots was actually "tattling" on Chemukh, making sure that Motomo would never be able to mate with her. This little commotion sparked a new round of howling, growling and complaining that didn't let up until dawn.

FOR MANY DAYS, WE MULLED OVER THE POSSIBLE REASONS WHY WAHOTS WAS SNITCHING ON MOTOMO AND CHEMUKH.

He was dangerously close to relieving Lakota from the omega rank and it was possible that he was trying to curry favor from Kamots. Another answer could be that Wahots simply could not stand to see the pack hierarchy violated. Every wolf in a pack knows its place and the places of all the other wolves. Without the hierarchy the pack falls apart. Wolves may challenge one another within the system but they do not disobey the system itself. Wahots knew the rules, and the rules dictated that he could not mate with Chemukh no matter how strong the desire. If he couldn't do it, then, by golly, Motomo couldn't either. Wyakin came into heat shortly thereafter, but the males did not pay nearly as much attention to her as they had to Chemukh.



For one thing, Wyakin was not advertising herself as “available.” In the previous days, Chemukh so successfully dominated her that Wyakin was too afraid to solicit any attention from the males. If a male approached her with intent to mate, Wyakin would run away or sit down and refuse to budge. It was either that or risk having Chemukh bite her hind quarters again.

Kamots had no interest in mating with Wyakin, but he still wasn’t going to allow any of the males near her. Though not with the same conviction,

he chased the males away from Wyakin as he had done with Chemukh. This would draw Chemukh’s attention and she would lay into Wyakin just for good measure. For the rest of the breeding period, Wyakin kept a very low profile.

It is common behavior in a wolf pack for the alpha pair to be the only pair to mate. It keeps the numbers in control, for too many wolves in the pack, especially puppies, would be a liability. Many hungry mouths and not enough hunters means they could all suffer. Instead, each wolf devotes itself completely to the few puppies that are born to the alpha pair, making sure they grow up to be strong and beneficial additions to the pack. This is not a hard and fast rule. In some

packs, the beta pair will be able to breed – it really comes down to what the alpha pair will allow. Generally, their decision has to do with the availability of a prey base. If food is plentiful, the alpha pair may decide that the pack can handle a few extra members and allow the beta pair to breed. When times are hard and food is scarce, even the alphas may choose not to breed. Whatever variables may exist in the wild, however, Kamots and Chemukh held to the standard model and would not tolerate any amorous behavior among the other members.

As the winter months progressed, Chemukh became more and more preoccupied with choosing the perfect site for her den. A den’s only purpose is as a place for giving birth and protecting newborn pups. The job of constructing it falls exclusively to the alpha female, for it is her domain alone. Chemukh seemed to have an instinctive set of specific criteria in her head. She would select a spot, dig for a while through the snow and earth, then decide that it was not the right place after all. Perhaps the soil was too loose or too rocky, or perhaps the ground held too much water. Something about it failed to suit her. The rest of the pack dug as well, not that they were helping Chemukh; they just dug shallow pits in any old spot, caught up in the spirit of the occasion. Having lost the battle for the alpha position, Wyakin settled gracefully into a supporting role. Like a midwife, she became very attentive to Chemukh, grooming her or just sitting by her

side. Kamots, on the other hand, was not particularly attentive to his mate. He had done his duty and was back to the business of protecting the pack and patrolling his territory.

FINALLY, CHEMUKH SETTLED ON A SITE AT THE HIGH END OF THE ENCLOSURE IN A HEAVY GROVE OF SPRUCE. A fallen tree had created a natural cavity and a perfect place for her to modify as a den. With an air of great importance Chemukh disappeared into the hole and a second later clumps of dirt began to fly out of the entrance. She kept at her work for several days. We knew the den must be cavernous but we avoided the urge to peek inside lest our presence cause her to abandon the project.

There was still over a foot of crusty snow lingering on the valley floor on April 22, 1996, the afternoon that Chemukh separated herself from the pack and disappeared into the spruce grove. She slipped away so inconspicuously and quietly that none of the other wolves followed, and Jamie and I failed to even notice.

The next morning, there was not a single wolf in sight around our camp. We hurriedly threw our clothes on and hiked up to the grove. The pack was milling around the area with an air of great excitement. As we walked to the den, they followed us and peered into the tunnel alongside Jamie and me. Inside, we could hear the delicate cries of newborn pups.



Beta Wolf

by Jim Dutcher

A WOLF PACK IS AN EXCEEDINGLY COMPLEX SOCIAL UNIT -- an extended family of parents, siblings, aunts and uncles. There are old wolves that need to be cared for, pups that need to be educated, and young adults that are beginning to assert themselves – all altering the dynamics of the pack. Thus, in the early years of the project, when we introduced three pups, one male and two females, to the existing pack of five adult males, we knew we were creating a much more complicated society and one that more accurately mirrored a wild pack. Previously unseen personality traits surfaced as each wolf responded to the new pups in his own special way. The most dramatic of these was Matsi.

Matsi was the littermate of Motomo and Amani, born in 1992 to the same parents that had given birth to Kamots and Lakota a year earlier. In a perfect example of how variable wolf markings can be, these three siblings ranged from Motomo's coal black coat, to Amani's traditional gray and black, to Matsi's uniform beige coloration and complete lack of darker facial markings. Because of his sunny appearance we gave him the Blackfoot name for "Sweet and Brave." Throughout his entire life, Matsi lived up to that name.

Not much is written about betas, and their role in the pack structure is unclear when compared with the well-defined positions of alpha and omega. In the very simplest of terms, the beta male is the "second in command," dominant over all but the alpha. While the positions of mid-ranking wolves are somewhat fluid, the beta generally enjoys a more stable existence. Since there is something of a separate hierarchy for males and females, there will generally be a beta female as well as a beta male.



