

A New Pup Becomes an Ambassador

By Lexi Ham and Abby Keller

The arrival of the International Wolf Center's new pup this summer was very exciting!

Pups require a lot of attention, and Rieka (pronounced Rye-ka) needed care 24 hours a day for a couple of months before she was ready to join our Exhibit Pack of Axel and Grayson in the main enclosure. Here's a closer look at how wolf pups grow and change over the first few months of life.

Wolves at Minnesota's latitude typically breed in late winter, around February. The female wolf will carry the pups for approximately 63 days and then give birth in a safe den, ground pit, or other protected area. Usually, four to six pups are born in a litter; they weigh about one pound at birth, and they're unable to see or hear. At 10 to 14 days of age, the pup's eyes start to open. Typically, this is the age of our pups when they arrive at the International Wolf Center from various captive colonies where wolves are allowed to breed.

Our pup was socialized by members of our wolf care staff and staff from the Wildlife Science Center located north of Minneapolis. They cared for her day and night, interacting with her, feeding her formula as a substitute for milk, cleaning her and monitoring her development. This time spent with people at an early age is important; it reduces the pups' natural fear of humans and introduces them to other stimuli. For example, throughout their lives at the Center, our wolves hear sounds from maintenance equipment

like weedwhackers and chainsaws. Our pup, Rieka, has heard these sounds since she was very young, so they're not so scary to her.

At three weeks old, pups begin to eat meat while still nursing. In the wild, their first solid food is meat that the adults regurgitate, or throw up, for them. That might sound pretty gross, but it's great baby food for wolf pups! Here at the Center, we try to mimic this process by giving our pups "gruel," which is meat we run through a blender to make it soft and easy for them to eat. At this age wild pups—and our pup, too—begin to try howling for the first time.

At around 8 weeks of age, wolf pups begin to grow guard hairs. These are longer hairs that grow over their soft, gray undercoat. Guard hairs help protect wolves from the cold and rain, wind and snow. They also give adult wolves their individual coat colors, which can be a mix of tan, gray, brown, black or even white, like the Arctic subspecies of gray wolf.

Wolf pups' eyes are blue when they first open, but they change to yellow or brown as the animal matures. In the wild, wolf pups play and wrestle outside the den, and they may travel short distances with the pack. Here, our pup moved to an outdoor enclosure with a fence that separated her from the adults in the Exhibit Pack.

Axel and Grayson greeted her through the fence and even howled with her to build their bond (their relationship with her.) She also took part in our pup programs, where International Wolf Center visitors had a chance to see her up close through a fence. This helped her get used to seeing people through the windows—something our adult wolves experience often.

At about 3 months of age, Rieka was moved into the Exhibit Pack enclosure with the adults. At this age, wild



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pups will have moved with their pack from the den to their pack's rendezvous site. The rendezvous site is where pups continue to grow and develop while the adults go off to hunt; rendezvous sites are often located close to a recent kill or a source of water.

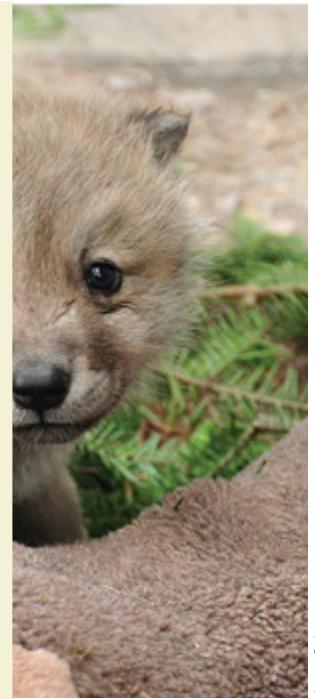
During this time, wolf pups start to grow fast, and they start to rely on meat rather than their mother's milk. The time from 3 months to about 7 months of age is called the "rapid growth period." In the wild, they even start to help the pack during hunts. At the International Wolf Center, Rieka began to feed on carcasses alongside the adults. After about seven months, growth slows down—and by 1 year of age, wolf pups are all grown up! ■



Wolves are *neophobic*, which means they are fearful of new things—and that includes a natural fear of humans. To help our wolves become less fearful of the wolf care staff and the visitors they see through the windows, we *socialize* our wolves.

(The Center's wolves are not domesticated, so you cannot train them as you would a dog.)

