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HELPING HANDS

Graywolf Properties
Rescuing Wolves In Need

By Rhonda Paschal

If you knew John Gertenbach, you'd know that the name of his northern California facility management company, Graywolf Properties, couldn't fit him better. Gertenbach and his family have dedicated much of past 14 years to rescuing wolves and wolf/dog crossbreeds. Gertenbach explains that hundreds of these crossbreeds end up homeless or euthanized each year because they don't end up being the kind of pets people expect them to be.

"What typically happens is someone sees an ad in the paper for wolf dog pups," he says, "and they think it would be cool to have a wolf. They take the pup home and try to raise it as they did their Black Lab." But Gertenbach says people don't know what they're getting into. The wolf nature of the hybrid will make him anything but a lap dog. There is no way to train these animals not to tunnel, run away, or hunt smaller animals.

"After a neighborhood cat or two disappears, Animal Control will be at your doorstep," Gertenbach says. "You can count on it." In addition to overseeing operations at five self-storage facilities in the Sacramento area as owner of a management company, Gertenbach dedicates much of his free time to rescuing ill-fated wolf dogs.

Not A Pet For Everyone

His first experience with the animals came when he purchased his own wolf hybrid, which he described as "10 times smarter than any dog I had ever owned." Soon afterward, Gertenbach brought home his first purebred wolf, thinking he knew what he was getting into. "Boy, was I in for a surprise," he says. "What a firsthand education I received." Although it was difficult, Gertenbach stuck it out and has since dedicated much of his time and resources to the animals.

What distinguishes the crossbreeds from other dogs? They require a high-protein diet, preferably of raw meat and bone. They have been described as escape artists, so keeping them penned can be next to impossible. Wolf dogs have the ability to scale an eight-foot fence from a standing position, and are also masters at digging that can quickly tunnel under-



Photos courtesy of Graywolf Properties



On top of overseeing the management of four self-storage facilities, John Gertenbach is concerned with the plight of a troubled species—the wolf and wolf/dog crossbreeds.

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neath a fence. They also have a shy, timid nature. As a result, contrary to some owners' expectations, they make terrible watchdogs.

"While most puppies are destructive to a degree, wolf dog pups are 10 times more destructive," Gertenbach says. "Leave your room to make a sandwich and upon returning, you will have a hole in the middle of your living room carpet. I know this from experience." He says an owner's lawn isn't safe either. "It will look as if meteors have landed in your yard," says Gertenbach. "There is no way to train a wolf dog not to dig or destroy."

Many people mistakenly think they can take a wolf or wolf-hybrid to the park as you would a dog. "You can't take Yukon to the park, throw the ball and expect him to fetch and bring it back," says Gertenbach. "Yukon will pass that ball on his way out of sight." All of these natural attributes that work well for the wolf in the wild frequently end up leaving him homeless after someone has tried to make him a pet. "After spending tons of money restoring your home to its original state, and after adding an additional two feet to the top of your fence, and after the tenth time telling your neighbors, 'it won't happen again,' Yukon is looking for a home," Gertenbach says.

A Sad Plight

Wolves became nearly extinct in the lower 48 states when they were killed off by ranchers and farmers who were naturally at odds with these resourceful predators that could decimate their livestock. Gertenbach and other wolf rescuers want to ensure that this doesn't become their fate once more.

Because of the animal's characteristics and poor judgment on the part of owners, many domesticated wolves and wolf dogs end up homeless or are destroyed. According to Gertenbach, there are no defining guidelines related to wolf rescue. "For all other breeds, there exists some kind of acceptance, both officially and unofficially. There is very little support from any governing agency for saving or rescuing a wolf or wolf dog. It becomes a personal battle that you may lose at any time."

Gertenbach's experience has taught him that there are not enough homes available in which to place the animals. There are several wolf dog rescue groups and organizations across the United States consisting of non-profit groups as well as state- or county-regulated groups. According to Gertenbach, the wolf dog rescue world is a small one. "You get to know who is out there, who is doing what and who is or isn't reputable," he says. "People have come to know us."

Even with a close-knit network of rescuers, Gertenbach and others still have to turn some animals away. Gertenbach's group tends to take in the animals with a higher content of wolf blood because they are harder to place. The lower percentage of wolf blood they have, the better chance they have of adapting to a home. "It is sad that you have to say no to any of them, but there are simply too many in need of homes," says Gertenbach.

Not only do wolf dogs run away and become homeless, Gertenbach says many of these animals are confiscated by animal control and similar authorities who often euthanize them without an attempt to place them. People like Gertenbach save the lives of many of these animals, taking great care to place them in the right homes. But even with rescuers matching the personalities and experience of the potential new owners with the individual animals, the majority of wolves and wolf dogs taken in by a rescue group remain at that facility their entire lives.

"We end up placing about five percent of the animals we take in within the first 12 months," says Gertenbach. "We currently have four wolf dogs ranging in age from three to five years that we've been trying to place for the past two years. It's just that hard to find qualified homes." With the food bill alone amounting to over \$300 per month, finding homes for some of the animals would make things a little easier on the Gertenbachs.

And food isn't the only cost. Each animal has to be given heartworm medication monthly, in addition to annual vaccinations. "Add spaying, neutering, and any unforeseen medical costs, and it can be quite a financial hardship," Gertenbach says. "You do what you have to do!"

All the while, the fact that more animals will require rescuing is ever present for Gertenbach. For each one saved, many will end up in tragic circumstances. Even with the dedicated rescue efforts of people like Gertenbach, the ultimate fate of these animals remains uncertain, he says. "We are down to 10 wolf dogs. Six of them will most likely spend the rest of their lives with us, while we hope to place the other four. Should that not happen, then all ten could spend the rest of their lives with us."

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