MOST SCIENTISTS SUGGEST THAT THE BETA MALE WILL ASSUME COMMAND OF THE PACK IF THE CURRENT ALPHA IS KILLED OR INJURED. For this reason, a beta may have to perform the most delicate balancing act of any wolf in the society. Matsi was certainly the gentlest wolf in the Sawtooth Pack, both to me and to his pack-mates. It could well be that his kindness was a way of garnering support in case his time ever came to be the alpha. In my observations, however, Matsi seemed completely uninterested in social rank. While Amani and Motomo jostled for position, Matsi conducted himself in a fashion similar to that of Kamots.

Back when he was a yearling, things had been somewhat different. Matsi had been fairly aggressive and seemed intent on asserting himself, especially over his brothers. When he was barely a year old, Matsi helped to solidify Lakota's omega status. It seemed as though he set out to prove himself to his elders and to secure a dominant role in the pack early on. Once his beta position was firmly established, Matsi relaxed, becoming one of the least aggressive wolves in the pack. He seemed to know which rank suited him.

Matsi possessed an intangible quality that I still find difficult to describe. In all affairs, he conducted himself with an air of calm dignity. He never seemed too concerned with what we humans were up to, but he did seem to enjoy our company. Often he sat quietly by my side, never expecting anything, not trying to solicit attention, just spending time with me as a friend, an equal, and I respected him for that.

There are two occasions when the social structure of a wolf pack is most apparent. The most volatile time is during the breeding season when the dominant males and females aggressively demonstrate their status. The other time that brings out the fiercest demonstrations of social rank is feeding. Much of the footage of dominance and submission that went into my films was shot on or around a deer or elk carcass. As I had learned to do earlier, I shot a great deal of this footage in slow motion so it would better reveal subtle nuances of the wolves' behavior.

Kamots' favor seemed to shift regularly. Some days he would let some of his pack eat immediately, some days he would make them wait. But one factor remained constant: Matsi was always allowed to eat with Kamots. This is not to say that he was not cautious. Like the other subordinate wolves, he selected a spot far away from Kamots and kept his eyes on the alpha as he ate, but he never doubted his place at a kill.



It was during feeding that Matsi's reputation as a peace-maker was born. As the meal progressed and more and more of the deer disappeared, Motomo and Amani would become increasingly agitated. Frequently they would work out their frustration on the unfortunate Lakota who was always waiting in the wings, torn between the desire to snatch a bite of food and the fear of drawing attention to himself.

Once as I was filming, I watched Lakota give in to his hunger and try to pick up a morsel that had been flung aside. Upholding the pecking order, Matsi growled and chased Lakota several feet away from the kill and then returned to his meal. Amani, still waiting for his turn to feed and



anxious to make a show of prowess, took over where Matsi had left off. He turned toward Lakota with a growl and tackled the confused omega, flipping him onto his back and straddling him as he often did. To our surprise and perhaps even Lakota's, Matsi again left the kill but this time he rushed at Amani, knocking him off Lakota. Matsi was disciplining Amani for disciplining Lakota.

We thought at the time that this was a fluke, that Matsi was simply displaying a lot of dominance that day. The more we screened our slow motion footage, the more we realized that this was a pattern. Matsi was continually sticking up for Lakota. One particular roll of film that I had shot of a pack rally was the first to bring our attention to Matsi's peacekeeping ability. The rally was especially energetic and had turned sour on Lakota. Perhaps he had joined in the howl too enthusiastically or howled too well. Or perhaps one of the mid-ranking wolves just felt the need to assert his dominance. Whatever the reason, the pack had formed a mob around



the hapless omega, blocking his escape. Even the yearlings Wahots, Wyakin and Chemukh were old enough by this time to get involved in the action, not really harassing Lakota but nevertheless adding to the mayhem. As always, Amani was the main perpetrator of any aggression aimed at Lakota. He closed in on the omega, climbing on his back and nipping at his flanks while Lakota sunk to the ground and tried to worm-crawl his way out of the ring.

A moment later Matsi charged into the fray as well. When I filmed this action, I assumed that Matsi was simply abusing Lakota with the others. It was Jamie who observed during the third or fourth screening of the footage what we had failed to see in the blur of fangs and fur. Matsi was not digging into Lakota, rather he was forcibly inserting himself between Lakota and his tormenters. In effect, he was body-checking Amani out of the way, giving Lakota the opportunity to make a dash for cover.

WE WERE NEVER ABLE TO EXPLAIN THE SPECIAL BOND THAT MATSI DEVELOPED WITH LAKOTA. If we had tried to look at it with a purely scientific eye, it would have been very hard to see what Matsi got out of it. Their relationship was especially surprising because Matsi had played such a huge role in forcing Lakota into the omega position to begin with. Once the ranks were established, however, Matsi was extremely gentle with the omega.

As adults, the two often slept side by side, and when Matsi went exploring Lakota often joined him. At the very least, Lakota knew Matsi to be the one wolf who would not pick on him and might even offer him some protection, but there seemed to be more to it than that. Matsi genuinely seemed to enjoy Lakota's

company. With Matsi, Lakota was free to do things he wouldn't dare do around the others. He would never have jumped on Amani or Motomo's back to instigate play. No wolf, not even benevolent Kamots, would have stood for that sort of audacity from an omega. Matsi, on the other hand, let it pass. He actually appeared to enjoy it, since he nearly always took the bait and launched into a mock fight or game of chase with Lakota. One of the happiest sights I have experienced in all my time with the pack was the sight of these two frolicking together and the look of joy on Lakota's face, freed for a moment from his burdens.