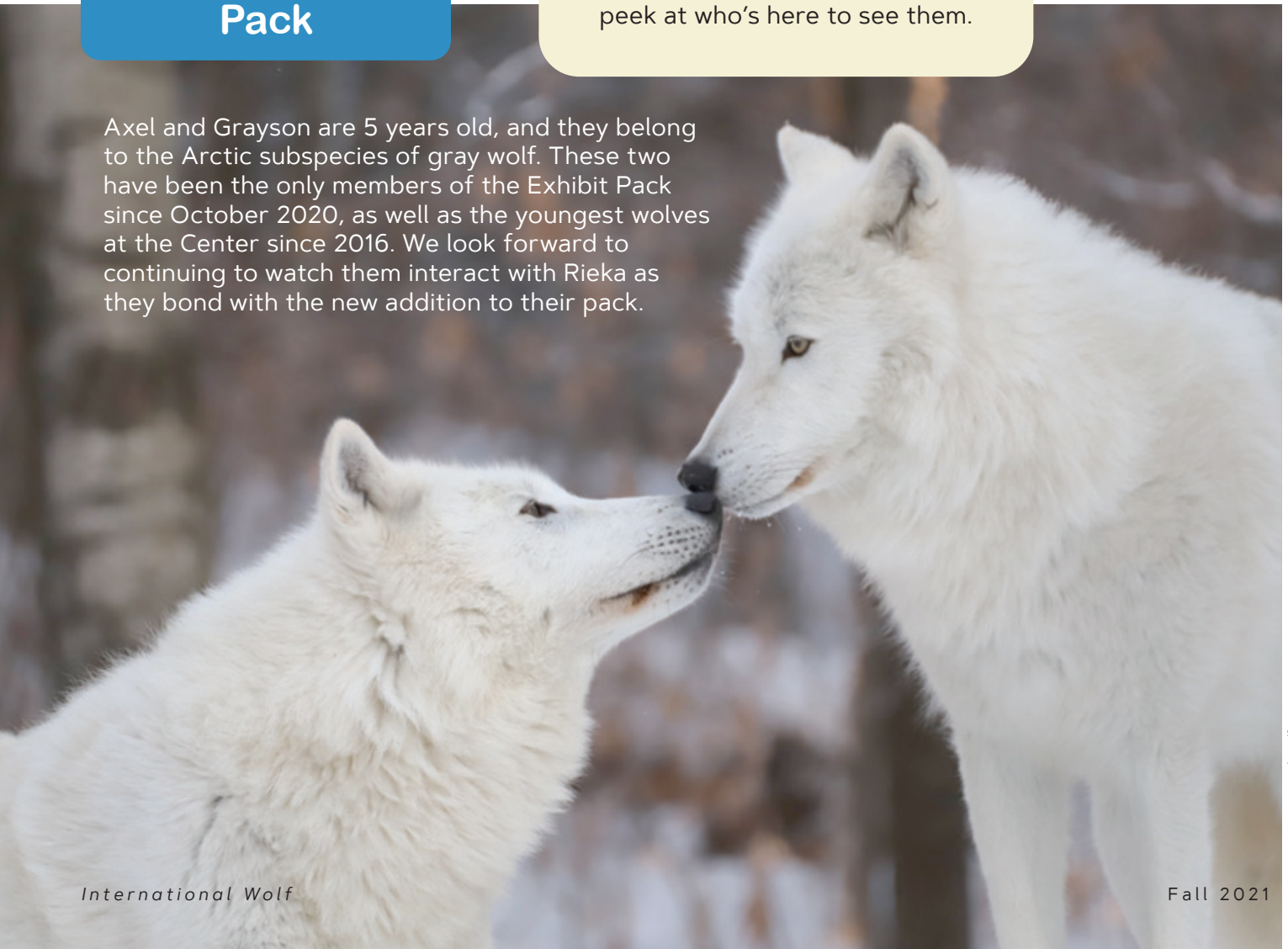
As part of her socialization, Rieka spent the first three months of her life in 24-7 human care with our wolf care staff and began taking part in our pup-viewing opportunity programs at about 3 weeks of age. You can see the positive effects of the socialization process when our wolves come up to the windows to peek at who's here to see them.



Aven Briem

Meet the Pack

Axel and Grayson are 5 years old, and they belong to the Arctic subspecies of gray wolf. These two have been the only members of the Exhibit Pack since October 2020, as well as the youngest wolves at the Center since 2016. We look forward to continuing to watch them interact with Rieka as they bond with the new addition to their pack.



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