

Atka and the Wolves of South Salem

by ReadWorks



Alawa and Zephyr are two-year-old Canadian Rocky Mountain wolves. They live in a large pen at the Wolf Conservation Center in South Salem, New York. The pen has trees, two dens, rocks to climb, and a pond. The wolves run by the fence and then stop to look around. They pant in the July sun. "Wolves like the winter," says Alex Spitzer. "They don't like the summer as much."

Alex is a teacher at the Wolf Conservation Center. He is in charge of teaching visitors about the wolves at the center. The Wolf Conservation Center is home to 22 wolves. They live in ten pens on 26 acres of land. Most of the wolves live in packs. As of July 2013,

there are ten packs at the center. "Our largest pack has seven wolves," explains Alex.

Alex studied wildlife biology. Before coming to work at the Wolf Conservation Center, he worked at the International Wolf Center in Minnesota.

Alex runs Wolf Camp. At Wolf Camp kids learn about wolves. The day before, Alex helped the kids make enrichment boxes for the wolves. They put catnip, blackberries and oranges, into boxes. Alex left the boxes in the wolf pen for the wolves to examine. "Anything to stimulate their sense of taste and sense of smell is interesting for the wolves," says Alex.

Another wolf at the center is Atka. Atka is an Arctic Gray Wolf. Atka is white with long legs and green eyes. Atka, Alawa, and Zephyr are the three socialized ambassador wolves at the center. Alex calls them the "teacher wolves." They were raised at the center and have no fear of people. These three wolves help with the educational programs. Atka is very popular with people. He travels to schools and educational events. Alex works with Atka a lot.

Alex walks up to the pen where Atka lives at the center. He kneels down, getting closer to Atka's height. Alex asks, "Do you want to talk?" Alex makes a long howling noise. He sounds just like a wolf! Atka hears Alex howling, and lifts his head and howls back. Then the wolves in the pen next to Atka howl, too. Pretty soon the wolves all over the center are howling.

"It's really nice to get a conversation going like that," says Alex.

Wolves howl to communicate with one another, Alex explains. He says this is one of the main ways wolves are different from dogs. Dogs bark. Wolves only bark to warn each other of danger.

Wolves only eat once or twice-a-week. When they eat, they eat a lot. The wolves at the center eat deer.

Another important difference between dogs and wolves is that dogs are domesticated. Alawa, Zephyr and Atka are socialized. They are not domesticated. When a wolf is socialized, that means it is used to people. Dogs are domesticated. That means they have learned to live with humans over thousands of years. They have evolved with humans, and want to do things to please humans. Wolves are different. "You can't ask a wolf to sit," says Alex.

Atka and the other socialized wolves at the center are not afraid of people. The other 19 wolves at the center are afraid of people. Alex explains they want to keep it that way. Alex explains the goal is to one day release the wolf packs back into the wild. These wolves that will be returning to the wild live in separate pens. People are not allowed to visit them.

Wolves are important. "They keep everything in balance," says Alex.