

Visitors have howling good time

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SOUTH SALEM -- "Yooowwwl. Yooowwl." Lois Kral howled into the trees and waited. The wolves gave a wailing response a moment later; they were ready for visitors.



Lois Kral, a volunteer with the Wolf Conservation Center in South Salem, feeds Apache, a 12-year-old part arctic wolf, during yesterday's Winter Wolves program at the center. The program brings people face-to-face with the wild animals and lets them observe in a safe way at the East Coast's largest wolf sanctuary. (Stuart Bayer/The Journal News Stuart Bay)

A bundled-up crowd gathered at the Wolf Conservation Center yesterday for the center's Winter Wolves program, which brings people face-to-face with Canadian/Rocky Mountain gray and arctic gray wolves. Kral said winter is the best time to see the wolves because their coats are full, and mating season makes them lively.

"Do they look ferocious? Do they look like they'll eat your grandma?" Kral, a center volunteer, asked the crowd as she fed three "ambassador" wolves slabs of venison. "They are gentle, loving animals. The only reason they are vicious is because they have to survive in the wild."

Lukas, an 11-year-old Canadian/Rocky Mountain gray wolf; Kaila, a 13-year-old Rocky Mountain female; and Apache, a 12-year-old part arctic wolf, eagerly gulped down the meat and whimpered for more.

Visitors also got a chance to meet, Atka, a 6-year-old arctic gray wolf who travels around the country as a showcase for his species. In addition, the crowd learned how wolves play a vital role in keeping elk and tree populations in check and found out that the wild dogs devour 20 pounds of meat - or 80 Quarter Pounders - in one meal.

Gregory Fuchek, a 9-year-old from Montrose, discovered the center while researching desert coyotes for a school assignment.

"I love wolves and have for a long time," he said. "Wolves spark my imagination."

Diana Rice of Katonah brought her three sons, ages 12, 10, and 5.

"They love hiking and bird watching," she said. "I heard amazing things about this program."

The 27-acre facility also includes 25 Mexican gray wolves and two red wolves that will breed and eventually be set free. They have little contact with people to prepare them for the wild and are part of a federal program to revive wolf populations. Wolves were nearly wiped out a century ago when they gained a reputation for killing farm animals.

Spencer Wilhelm, operations manager at the facility, said the center, which was built in 1999 by classical pianist Hélène Grimaud, is different from a zoo.

"You get a more intimate experience," he said, noting that it is the largest wolf center on the East Coast. "You are not only getting a visual experience, you are learning something about them. Wolves are historically a poor zoo species. They are shy."

The ambassador wolves were hardly coy yesterday when they put their noses against the enclosure fences and yelped and howled in unison with Kral.

Stephen and Rady Bauer of Chappaqua visited the center with their 10-year-old son, Issac, and 8-year-old daughter, Love.

"It's great for them to see we're not the only ones on the planet," Rady Bauer said. "We need to be conscious of all creatures."