Reading & Understanding Canines....

By Kim Miles

Reading a Canine

Many of the behavior traits and body movements or positionings can be applied universally to all canines. The problems many may encounter when reading a canine are when the specific breed has been genetically or surgically altered to such an extent that the animal can no longer communicate through traditional methods: ear positioning, tail positioning, raised hackles, etc.

For example, the ears may be too long to stand, or the tail may have been cropped, or the coat may be so short that it fails to indicate that hackles are up — all of which can cause problems in humans being able to accurately read a canine.

Genetics and surgical alterations not-withstanding, the body language in this article focuses specifically on wolves, but since all dogs are descended from the wolf — some quite recently — the body language of the wolf applies to all canines.

After learning wolf behavior, you may see that many dogs — even those who have been altered — exhibit similar body language to as great an extent as is physically possible.

Because they are highly social animals, wolves have a very sophisticated communication system — in both body language and verbal language. They use their whole bodies when communicating.

To successfully read a canine, one must collectively assess the canine's complete body language: head position, tail position, eye contact, ear position, hackles, etc. The figures below illustrate facial expressions (Fig. 1) and tail positioning (Fig. 2). Below each figure is a comprehensive discussion of various body positionings and their respective meanings.

The following is a synopsis of certain combinations of positionings. I have provided these so that you can more easily see how the different placements of ear, lip, tail, etc., are mutually inclusive and must be considered collectively:

1) Ears erect (1A) & tail in position 2A, 2F, 2G, or 2H — the animal is alert, listening and assimilating.

2) Ears erect (1A, 1B, or 1C) & tail is in position 2H and 2E (depending upon the lift of tail at the base) and 2C and 2B — the animal is becoming increasingly aggressive, respectively. The more the tail lifts and the ears are up and angled forward, the more aggression the animal is showing.

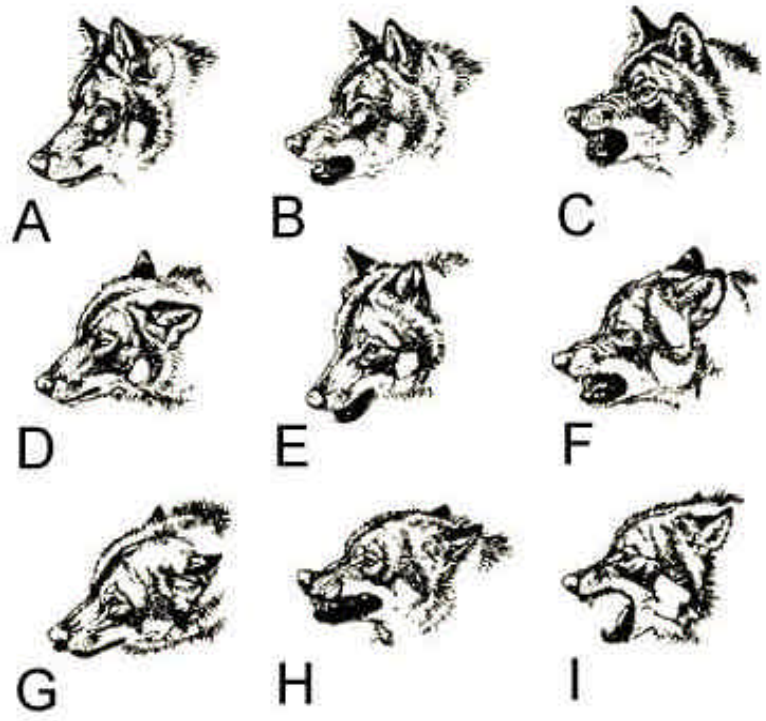

Figure 1: Wolf's Facial Expressions

(A) Normal & Self-Assured; (B) Self-Assured Threat; (C) Serious Self-Assured Threat; (D) Submission or Worry; (E) Worry with Self-Assurance; (F) Serious Fear Submission with Threat; (G) Submission or Worry (No Threat); (H) Increasing Fear & Increasing Threat; (I) Serious Fear & Serious Threat.

