



Why your dog hunts

In the first of two articles, Lez Graham explores the evolution of the dog and how early man's selection of traits led to our modern-day shooting companions

Have you ever wondered why our dogs hunt the way that they do? Why some breeds are stealthy hunters whereas others have a “crash and burn” approach to bringing back the bacon? And why do they bring it back? Why do they not settle down under a tree to enjoy the spoils of the chase?

To truly understand the answers to these questions we need to look to our dogs' history, before there were specific breeds, even before there were “types” of dog. In fact, we need to go back to a time when our *Canis lupus familiaris* was still a *Canis lupus*.

The skeleton of the early dog is similar to the wolf, so historians have found it difficult to put an exact date on when the wolf became part of our family. Some believe that domestication started some 120,000 years ago, but more recent research suggests that the genetic separation between wolves and dogs could have happened only 32,000 years ago – relatively recently, by comparison.

THE HUNT AND THE HUNTERS

When wolves hunt it's a very ordered affair. They set off at a decent working pace, generally in single file with the alpha at the front followed by the senior ranks, middle ranks and then lower ranks. The youngsters tend to be left behind as they are too

excitable and can run in ahead of the strike, which would risk spoiling the hunt.

Once the prey has been found, the pack is likely to split up. Some wolves watch from higher ground, while others keep moving the prey forwards. They prefer to keep their distance from the prey, staying up wind and out of sight for as long as possible. Depending upon the size of the wolf pack and the type of prey that they're hunting, they may put a particular animal to the test with one or two wolves breaking off from the hunting party and giving chase.

When hunting larger animals, the pack will stealthily form a circle around one and close in, attacking from all angles. For smaller prey, taking hold of the neck and giving a shake will quickly end the chase. The alpha will get to eat first, regardless of who made the kill or what they killed. As they get first choice of everything, as befits their rank; not because they “bully” the other wolves but, through ritualised fighting to establish status and a need for survival, the pack defers to them.

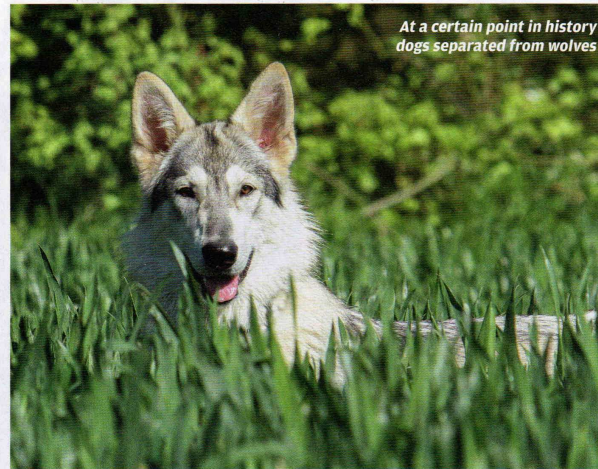


Once their prey is found, wolves will split up

At some stage when pickings were a bit lean, the wolf discovered humans



Dogs following the ordered traits that wolves display when hunting



At a certain point in history dogs separated from wolves

FROM NOMADS TO FARMERS

The presumption is, that at some stage when pickings were a bit lean, the wolf discovered humans. Sometimes the wolf would steal pickings from the human group, probably by rushing in the “back door” while others were chasing wolves from the front. A lone wolf may have followed nomadic humans as a way of gaining an easy meal. No doubt some would have taken pity on the animal, throwing it scraps and sealing its loyalty to a new pack – only this time its members were humans.

It didn't take us long to take advantage of the fact that there was not only another hunter in the group, but one with superior skills; faster, stealthier and a better tracker, with excellent hearing, a superb nose and keener sight in the dark. Early man had been adopted by an animal that was its superior in nearly every way bar intelligence, that provided for the group and could warn of danger approaching much sooner than anyone else.

It is believed that, without the wolf watching our backs, humans wouldn't have had the time to turn their attention to things other than providing food for the group, so this relationship played a huge role in humans settling down for periods of time rather than remaining exclusively nomadic.

WHEN HOWL BECAME BARK

Thousands of years ago, without realising what they were doing, early humans started a breeding programme that forever changed the wolf into the dog. Any aggression towards man would have resulted in the wolf being

killed and so removed from the gene pool. So started a chain of events that gradually created a sub-species of wolf that actively started to seek out the company of a species other than its own.

In 1959, Russian scientists tried to recreate this domestication process in an experiment using the silver fox (type silver fox domestication' into a search engine) and the results were amazing. By breeding the non-aggressive foxes to non-aggressive foxes, not only did the animal start to become tame and react in a positive and playful manner around people, but also its coat colour changed from silver to silver-and-white and black-and-white.

For me, though, the most significant changes were that its tail started to curl and the ears started to flop; the tame silver fox was developing “dog ears”. It wasn't only the removal of aggression from the gene pool that had an impact on the evolution from wolf to dog – the environment played a big role, too. The legs and back would have been longer on the dogs that lived on the plains, so that they had the turn of speed to

Early man quickly recognised that dogs possessed a far superior nose



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Ever wondered why our dogs bring back game and don't run away and enjoy it?

match and surpass the fast prey of the open ground. Short-legged, short-backed dogs were adapted to the wooded areas so that they could duck into the undergrowth and turn quickly; shaggy, well-haired dogs could survive in colder climates.

TWEAKING AND TINKERING

Knowing the way that people are, I can imagine early humans, as they traded with villages and other communities, admiring and wanting to acquire certain traits from “the others” dogs. Just like us, they would have swapped stories and bragged about how their dog could scare off a bear or a lion or hunt tirelessly... Perhaps the timing of a community gathering coincided with a bitch in heat to spread the genes (and the traits) north to south and east to west.

Breeding for what we needed in our dogs would have made the function that we used them for much easier and so tweaking and tinkering would have ensued. One of the earliest hunting books, *The Art of Venerly* (1327), talks about “limer” (a leashed bloodhound-type), a pack of running hounds and greyhounds. *The Boke of St Albans* (1486) – a “school” book about hunting, hawking, fishing and heraldry – lists the different dogs for hunting and then moves on to butchers' dogs and, my favourite, “the small ladies puppies that bear away the fleas.” **SG**

NEXT MONTH: How a dog's functions have affected how it looks – and vice versa.