

HOWLING WOODS FARM



**WHERE
WOLFDOGS
GET A
SECOND
CHANCE**

by **Lavanya Sunkara**

A brown, burly dog came jogging toward me. His wolf-like face had amber colored eyes that sparkled in the sun. His heavy coat waved and his thick legs moved with grace. When he reached me, he sniffed and slowly plopped to the ground, exposing his long, soft belly to rub. Big, and surprisingly cuddly, Samson, a 7-year-old, 110-pound, wolfdog mix of wolf and Alaskan Malamute lives at the Howling Woods Farm in Jackson, New Jersey.

Howling Woods Farm is a breed-specific animal rescue organization, situated on a 10-acre pinewoods forest in the Pinelands National

Reserve. The all-volunteer organization rescues and re-homes domesticated wolfdogs. It is home to 20 rescued hybrids, including 15 awaiting adoption. Samson lives there along with his pack members—Bandit, Sierra, Takoda, Ahote, Kotori, and Chante—roaming the grounds in a 3-acre enclosure and greeting visitors.

A wolfdog, also known as a “wolf hybrid,” is a dog that has pure wolf in its recent family history—its parents or grandparents. All dog breeds descended from wolves, but most family dogs have distant wolf ancestry—possibly even hundreds of generations back.

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Wolfdogs face two main problems today. First, ownership is illegal or restricted in more than half of the states, yet backyard breeders continue to breed and sell them to those seeking status symbol dogs. Second, some of those who get these canines as puppies don't possess the proper knowledge to raise these animals. Wolfdogs are quite large and require a sizeable area of land and plenty of exercise. They also need canine companions and a high-protein diet. With socialization training, attention and good care, they can make wonderful companions. Owners with unrealistic expectations and/or who are unable to care for their wolfdogs end up abandoning them.

Samson and his littermate, Noah, came to Howling Woods after their former owner surrendered them in November 2007. Noah was adopted shortly afterward by a local family, and Samson stayed at the farm, enjoying a life of peace with his friends. If he had ended up in a shelter, his fate would have been very different. Wolfdogs in shelters face inevitable euthanization. Even

if a hybrid has just one percent wolf, he is sure to be put down, which is why founder and president of the Howling Woods Farm, Michael Hodanish, has dedicated his life to saving these creatures.

In addition to rescuing and adopting wolfdogs, Howling Woods also participates in educational programs. On weekends, Samson and his canine companions educate visitors about their kind. They give kisses and cuddle with guests. They stand patiently atop a wooden stand to pose for pictures and prove that wolfdogs are gentle and friendly.

UNDERSTANDING THE WOLFDOG

Genetically, the wolf and the dog are the same species. Wolves and dogs can mate and produce fertile offspring, just like two different breeds of dogs. Wolfdogs will have characteristics of the breeds they descend from in varying proportions. Today's wolfdogs are a result of dozens or more generations of wolfdogs bred with

wolfdogs by private owners. Most domestically bred wolfdogs can trace their lineage back to fur farms of the 1950s and are a combination of wolf plus Siberian husky, Alaskan malamute, or German shepherd.

"The captive wolves and wolfdogs you see and hear about today are not taken from the wild. Years and years of selective breeding have produced the animals you see today. None are taken from the wild," said Hodanish. "One of our primary goals is to demonstrate to the public that wolfdogs are not the dangerous animals portrayed in the press or in the law," he added.

Many state and local regulations designate wolfdogs as "wild," "dangerous," or "exotic" animals, and thereby prohibit domestic ownership. Despite popular belief, these animals are not inherently provocative or aggressive. They don't "turn on you" out of the blue. The opposite is true. "The biggest misconception is that they are aggressive. In nearly everything from fairytales like Little Red Riding Hood to commercials on TV to



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movies, wolves are pictured as dangerous and mean, but they are actually wimps. They run from people as far as possible. In no way are they aggressive. In fact, they are less aggressive than other dogs," said Hodanish.

Naturally, wolfdogs tend to be shy with strangers, but warm up once they get to know them. They are loving, curious, energetic, playful, and pack-oriented. They can also be stubborn, independent, and aloof. If abused or neglected, they learn defensiveness or aggression. All the rescues living at the Howling Woods Farm have learned to mingle with people

and have formed special bonds with the volunteers who care for them. They roam freely in a large enclosure and stay together as part of the family pack. They can be seen resting in the shade of a large Juniper tree, playing with one another, and greeting guests with their tails wagging.