COULD IT BE THAT MATSI WAS SIMPLY SHOWING HIS CARE FOR LAKOTA, UNDERSTANDING HOW THE OMEGA SUFFERED AND OFFERING A MOMENT OF RELIEF? Though it is difficult to observe such subtle behavior in the wild, indications of this kind of care do exist. While we were on location in Fairbanks, Alaska, a biologist showed us the skull of an average sized male wolf. The skull bore unmistakable evidence that the wolf had suffered a broken jaw in his lifetime, probably delivered by the kick of a moose or caribou. Such an injury would have rendered the wolf unable to hunt or even tear hunks of meat from a kill. Yet the skull indicated that the bone had mended and the wolf had continued to live for several years. The only way he could have survived this injury is for the other wolves of his pack to feed him. They would have had to bring food to him from a kill, possibly even regurgitating for him, nurturing him as they would a pup.

Observing Matsi's behavior, I genuinely felt that if one of the Sawtooth Pack were injured he would be the one to take charge of



the nursing and care. The survival of the pack seemed that important to him. Of course, this also meant that the rules of society were important to him as well. Although Matsi was more than willing to let the social order bend, he was by no means willing to let it break. I don't recall seeing Lakota behave as freely with Matsi when they were in the company of Kamots and the others. Perhaps Lakota didn't want to attract attention to himself, or it may have been that Matsi would not tolerate the same liberties in public. Matsi certainly wasn't going to budge an inch when it came to food. If Lakota overstepped his bounds at mealtime, Matsi was quick to make his displeasure known.

One day, as I was photographing the pack, I noticed Lakota cowering under a tree. He was tucked into a deep crouch with his ears plastered back, looking as if he were trying to be absorbed by the ground and disappear. As I watched him and wondered what he had done, Matsi walked up to Lakota, lifted his leg, and urinated all over the unfortunate wolf's back. I had missed whatever earlier altercation had provoked this extreme demonstration of dominance but it was clear that Matsi felt the need to put

Lakota severely in his place. I was so shocked at the behavior that I was too dumfounded to squeeze off a photo. That afternoon, however, I spied the two playing by the pond together and that night they slept side by side.



I have often said that Kamots' confidence is what made him such a superb leader. Although Matsi did not have the drive to lead the pack he did seem to possess some of that same confidence. One of the reasons Motomo and

that the workings of a wolf society are deeper and more complex than I will ever know. Although competition is prevalent and the drive to become the alpha can burn fiercely in the hearts of certain

wolves, the good of the pack, the family, is more important than anything.

These animals clearly care about one another and show signs of what I would call nothing less than empathy and compassion

Scientists are continually debating the emotional life of animals and only lately has real consideration been given to the possibility that a creature like a wolf could be capable of something as complex as compassion. If compassion is not a word that can be used to describe a wolf, then what word should we use? What word would a wolf use when it protects the omega from aggression, or when (as has been observed in Alaska) it brings food to an injured pack mate? When a worried mother brings her sick child to the doctor, no one would suggest that it is because she knows the child carries her genes, or that she

wants the child to care for her when she is older. I have yet to see a shred of evidence that humans have a monopoly on feelings.

This insight is the gift that Matsi gave to me. It has been an underlying theme in my films and the single most important message about wolves that I can share. They possess something beyond their more obvious attributes of beauty, strength and intelligence. These animals, who have been maligned for centuries, despised as the embodiment of all that is cowardly, savage, and cruel, clearly care about one another and show signs of what I would call nothing less than empathy and compassion.



Amani were quick to pick on Lakota was because they themselves were insecure in their status and felt they had to make a show of dominance. Matsi just didn't feel the need. He knew exactly where he stood.

AS I LOOK BACK ON MY YEARS WITH THE SAWTOOTH PACK, I SEE MATSI AS THE EMBODIMENT OF ALL THAT WAS MAGICAL ABOUT THEM. He was a wolf that gave everything of himself for the benefit of the pack. He patrolled their territory, took care of the pups, maintained peace and order – and amidst all this, he seemed completely content not to rule. Matsi taught me



Mid - Ranking Wolves

by Jamie Dutcher



AS IN ANY SOCIETY, THE MAJORITY OF WOLVES THAT comprise a pack are neither leader nor underdog. Most are mid-ranking wolves, filling the vague area below the beta and above the omega. The rank of these wolves is more difficult to determine through observation because it appears to be rather fluid. All the same, within the middle echelons no two wolves have exactly the same rank, and these ranks may change from week to week.

It is extremely difficult for a mid-ranking wolf to depose a well established alpha or beta. However, there is always hope of moving up a peg or two in the pecking order and improving one's lot ever so

slightly. For this reason, much of the squabbling in the Sawtooth Pack occurred within the middle ranks.

Over the years, the pack grew in size and the middle echelons became more complex, but the two older wolves that epitomized this nebulous and volatile group were Motomo and Amani. Their brother Matsi had solidly established himself as the beta wolf, effectively sealing off any hope for social climbing. The only other option left to them was to descend in rank, and it was easy to see that neither of them was about to do that. Consequently they jockeyed for position with each other, trying to assert themselves as the more dominant of the two.

When that got old, they resorted to displaying dominance over Lakota just to remind the rest of the pack that they were definitely not omega material. During my years with the pack, I would only have been able to guess at which of these two was really dominant and which was subordinate on any given day, but I'm quite sure that they knew.

Motomo was the darkest wolf of the pack, jet black with a white patch on his chest. Of all the wolves he seemed to take the greatest interest in the activities of people. It wasn't so much that he craved direct contact with us, he was just incredibly curious and loved to observe us. Long after the



rest of the pack had moved on to other business, Motomo would stay close by. When we walked the perimeter of the enclosure to check for fallen trees or other potential threats to the fence, Motomo usually followed us the entire way, as if supervising.

