



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

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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

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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.