Adapted from the works of L. David Mech, Barry Lopez, L. Partignani & Ricordi

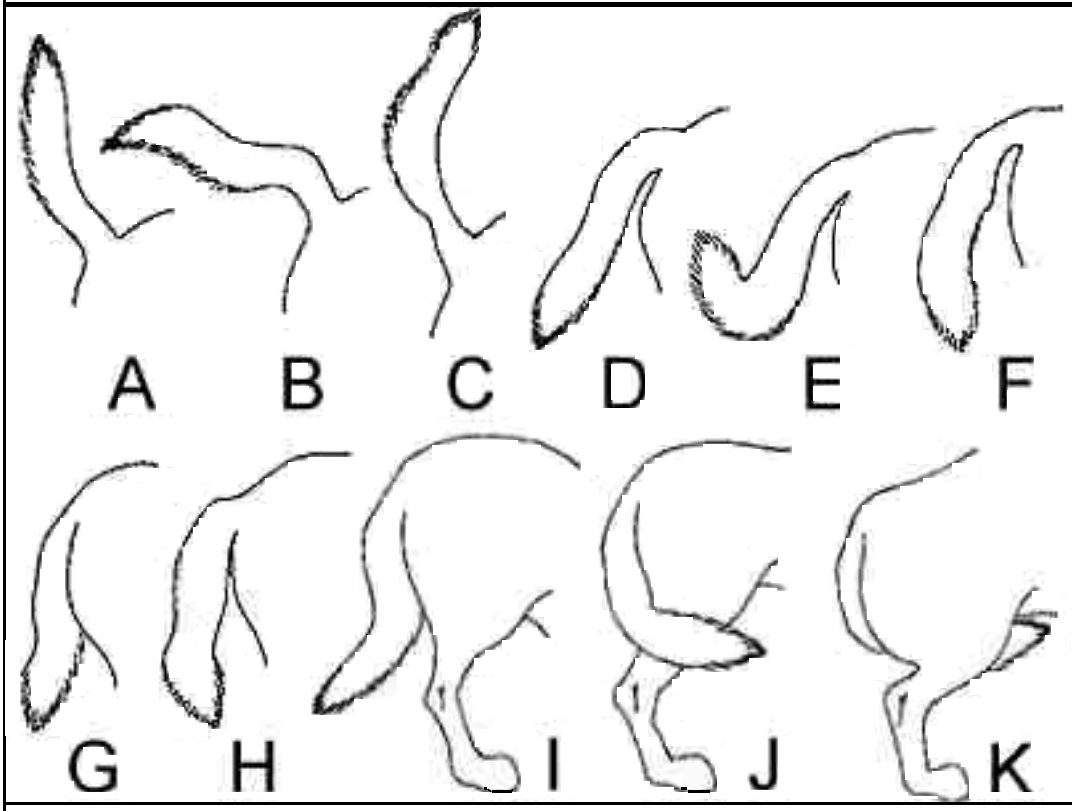

Figure 2: Wolf's Expressive Tail Positions

(A) Self-confidence; (B) Aggressive, threatening; (C) Imposing attitude with insecure threat; (D) Self-assured (lifted from the base is slight aggression); (E) Worry to defensive (depending on lift of tail at base and curl at tip); (F & G) Normal attitude; (H) Between normal & threat/defensive; (I) Friendly subordination; (J & K) Total subordination (J is friendly; K is fearful).

Adapted from the works of L. David Mech, Erik Zimen, L. Partignani & Ricordi

As mentioned before, ALL body, tail, and facial positions must be observed collectively. Watching the ear positions without noting the full facial features, the position of the tail, and the body stance will provide you with less than half the picture.

Look at the positions holistically and you will better understand and more effectively read and communicate with your canine. A knowledge of canine behavior is vital when trying to "read" canines; therefore, the next section will address the social behavior of wolves: the social structure of the wolf pack and the interactions of wolves with their packmates.

3) Ears flattened and out to the side (1E, 1D, 1G, or 1H) & tail is in position 2D, 2F, 2J or 2K--the animal is indicating neutral to increasing submission or fear, respectively. The more submissive/afraid, the more the tail will curl between the legs to the belly and the ears will flatten to the side. The more fear aggression present (1H and 1I coupled with 2E and 2H), the more the ears lift, angling forward (1I, 1F and 1C, respectively), and the more the tail rises (2E, 2H and 2B, respectively).