One of Jim's photographs that became a successful poster is a head-on shot of Motomo in which he is lying in the snow and staring directly into the camera with his deep yellow eyes. That is exactly the way I remember him, sitting completely still and scrutinizing us intently from a few yards away as we set up our camera gear, split wood or shoveled snow. At times, he really appeared to be trying to figure out what on earth these strange primates were up to, always scurrying about, always busy.

There was something wonderfully dignified about

Motomo. He enjoyed our company but kept his cards close to his chest. He wasn't going to lower himself to the point of actually soliciting our attention.

There was something wonderfully dignified about Motomo.

His brother Amani couldn't have been more different.

In both appearance and demeanor, Amani was a near opposite of Motomo. He had the perfect markings of a classic gray wolf: mottled gray fur with a black mask, a pale muzzle and throat, and rich caramel eyes. Where Motomo was dark, mysterious, and rather reserved, Amani was all flash and showmanship. He was a little like the class clown, the kid at

school who would do anything for attention.

However, when it came to social status he was dead serious and could be a downright bully. As he did when he played the clown, Amani approached social competition with great flair, making sure that he had an audience. Oddly enough, when Amani was a yearling, he was the shyest of his siblings. Perhaps this fear lingered with Amani and he continually felt the need to prove himself.

Unfortunately, the wolf that was almost always on the receiving end of Amani's posturing was Lakota. Amani would use any available opportunity to demonstrate his dominance, sometimes even pouncing on Lakota out of the blue when all was otherwise quiet. During pack rallies when displays of dominance were common, Amani

It is in the middle rank where one sees the true and fascinating paradox of life in a wolf pack, the incredible balance of competition and cooperation.



could be counted on to lay into Lakota with special zeal. Once he started, Motomo, Chemukh, Wahots and Wyakin would often get involved and make the situation all the more miserable for the omega.

Amani also seemed to dominate his brother most of the time, making a show of climbing on Motomo's back and growling. Motomo didn't seem to mind the fact that he was being pushed into a submissive role most days. A man of few words, Motomo decided to save his energy for when it really counted – meal time. As calm and docile as he was, Motomo's personality transformed once a deer carcass appeared on the scene. It was here that we could really see who was on top when the chips were down. With his black coat and yellow eyes, he looked utterly sinister as he bared his fangs and tore into the deer or elk. Hair from the animal would get stuck in his mouth and the ensuing spitting and snorting to get rid of it made the image all the more frightening.

When Motomo moved toward the carcass to eat, he met with less resistance from the more dominant wolves than did Amani, a probable indication of their ranks in the eyes of the pack. Once Motomo was savoring the

kill, he made a point of trying to keep Amani off. It was much more important to him than it was to Kamots or Matsi. He would snarl and chase his brother away in what seemed like payback for all the previous day's dominance. Sometimes Amani was left circling the carcass for quite a while, jockeying for position and taking out his frustration on Lakota.

THERE WERE RARE OCCASIONS WHEN MOTOMO AND Amani set their competition aside and joined forces for their mutual benefit, at least this seemed to be the case. There was one particular feeding which stands out in my mind as a time when the two mid-ranking wolves actually appeared to be cooperating so that they both could eat. On a crisp October morning, we brought the pack a young deer that had been killed on the highway a few days earlier. They had recently eaten but since the deer suddenly became available, we brought it to them. Wolves in the wild are used to eating this way, bringing down kills of different size at irregular intervals. Still, this unusually

small meal heightened competition over the carcass. The only ones really to get their fill were Kamots, Matsi, and the pups, Wahots and Wyakin. Lakota and Chemukh were going hungry on the sidelines and Motomo and Amani were frantically sniffing around the scene, snatching up any scraps that had been inadvertently cast aside.

I heard them vocalizing to each other in an exchange of frustrated whines, and at the same moment they turned toward Kamots who was towering over the carcass. The small deer had been torn to shreds and nearly consumed. All that remained were two disembodied hind legs and a portion of the torso. Kamots appeared to be intent on finishing it all. As the two mid-ranking wolves faced Kamots he uttered his warning growl, telling them to not even think of approaching the deer. They whined back to him, or to each other, appearing to be begging for food.

The scenario that followed occurred with such incredible speed that it stunned us as much as it did Kamots. Looking as if he had been shot from a cannon,

Motomo dashed directly at the carcass and grabbed a small chunk of fur and meat that was lying off to the side. Kamots took the bait and chased after him for a few feet, momentarily leaving the carcass unattended. Capitalizing on the tiny window of opportunity, Amani rushed in and snatched one of the remaining deer legs. Seeing his mistake, Kamots turned, but not

Amani and returned to stand guard over what was left of his deer.

This interaction was the subject of ongoing debate and discussion in the days that followed. It could well have been that what we had witnessed was an “every wolf for himself” situation in which both Motomo and Amani were able to capitalize on the chaos. However, it was all so perfectly

It is hardly a far-fetched suggestion that Motomo and Amani had worked together.

Amani had worked together. After all, a wolf’s strong cooperative nature is perhaps its greatest survival skill. A solitary predator

like a cougar is physically far better equipped for hunting than a wolf is. With its sharp claws, a cougar can grasp its prey long enough to deliver a suffocating bite to the throat. Its forelegs are powerful enough to snap the neck of large elk. Wolves may lack a cougar’s power, stealth and weaponry, but they do possess one great advantage – each other.

