

# Wolf man observes behavior

By KATHLEEN BAKER  
Of the Emerald

To the 10 wolves in the current studies at the University Bio-Social Research Center (BPRC), Professor John Fentress and his assistants are friends. Fentress' studies are basically observational work, looking closely at different aspects of behavior including vocalizations, posturing and the formation of social groups.

The initial goal of the research was to take an animal with a reputation like the wolf's, work with it and eventually become friends with it. The extent to which temperament is genetically determined and its flexibility are also major interests.

Fentress stresses treating the wolves as friends and placing the animals on an equal footing with the workers, by not "putting them in a psychological corner" the staff is able to become accepted as part of the social group. Working on a one-to-one basis, it is "quite easy to form social ties," says Fentress. Once the bonds have been developed, the wolf will interact with the researcher as freely as with another wolf, a useful factor in studies of communication within the group. The ears, tail and stature of the wolf serve as signals of the wolf's feelings and actions, although "no one understands in detail," according to Fentress. Vocalizations include a series of squeaks and howls.



Photo by Pamela Fitzsimmons

These wolves are part of a pack under observation at the University's Bio-Social Research Center.

The wolf plays a critical role in maintaining the lifestyles of the animals it preys upon, says Fentress. By selecting the animals that are unable to keep up, they prevent overfeeding and the spread of disease. "An appropriate analogy is to consider the wolf as a farmer weeding his garden," says Fentress, "But unlike humans, who take the largest, strongest animals, the wolf takes the smaller, less healthy ones."

The wolf has captured imaginations for centuries, but according to Fentress, the images of the wolf in mythology and the wolf in reality conflict. "They're very docile in the wild, they don't attack," he points out. "One of the most striking differences of many compared to the domestic dog is the wolf's shyness." Studies in Toronto, Canada and Minnesota discovered only two or three cases where a wolf actually attacked a human, in each case the wolf was rabid.

The studies at the BPRC are concerned with three types of wild dogs—timber or gray wolves, red wolves and coyotes. The timber wolf is a highly social

animal and easy to train. The coyote is shy and travels alone rather than in a pack. It is thought that the red wolf might be the intermediate between the timber wolf and the coyote.

The wolf, North America's largest predator, is also becoming extinct. Only about 300 red wolves remain in the world and the timber wolves number in the low thousands.

"Working with the wolves is fun," says Fentress, "they're harder to get answers from and you can't play tricks on them." He explained that because wolves are sophisticated animals, they demand more sophisticated effort. His wolves are very intelligent and, according to Fentress, learn things quickly. "They're appealing animals and sensitive to others, but you have to remember that they're not big dogs," he cautioned. "They've got shorter tempers than dogs."

Fentress said wolves will tolerate less abuse than the domestic dogs and are too highstrung for pets. Working with the wolves has increased my appreciation for one bit of nature," Fentress says, "it's opened up my eyes."

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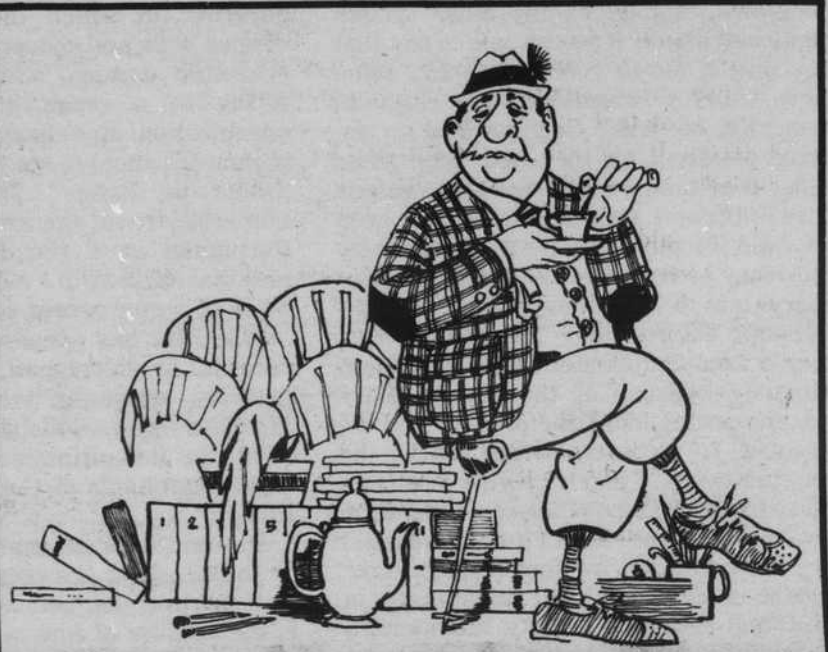


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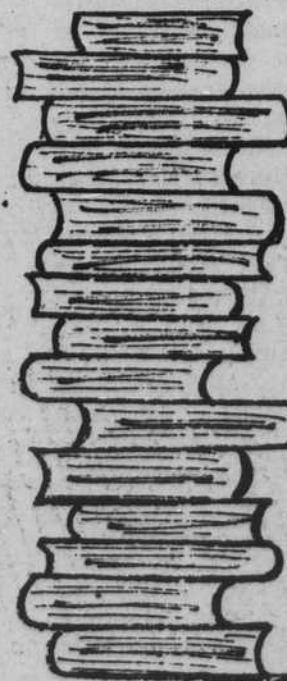
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