

# Walking on the Wild Side with the California Wolf Center

By Angela McLaughlin ~ THE JOURNAL

Large paws pad softly across the dirt, nostrils flaring as they take in different scents, ears twitching at the sounds of nature. From behind a tree peer the inquisitive eyes of a wolf.

As wolves are instinctively shy of humans, this would be an incredibly rare thing to experience. But at the California Wolf Center, seeing wild wolves is part of the package.

The California Wolf Center (CWC) operates out of a semi-secluded home base in Julian, providing support for wild wolf recovery, coexistence between wolves and humans, and community education. On-site efforts include providing educational tours to the public, with opportunities to visit habitats of the North American gray wolves and the critically endangered Mexican gray wolves.

Though visitors will not be able to touch wolves on the property — they are wild animals, after all — the experience of observing the wolves and learning more about them is unforgettable. Tours may be booked at [www.californiawolfcenter.org](http://www.californiawolfcenter.org).

Tours are only a small part of what the CWC is all about. A mission statement describes their goals well: “The California Wolf Center is dedicated to the recovery of wolves in the wildlands they once roamed. We envision a landscape where wolves thrive in



A resident wolf explores its habitat at the California Wolf Center.

healthy ecosystems and wolves and people successfully coexist.”

CWC Director of Operations Erin Hunt says that they have two very important focuses: the wolves themselves, and coexistence between wolves and people. Due to the impact of humans, wolves in the wild were nearly wiped out.

Unlike some advocacy groups, the CWC takes an open-minded approach to their conservation efforts. Most notably, they actively involve the ranching community. While this may seem counterintuitive, it is an approach that supports the needs of both the ranchers and the wolves.

Historically, ranchers have been stereotyped as uncaring, stubborn and unwilling to work with conservation



One of seven Mexican gray wolf pups born at the center.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CALIFORNIA WOLF CENTER

groups. This conflict between ranchers, wolves and conservation groups has been ongoing, with many people not recognizing the common ground that unites them.

“They are passionate about their animals and conservation because it is their way of life,” says Hunt. “Ranchers want a healthy landscape, because their livestock depends on a healthy landscape for grazing.”

The CWC realizes that this broad-minded attitude is necessary for the success of their conservation efforts; every side must work together.

“We are not just helping them, they are helping us,” she says, adding that ranchers have an expertise that is very helpful in achieving their mutual goals, making them true partners.

With this willingness to compromise and collaborate, great strides have been made in repairing the relationship between ranchers and wolves — and a lot has been learned in the process.

Hunt says that it takes time to build a relationship of mutual trust and respect. The ranchers must be an equal partner and part of the solution. Instead of stepping in and making demands, the CWC focuses on listening to ranchers’ needs and developing successful solutions that benefit both wolves and the ranching community.

“We can’t expect endangered species recovery to be successful if we are doing it at the expense of human livelihood,” Hunt says.

Through this type of open dialogue,

the CWC can learn what non-lethal deterrent methods might work for a specific property. There are many types of coexistence tools, including RAG boxes (radio activated guard), fladry (flagging installed around enclosures), guard dogs, and the highly successful range rider program — human presence on horseback around the livestock. These tools are funded by donations given to the CWC and provided to its ranching partners.

Mexican gray wolves historically roamed the Southwest, in New Mexico, Arizona, Texas and Mexico, and they nearly disappeared from the wild before gaining federal protection. The CWC is one of the largest participants in the Mexican Wolf Species Survival Plan, whose goal is to reintroduce Mexican gray wolves into their historic range.

This plan seems to be working for the CWC, which recently confirmed that a litter of seven Mexican gray wolf pups was born there this spring. Their first vaccinations and veterinarian health checks went well and Hunt says, “We will do everything we can to make sure they are safe, happy and healthy.”

The hope is that these wolves — three females and four males — will eventually be selected for release.

The center launched a fundraising campaign at [www.gofundme.com/projectlobos](http://www.gofundme.com/projectlobos) to help fund Mexican gray wolf recovery in the wild, including supporting the recent pack additions.

Mexican gray wolves did not roam California, but North American gray wolves once did. For the first time in almost a century, North American gray wolves have made their way back into the state. The CWC is actively working with ranching communities in Northern California, where these wolves are reestablishing themselves, making sure they have the tools they need to coexist.

“As humans, we are stewards for the natural world,” says Hunt.

Wolf recovery in the wild has been a hot topic for years, and the benefits of wolves in different ecosystems have been studied in areas such as Yellowstone National Park. The knowledge being gained from these studies has shown the importance of apex predators to a healthy ecosystem. Organizations such as the CWC are adding knowledge and experience to this subject.

Hunt says that we have been given an opportunity with wolves to “right some of the mistakes that we’ve made in the past when it comes to wolves and other predatory animals. We are getting a second chance. Let’s do it right this time.”

Whether a wolf-lover, curious visitor or skeptic, guests of the California Wolf Center will receive a unique opportunity to learn more about these fascinating animals and the intensive efforts the center is putting toward their recovery in the wild. ■

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