Howling Woods gets its name from its residents. Despite being dogs, wolfdogs howl instead of bark. Another misconception of wolfdogs is that they howl when there is a full moon. "They howl if there is a full moon, half moon, and no moon. They are active hunters when there is light, and that's why

they howl more when there is a full moon," said Hodanish who lives in a house on the property and hears the howling every morning, evening, and whenever someone visits.

RESCUING AND ADOPTING WOLFDOGS

Michael Hodanish has been rescuing wolfdogs for the past eleven years. He first learned about the wolfdog in the early 80s when he was working for the Forest Service in Tucson, Arizona. "We had a stray dog that kept coming to our house and my roommate was feeding him. At first, I told him not to, but I became attached to the dog," said Hodanish. Eventually he took the dog in and started taking her on hikes in the desert. "We thought it was a full-grown dog, but it turns out she was just a puppy when we got her," Hodanish said. She grew up to be a wolfdog, and Hodanish named her Heidi. Because of that special friendship, Hodanish decided that if he ever got a dog, it would be a wolfdog.

Years later, when he no longer needed to travel for his job, Hodanish settled in New Jersey. Hodanish began to rescue wolfdogs after learning that shelters euthanize them—even when a state considers ownership legal. "If they look enough like a wolfdog, then [shelters] cannot adopt them out to the public and they end up putting them down," he said.

The wolfdogs at the farm are rescued from backyard breeders, shelters, and owners who could no longer care for them. Winona, a gorgeous grey wolfdog, was found as a stray in Brooklyn. "Someone bought her as a puppy from a breeder. She became destructive at 6 or 7 months and was let go," said Hodanish. When Animal Control seized her from the streets and put

her in a shelter, someone contacted Howling Woods and arranged for Winona to be transported—a move which saved her life.

Every wolfdog that is up for adoption at Howling Woods Farm is placed in an environment appropriate to its temperament. After a thorough inquiry and application process that can take months, animals go to homes, farms, and sanctuaries. Those adopting wolfdogs need to understand their need for space, secure outdoor containment, presence of canine companions, and any necessary licensing as required by the state. So far, Howling Woods Farm has rescued and re-homed over 70 animals in the last five years.

LIVING WITH WOLFDOGS

Wolfdogs are not for everyone. Many people gravitate toward these giant dogs to keep their homes secure. However, they make poor watchdogs, as they are fearful of strangers by nature.

Wolfdogs view their owner as the alpha wolf of the pack and consider protection the owner's job.

Wolves are hunters and scavengers, relying on animal protein and some plant matter that is left in the digestive tract of the animals they kill. Therefore, wolfdogs are not kibble eaters. Even those that have low wolf content in their bodies have trouble digesting processed food. At the Howling Woods Farm, road kill and animals that were hunted provide the necessary meat for the dogs. Wolfdogs eat most of the carcass, including antlers, but leave the jawbones. Cats should be removed from households with wolfdogs as they can trigger the prey drive found in all canines.

Wolf hybrids also need mental stimulation in the form of games to keep them entertained, even if they are reluctant to follow orders. Enticing them with high value food like meat chunks or cheese will yield better results. Wolfdogs do not make good pets if confined to a house. Expect trashed furniture, shredded carpets and curtains, and

many other messes if you leave a grown wolfdog in the house. These animals require large outdoor pens for exercise and high walls to keep them from jumping out. If they are bored or tied down, they can dig large holes in their pens.

Wolfdogs are very strong and require considerable training and exercise. Some may show signs of anxiety and stress when taken to public places. Wolfdogs need socialization at a very young age if owners expect to take them to the dog park or for a walk. Even more important, these social animals need canine companions to thrive.

If you fall in love with these attractive and loving canines, like I did on my visit, realize that it's a lifetime commitment. These loving animals form strong bonds with their humans and tend to languish if their owner suddenly changes. Giving up a wolfdog would likely result in its death, as it would most likely never make it out of a shelter. With proper training and plenty of positive reinforcement and attention, these animals can make wonderful companions.

VISITING HOWLING WOODS FARM

Howling Woods is located three miles from Six Flags Great Adventure in New Jersey. The farm is open to the public by appointment on most weekend afternoons. Check for upcoming events to ensure the farm is not booked at the time of your visit. Visitors enjoy a tour of the facility, an educational presentation, and plenty of interaction with the loving wolfdogs.

To learn more, visit www.howlingwoods.org, call 732-534-5745, or e-mail luv2howl@optonline.net. 