4) Ears flattened and straight back — the animal is angry, probably afraid and angry. The more afraid, the more the tail will tuck between the legs; the more angry, the higher the tail will be raised, out and away from the body.

5) Raised hackles are also indicative of aggression/ anger and can also accompany fear aggression.

Social Hierarchy

North American wolves are extremely social animals and live in groups called packs. The packs can vary in size, usually according to the abundance or dearth of prey. For example, the wolf packs of Alaska's Denali National Park — preying primarily on moose — can number into the twenties; but in Minnesota wolf packs typically number under ten because of the smaller abundance of prey.

However, North American wolf packs generally consist primarily of the alpha mating pair and their offspring or relatives. In fact, they are similar to the extended family structure of man. North American wolves have a rigid social structure that is based on a dominance hierarchy. An alpha (dominant) pair leads the pack, but neither the male nor the female is necessarily the top leader.

In his book *Of Wolves and Men*, Barry Lopez contends that the alpha male is at the top of the male hierarchy, and the alpha female is at the top of the female hierarchy. But they work in tandem, not only deciding where and when to move; but also deciding where, when, and what to hunt. However, during the breeding season, the alpha female is responsible for choosing the den site, thus determining where the pack will live for the next couple of months.

Both alphas are almost always involved in the hunts — with the exception of the time during the birthing of the pups and for a few weeks thereafter. The alpha female will generally stay with the pups in the den (or near the den area) for their first three weeks. The alpha male and other pack members will bring food back for the female and then for the pups as they get older. When the pups are old enough, the alpha female may continue her duties as huntress while a lower-ranking "nanny" stays behind to watch over the pups.

Next in the hierarchy is the beta of the pack. The beta can be male and/or female. In some cases, the beta will also breed. One of the documentaries on the Discovery Channel recorded an instance when an alpha male had lost his mate and had allowed the beta male to breed with the new alpha female. But a female beta breeding along with a female alpha is uncommon and usually occurs only when food is in abundance.

The rest of the members of the pack are the subordinates; these members are subordinate to the leaders (and to the betas, if any are present in the pack) and are dominant over those younger than them: the juveniles and pups. A mini dominance hierarchy can also be found within this group, as well as within the juvenile/pup group. But there is one difference between these groups: the alphas, betas and subordinates will form their mini hierarchy according to sex; the pups will form their hierarchy without regard for the sex of the individuals.

In some packs, there is one male or female wolf called the "omega." This wolf lives on the fringes of the wolf society and is usually the last to eat, sometimes going without if food is scarce. This wolf will also be likely to travel outside and a little off from the rest of the pack, trailing at a distance. Lopez makes one interesting observation when he discusses the omega being a displaced alpha or beta: "If he was once dominant and abused animals from that position, he will likely be abused in turn. If he was benevolent as an alpha animal, he will be treated kindly."

One more word before I end this section. I want to include a brief "lesson" that Lopez mentioned with regard to momma wolf teaching her young pups and the level of intelligence that was displayed:

> A female wolf left four or five pups alone in a rendezvous area in the Brooks Range one morning and set off down the trail away from them. When she was well out of sight, she turned around and lay flat in the path watching her back trail. After a few moments, a pup who had left the rendezvous area trotted briskly over a rise in the trail and came face to face with her. She gave a low bark. He stopped short, looked about as though preoccupied with something else, then, with a dissembling air, began to edge back the way he had come. His mother escorted him back to the rendezvous site and departed again. This time she didn't bother watching her back trail. Apparently the lessen had taken, for all the pups stayed put until she returned that evening.

Would that human parents maintained as much control over their children — and that human children listened so well. . . .

NOTE: *Although this article focuses primarily on wolves, both posturing and hierarchies are found in dogs and in wolfdogs. It is usually more watered down in these animals due to selective breeding, domestication and environment. Man provides most of the dog's needs; therefore, even though posturing and pack dynamics are still present in domestic dogs, they aren't crucial to their survival.*