

Who's What at the International Wolf Center

By Maddy Witt

This article is intended for children aged 7 and up.

Vocabulary

Northern Hemisphere

the half of the earth between the North Pole and the equator

Ambassador

an authorized messenger or representative. We call our wolves ambassadors because they serve as educational representatives of their subspecies found in the wild

Pelage the hair, fur, wool or other soft covering of a mammal

Pigmentation coloration, especially of the skin or coat

Did you know that gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) once lived throughout the entire **northern hemisphere**? Many different types of gray wolves, called subspecies, are found across the globe, and they each have their own scientific name.

Five different subspecies of the gray wolf are found in North America. These are the eastern timber wolf (*Canis lupus lycaon*), the Mexican wolf (*Canis lupus baileyi*), the Great Plains wolf (*Canis lupus nubilus*), the arctic wolf (*Canis lupus arctos*), and the northwestern wolf (*Canis lupus occidentalis*). At the International Wolf Center, we have the arctic and northwestern subspecies represented by our current ambassadors. Grizzer, of the Great Plains subspecies, recently died at age 17½.

Axel and Grayson are our **ambassadors** for the arctic subspecies. They are brothers, and they are 5 years old. The arctic subspecies of the gray wolf can be found on the northern and eastern shores of Greenland as well as on the Queen Elizabeth Islands (Ellesmere, Prince Patrick and Devon, for example), and on Banks and Victoria Islands. These wolves are well adapted for the frigid temperatures that occur in arctic regions. They have pure white coats that help them blend into a snowy environment. They have small ears, a stout snout and short legs, which help reduce heat loss and allow them to stay warmer. They also have very large feet with lots of fur between their toes.

These massive, webbed feet work like snowshoes, allowing them to walk and run on top of snow, and the fur between their toes helps keep their feet warm while it prevents ice from building up.

The Great Plains subspecies was represented by Grizzer, who was our oldest ambassador at 17½ years old! That is quite old for a wolf, since wolves usually live for 12 to 15 years in captivity. The Great Plains wolf still can be found in the western Great Lakes region, which includes Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan and Ontario, Canada. Great Plains wolves typically weigh 60 to 100 pounds and measure 4.5 to 6.5 feet from the tips of their noses to tips of their tails. Their **pelage**, or coat, is usually a combination of gray, black or brown. However, Grizzer's coat was almost completely white. This is because as wolves age, they begin to lose the **pigmentation**, or color, in their fur. Since Grizzer was so old, he had lost almost all of his fur pigmentation. Learn more about Grizzer's death on Jan. 27, 2022 at www.wolf.org.



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Rieka is our newest ambassador wolf. She joined the pack in the summer of 2021 and represents the northwestern subspecies (*Canis lupus occidentalis*). These wolves can be found throughout the western United States, western Canada and all the way up into Alaska. The northwestern wolves tend to be the largest of the different subspecies. Usually, they weigh between 85 and 115 pounds, but they can reach weights over 150 pounds.

Rieka is still just a pup, but she's growing quickly. One theory about why the northwestern subspecies can grow to be so large is that their size helps them to successfully hunt massive prey animals like bison, moose and elk. These wolves tend to have coat colors that are gray, black, white and tan. Rieka is primarily gray and tan with some black on her back. This coloration helps her to blend into a background of rocks very well; in fact, when she curls up, she can look just like a rock lying in the grass.



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Over the years, scientists have disagreed on how many subspecies exist. Until 1995, for example, scientists thought there were 24 wolf subspecies in North America, but then they grouped all 24 into just the five discussed above. In any case, in terms of their basic behaviors, all subspecies are alike. ■

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