Had they been part of a wild pack, Motomo and Amani’s cooperative efforts would have served them well in the hunt. They would have been the grunt labor, in the thick of the hunt, getting the job done. But these two also taught us that

fast enough. Amani clung to his prize and made a bee line for the willows with Kamots, now close on his tail. What was most fascinating is that, instead of continuing to eat his small chunk of meat, Motomo dropped the morsel (much to the pleasure of Lakota), and turned back to the carcass. He grabbed the other hind leg without breaking stride and veered off in the opposite direction. This final maneuver bewildered Kamots so completely that he broke off his pursuit of

timed and adeptly executed that there seemed to be more to it than mere chance and opportunism. The way they approached Kamots together, the unusual vocalizations they made to one another, the way Motomo dropped his “decoy” piece of meat the instant Kamots’ attention turned toward Amani: these factors indicated to me that they had actually hatched a scheme and deftly pulled it off.

It is hardly a far-fetched suggestion that Motomo and

being a mid-ranking wolf has no similarity to being a foot soldier, part of a large force of equal “worker bees.” In a wolf pack, there are no equals. Someone always has the slightly upper hand, even if it changes from day to day, and there is always the chance of moving up the ladder a rung or two. It is in this nebulous middle rank where one sees the true and fascinating paradox of life in a wolf pack, the incredible balance of competition and cooperation.



Omega

by Jamie Dutcher



THE SOCIAL HIERARCHY OF A PACK

IS WHAT MAINTAINS ORDER, dictating who makes decisions, who mates with whom, who eats first and who eats last. This order is constantly reinforced by displays of dominance and submission.

Unfortunately, the omega bears the brunt of this behavior. One or many of the wolves will assert themselves over the omega, who flips over onto his back, whimpering in surrender. Generally this is a bloodless exchange, but at times, especially during the breeding season, it can get vicious and extremely difficult to watch.

In most wolf packs, there will be an alpha male and female and frequently an omega male and female. In wolf hierarchy, the males tend to dominate other males and the females dominate other females so that there is generally a low ranking member of each sex. The alpha pair would never allow the omega male and female to mate, therefore the omegas are not pair-bonded to each other like the alphas. In the beginning of the project, the Sawtooth Pack was small, consisting only of five males. So Lakota held the omega position alone. One of the things that was so noticeable about Lakota was his posture. He kept his tail tucked, his shoulders hunched and his head lowered as he moved about with uncertainty. Because of his demeanor it was difficult for me to see, but actually Lakota was a huge wolf, larger than the three other mid-ranking



wolves and possibly even larger than his brother, Kamots, the alpha. His paws were definitely bigger. Obviously there was more to social rank in a wolf pack than mere size and strength.

Over the years that I observed him, Lakota would often approach me and timidly lick my face. During these occasions, I would run my hand down his back through his fur coat. Sadly, his skin was riddled with small bumps and scabs where the other wolves had nipped him, and there were small scars on his muzzle where the fur would not grow back. In dominance displays, a dominant wolf will frequently grab the muzzle of the submissive wolf, as a mother might do to discipline her pups. Lakota's face bore the marks from such encounters. As I would sit with him, he would begin to relax a little, beginning to trust that I wasn't going to hurt him. Then, he would take his paw, gently place it on my shoulder, and gaze at me with his sweet, wise, amber eyes. We would sit that way for quite a while. From that moment, I was captivated by him and would forever hold a special place for him in my heart.

Over the years, Lakota and I continued to have this special bond. Sometimes I would purposefully sneak away from the rest of the pack to carry on this clandestine friendship with the beleaguered omega. We were careful not to show any interest in each



Sadly, there were times when Lakota's playful attitude would backfire



other when the rest of the pack was nearby; both of us were concerned that that he would call attention to himself and risk being disciplined by one of the mid-ranking wolves. Instead, I would join him at times when he was by himself, and we would sit together, his paw on my shoulder.

Although Lakota was not the initial choice for pack omega, the killing of Motaki by a mountain lion had forced him into that position and he began to adapt to it. It may sound odd, but he became a wonderful omega. In some ways, the omega is like the court jester. He must suffer terrible abuse at the hands of the king and court, but he is undeniably loved. Like a jester, the omega is often the one to instigate play and act the fool.

During a period when the pack's mood was calm and relaxed, I watched Lakota approach his brother Kamots. The omega suddenly crouched into a play stance with his head low, front legs splayed wide, rump and wagging tail in the air. Kamots would spring into action, darting and snapping playfully. Soon they were tearing through the meadow, Lakota only inches ahead of Kamots' jaws. The knowledge that this chase was not a dangerous dominance display was written all over Lakota's body. He zigzagged through the grass with his mouth agape and his lips pulled back as if in a smile, nearly allowing himself to be caught, then leaping ahead.

Eventually Lakota was caught, or let himself be caught. He flipped over onto his back in surrender, bestowing on Kamots the full victory. Kamots straddled his brother snarling and snapping in mock aggression. Lakota gently licked the muzzle of the victor, the wolf equivalent of saying "uncle," and the game was over.

On another occasion, I again saw Kamots and Lakota racing through the meadow in a game of chase. The two brothers are extremely similar in appearance -- large with very typical black and gray markings -- so it took me a while before I realized to my amazement that this time Lakota was chasing Kamots. I couldn't imagine how this role reversal could be happening. In an amazing twist in their standard game, Kamots was allowing himself to be the victim!

As I grew to know these wolves I realized that this was a regular occurrence, one that bears no scientific explanation other than the fact that sometimes it is fun to be the one getting chased. To me, it implies that there is a lot more going on in the inner life of wolves than we can imagine. In humans, an older, stronger brother might let a younger brother pin him in a mock wrestling match, feigning defeat and letting his younger sibling celebrate victory. Both know who the dominant one is, but it is fun to reverse the roles. Many a scientist would gasp at the

Many a scientist would gasp at the thought of ascribing emotions to an animal but since I'm not a scientist, I can allow myself the indulgence.

thought of ascribing emotions to an animal but since I'm not a scientist, I can allow myself the indulgence. Witnessing scenes like this, the only interpretation I could make was that Kamots and Lakota genuinely cared for each other.

Some years later, while scouting for wolves along the Yukon River with Jim, I watched from a small airplane as a pack played a game of tag in the deep snow. Though it was too far to see, I could imagine their expressions of joy as they took turns running after each other and nipping at one another's tails, and I knew that one of the wolves below me was the omega, inciting the others into chasing him and keeping the game going.

Sadly, there were times when Lakota's playful attitude would backfire. The attention he would draw to himself could sometimes result in a full-on mobbing. As he'd run, we could see him realize that the pursuit was not a game this time. It was painful to watch his hopeful expectations dissolve, fear spring into his eyes, and his entire posture change. Quickly he'd flip over onto his back and yelp in submission while each mid-ranking member of the pack got his digs in. Amazingly enough, he would return time after time, inviting the pack to join in a game of chase or tug of war, eternally brave and eternally hopeful.

Group rallies were another risky time for Lakota. Often the pack gathered together and howled, as if to celebrate its solidarity. The real reason for this ritual is unknown. Sometimes it appeared that Kamots would purposefully start to howl, apparently calling the pack together and reminding everyone of his leadership. Other times the rallies seemed more spontaneous, with a spontaneous howl bubbling up inside one of the wolves, then bursting forth uncontrollably.

When one wolf began to howl, the others would quickly join in and assemble around Kamots. As the rally grew in intensity, the wolves often displayed their dominance, sparring, growling and pinning each other to the ground. These were dangerous times for the omega. Regardless of the bickering that went on between the mid-ranking wolves, Amani and Motomo, most of the aggression was transferred to Lakota. All the same, he would often be there, lending his voice to the group howl.

When I began recording the sounds that would later be

used for the soundtrack of *Wolves at Our Door*, I made an effort to record each wolf's individual voice as cleanly as possible. I would try to find an occasion when a wolf was howling more or less by himself, rather than right in the middle of the group. This was easier with Lakota because he often stood on the fringe, howling, but trying to keep a low profile. With the eight-foot boom microphone in front of me, I'd slowly and quietly approach him in a crawl, careful not to disturb his singing.

When I first recorded his howl, I was amazed at what was coming through my headphones. Lakota, eyes shut and head thrown back, was just pouring his heart out. His rich, mournful voice soared into the evening and hung in the air for what seemed like forever. I actually found myself welling up at the sheer beauty and expressiveness of his song. I felt as though I were listening to him sing the blues, giving voice to all the loneliness and pain that his social position brought him. Even when new pups were added to the pack in later years, no member of the Sawtooth Pack ever came close to comparing with the beauty and sadness of Lakota's howl.

To experience a pack of wolves howling together is to bear witness to one of the most mysterious and awe inspiring events in nature. It almost seems that the wolves themselves have no choice but to join in when the Alpha howls. Lakota could never be certain if his participation would get him into trouble, but he could not help but be a part of it. He would slink from wolf to wolf and pay his respects, his tail tucked and his head nearly scraping the ground. But as Kamots continued to howl, you could see Lakota's voice welling up inside him, and, after a few tentative mumbles, he was howling away, trying to keep off to the side, but wanting to be involved.

His participation was looked on as almost an insult by some of the mid-ranking wolves, as if he were overstepping his bounds. Amani seemed especially determined to put Lakota in his place and during pack rallies he would frequently rush at Lakota, snarling and flashing his teeth. It often looked as though Amani had knocked Lakota off his feet, but in reality Lakota was just flipping over and surrendering. There would follow a chorus of growls and yips while the other wolves got into the

action. Although Lakota was rarely hurt in these displays, his cries were agonizing to hear. Amani would stand triumphantly over Lakota, making the omega beg to be let up. Once he was satisfied that his point was made, that he was the more dominant wolf, Amani would let up and Lakota would slink away quietly, through with howling for a while.

I had grown accustomed to being extra careful in giving attention to Lakota but there were be times when our surreptitious meetings would be discovered. Any human activity always drew intense interest from the pack. If Motomo or Amani spotted Lakota and me sitting together, they would hurry over to investigate and to find out why Lakota was getting attention that they were not.

In some ways they reminded me of children. If one wolf had something, a bone, a stick, or the attention of a human, all the others wanted it. I was most concerned at these moments that my display of affection would result in Lakota's getting pummeled, so I quickly learned to turn my attention to the other wolves when they approached. This seemed to satisfy them and keep the peace. Lakota knew the rules all too well and would discreetly walk away from me, unharmed but always the underdog.





The Pack

by Jim Dutcher

A WOLF PACK IS A WHOLLY DEVOTED EXTENDED FAMILY. It is bound together by a common purpose and, at times, it seems, a common mind.

Watching the way wolves interacted with one another, it was easy to see why so many early human cultures revered wolves. Hunting societies especially admired and even imitated the wolf's skill, for as predators humans beings and wolves have similar limitations and must employ similar techniques. It is during a hunt where wolves' near telepathic co-operation is most apparent. A wolf pack may trail a herd of elk, caribou or other large prey for days before making its move. During this time, they are already hunting, assessing the herd, looking for an animal that displays any sign of weakness, and this is just the beginning. Wolves must also factor in other conditions that will affect the hunt; weather and terrain can tip the scales in favor of predator or prey. For example, a wide open plain favors the ungulates, who, if full-grown and healthy, can outrun the fastest wolf. On the other hand, crusty snow or ice favors the wolves

whose wide round paws have evolved to perform like snowshoes and carry them effortlessly over the surface. An experienced wolf is well aware that hoofed animals break through the crust and can become bogged down in deep snow.

Wolves have learned to use these conditions to their advantage. A biologist friend told me of a particular pack in Alaska that he has observed following a herd of caribou on a narrow packed trail through deep snow. The wolves know that their mere presence, following close behind, will eventually panic the caribou. When the rearmost caribou spooks, leaving the hard trail and attempting to run to the middle of the herd, it founders in the snow drifts. When that happens it is all over. In warm weather, this same pack of wolves changes its tactics, herding the caribou into a dry river bed where many of the ungulates stumble on the round stones.

A wolf pack therefore weighs many different factors when selecting its target and, as circumstances change during the hunt the target may change as well.



Initially they may be pursuing a calf, but if a big healthy bull stumbles unexpectedly, they all know to go after the bigger meal. Conversely, if too many factors seem to be going in favor of the prey, they may choose to wait. Sometimes it is better to stay a bit hungry until the odds improve rather than expend precious energy on a fruitless chase.

Rarely did two wolves pass one another without playfully rubbing shoulders together or exchanging a brief lick

Other observers of wild wolves have reported that often fewer than half of wolves on a hunt are actually involved with physically bringing down the prey. The youngest wolves frequently do nothing more than observe and learn from the sidelines. Each of the other pack members contributes

according to its particular experience and ability. Speedy, lightly-built females often take on herding roles, darting back and forth in front of prey, causing confusion and preventing escape. Slower but more powerful males are able to take down a large animal more aggressively and quickly.

Some of the wolf's bad reputation stems from the apparent mob scene that ensues when the prey begins to falter. Wolves are not equipped to dispatch their victims quickly; prey usually die of shock, muscle damage or blood loss. If it can, one of the stronger wolves will seize the prey by the nose and hold on tight, helping to bring about a more expeditious end, but the animal can still take many minutes before it succumbs. Equipped only with feet for running and jaws for biting, wolves make the best of their limitations. A

wolf pack's ferocity and apparent brutality is really a defensive measure. It is not rare for a wolf to be seriously injured by flailing hooves and slashing antlers. A well placed kick could break a wolf's jaw, rendering it unable to feed itself. It is much safer to harass the prey and let it tire out before moving in close. Far from being a mob scene, a hunt is a masterfully coordinated group effort, well deserving of our admiration.

Although the alpha male is usually in the thick of the hunt, it would be an exaggeration to say that he is leading it. The alpha may select the animal to be pursued, or he may chose to break off the hunt if it is going poorly. But he is not barking out orders to his subordinates like a general on the battlefield. The wolves just seem to know what to do, and they do it as one.

People understand that wolves are predators, but many still do not know the other side of wolves, a side that the animal



The youngest wolves frequently do nothing more than observe and learn from the sidelines.

does not readily share. Our project, by its very nature, had its limitations. The animal's prowess as a hunter was one aspect of wolves that we were unable to feature. Nor were we able to show certain other qualities such as the great distances they can travel or the way packs defend their territory. These limitations were balanced by our ability to examine their personal relationships with one another, and it was here that the more subtle signs of pack unity revealed themselves. Rarely did two wolves pass one another without playfully rubbing shoulders together or exchanging a brief lick. So often Jamie and I would see two wolves relaxing together, curled up beside one another, the head of one wolf draped over the neck of the other in a gesture that was both assertive and affectionate. More than hunting or travel, this is the behavior I hoped to reveal in my films because it is the side of wolves that people understand the least.

After observing this pack for so long, I have come to believe that the bond a wolf has to its pack is certainly as strong as the bond a human being has to its family. One would hope that this similarity would give us an instinctive sympathy for wolves, but we stubbornly resist granting another creature qualities that we cherish as singularly human.





Sawtooth Pups

by Jamie Dutcher

THE BIRTH OF NEW PUPS WAS LIKE AN EXPLOSION IN THE PACK. The celebration and burst of energy that came over the wolves was incredible. One moment they'd be racing around playing exuberantly and the next they'd be back at the den site, whining and shifting from one foot to the other, barely able to contain themselves.

Jim and I decided it was best to stay out of the way for the first day. We weren't sure just how protective the pack would be of the new pups and we didn't want to find out. We contented ourselves with watching the den from a distance and not trying to film or record sounds. I was as nervous as the rest of the wolves were; in fact, I was even envious of them because I was certain they all knew how the pups were doing.

After the first day, the pack began to return to a normal routine of playing relaxing and jostling for social rank. Even so, every wolf, from Kamots down to Lakota peered into the den from time to time, bodies tense with excitement, heads cocked, listening to the pups. Wyakin was different, maintaining a constant vigil beside the den. She seemed to be waiting, like

a dutiful aunt, to see if there was anything she could do for Chemukh. Still, we never saw Wyakin or even Kamots enter the den. The nursery was clearly Chemukh's territory.

Since the scene around the den had relaxed, Jim and I decided that it was safe to approach. At first, I set up a microphone on the outside of the den and sat nearby with my tape deck listening to the muffled squeals and gurgles that issued from underground. Sensing me above, Chemukh emerged from the den after a few moments to see what was going on. She seemed no more perturbed by my presence than she was by Wyakin's. I was just another familiar face, curious about her new pups and certainly not a threat to her.

Chemukh was still a high strung wolf, but she had developed a level of trust with me that she shared with no one else. I thought perhaps that, although Jim is a very gentle and soft-spoken man, his size and masculine presence might have been intimidating to her. She might even have been able to sense that Jim was in charge of the project, that the other humans in his company treated him as an "alpha." Whatever



the reason, she was much more comfortable around me. It was an unspoken certainty that if anyone was going to crawl into the den to count the pups, I would be the one.

The following afternoon I sat beside the opening of the den and listened to Chemukh

I hoped the gentleness of my voice would let her know I meant no harm

and the pups inside. A moment later she climbed out. She gave me a little whine and a lick on the nose and then sat down next to me as she had done so often as a pup. I spoke to her quietly, congratulating her on her young ones, and asking her if I could check them out for just a minute or two. I hoped the gentleness of my voice would let her know

I meant no harm and, more importantly, I wanted to reassure myself that she would not bite me on the behind if I crawled into her den. I scanned her face for any trace of fear or insecurity but she just looked at me with curious eyes, cocking her head as I spoke.

I took out a little flashlight, and allowed Chemukh to inspect it to her satisfaction. Then I got down on my hands and knees and made my way head-first into the cavern.

The tunnel was at least five feet long and wide enough that I could crawl through it without having to squeeze. Small roots dangled through the tunnel ceiling but Chemukh had managed to avoid the strong fat roots of the spruce trees. Somehow she had known exactly where to dig. The only odor I could detect was the musty smell of clean spring earth;

there was not a trace of any animal odor, at least not to my primitive nose. Chemukh kept a tidy den, cleaning up after her pups and instinctively making sure there was no smell that might perhaps attract the attention of bears or other predators.

The tunnel jogged to the left and opened up into a much larger area. There I got my first glimpse of the pups. At first, all I could see was one solid furry black ball that wiggled and whined. After a moment, I was able to make out four little heads with eyes still closed, noses tipped up into the air, sniffing at my unfamiliar scent.

Again I found myself marveling at Chemukh's construction. The rear of the den where she had placed the pups was slightly elevated. I had read that wolves do this, but it was still just incredible to see it for myself. Whether consciously or unconsciously, she had formed

The entire pack was willing to make any sacrifice necessary for Chemukh and the cherished new pack members

the floor in this way to keep the pups above any water that might collect inside the den. It was an ingenious bit of engineering. I would love to know if she understood the reasons behind her design or was just acting on instinct.

My entire visit with the pups was less than a minute long. It was enough of an honor to be able just get a glimpse of these delicate little creatures. I didn't want to try to handle them or see what sex they were, a simple head count was enough. I began to back out through the tunnel slowly. I was so excited that I wanted to rush out and announce the good news, but knowing that Cheumkh was undoubtedly waiting outside the den, I made my movements very slow and deliberate. As I surfaced covered in dirt, Chemukh was waiting for me expectantly. She gave my dirty face another lick, reassuring me that she was not upset, and then disappeared back into the den. Jim and Wyakin both seemed relieved to see me out of the hole. When we brought the next road-killed deer in for the pack, Chemukh stayed in the den. After eating, Kamots dragged an entire deer leg to the den entrance for her. Wyakin, too, brought food to the black wolf that had until recently been her tormenter. For once, there was no arguing from the rest of the pack when it came to Chemukh getting her fill; she was treated like a queen. Kamots didn't have to enforce this rule. The entire pack was willing to make any sacrifice necessary for Chemukh and the cherished new pack members.

In the first days of May, the last of the year's heavy snow finally receded and Chemukh decided it was time to introduce her pups to the world. One by one she carried them out of the den and into a little patch of dry grass and sunlight about twenty yards away. Their milky blue eyes had just opened and they were only beginning to try to stand on their wobbly legs. Finally we were able to get a really good look at them. There were two females and one male, all black.





Over the next few weeks it was interesting to see how each wolf stepped up to deal with the new family members in his or her own way. Kamots remained the chief disciplinarian and establisher of order. Matsi behaved as he had with Wahots, Wyakin and Chemukh, making sure they got a place at every meal and regurgitating much of his own food for them. Wyakin stepped in as the second caregiver to Matsi. Wahots and Motomo were ever fascinated by them and from time to time we'd catch them playing with the pups.

By far, the most entertaining wolf to watch around the new pups was Amani. We had observed him playing with Chemukh, Wahots, and Wyakin when they were young, but with Piyip, Ayet, and Motaki, he pulled out all the stops. Some may have been better caretakers, but Amani played with them like no other. He was just shameless, like an indulgent uncle who simply can't say no to the children. Amani really seemed to enjoy dropping to their level, both physically and mentally. He'd plunk himself down in the grass and they'd rush up to attack him. Motaki would grab him by the tail and yank in one direction,



Ayet would seize an ear and yank in the other, and Piyip would pounce on his back and nip at his neck. I couldn't believe the things he let them get away with. Those needle sharp puppy teeth would puncture my skin at the slightest nip, but Amani just let them gnaw away. While the three pups used him simultaneously as their springboard, chew-toy and surrogate prey, Amani lay in the grass, eyelids drooping, looking as though he were in heaven.

Watching Amani behave in this way revealed just how complex a wolf's personality really is. He was the one that brutalized the omega more than any other. He always seemed to be spoiling for a fight, always ready to display dominance when he could. One minute he could be chasing Lakota into the willows, gnashing his teeth, and the next he would be rolling on his back, looking every bit a puppy himself as Ayet, Motaki, and Piyip squirmed all over him. He did not seem to display any desire to be the pups' teacher or protector, only their playmate. With them, his often quick temper was nowhere to be seen, and watching the way the pups treated him, there was no doubt that he was their absolute favorite.

Well fed, the pups grew rapidly and were practically full size by winter. In a year or so, we would be able to see how they integrated into the pack. But for now, their lives still revolved around play and learning how to function within the pack. Kamots handled most of the discipline and the establishment of rules. The gentler and more subtle job of educating, caretaking, and confidence-building fell on the shoulders of a single wolf - - Matsi, the beta wolf of the Sawtooth Pack.