

Once kept on a short chain at an Alaska roadside attraction, Big Boy—and 24 of his fellow wolf dogs—have found sanctuary in California. Four others went on to other sanctuaries in Colorado and Washington state.



A Rescue to Howl About

Wolf dogs get a second chance at California sanctuary

BY JIM BAKER

In the wild, wolf packs often roam territories of hundreds of miles.

At Wolf Country USA, 29 wolf dogs roamed a few feet behind fencing—for years, the only space their short chains would allow them.

On a half-acre lot at 81-year-old Werner Schuster's roadside attraction near Anchorage, Alaska, tourists paid \$5 to "adopt a wolf dog for a day"—the facility's way of skirting U.S. Department of Agriculture rules that govern the exhibition of animals for money. The fee gave visitors the chance to walk among the animals, and feed them cookies.

The Alaska legislature passed a law in 2002 banning the ownership of wolves and wolf dogs in the state (some animals may be grandfathered in under certain conditions; Schuster had not fulfilled them). Since then, a new form of DNA testing has made identification easier, leading to more prosecutions for illegal ownership. There has also been a series of cases involving owned wolf dogs who attacked or threatened someone—though Schuster's dogs were not involved—according to Andrew Peterson, an assistant attorney general for Alaska who works on fish and game cases statewide.

These developments led state officials to take a closer look at Wolf Country USA, located in Palmer, about 40 miles north of Anchorage. The state executed a search warrant on Schuster's property in June 2011, and determined that it had the right to seize his animals, but allowed Schuster to temporarily keep the wolf dogs on his property since the state had nowhere to house them. The wolf dogs were likely to be forfeited to the state and—with a court order from a judge—killed, since efforts to find alternate placement initially were fruitless, according to Peterson.

Lorin Lindner and her husband Matthew Simmons, co-founders of the Lockwood Animal Rescue Center, heard about the situation through contacts in the field. The pair's 20-acre sanctuary, located about 75 miles northwest of Los Angeles, is largely devoted to providing care to wolves and wolf dogs. The sanctuary has four staff who participate in its Warriors and Wolves work/therapy program for veterans, helping care for the animals onsite. Cooperating with Peterson and Alaska law enforcement officials, Lindner and Simmons came up with a plan: They would have all the wolf dogs spayed and neutered, then transport them to their sanctuary to live.

They soon discovered that getting 29 wolf dogs from Alaska to California is no easy matter. They couldn't find a suitable flight from Alaska to Los Angeles International Airport; any such flight would have required a layover in Seattle, and the animals would have had to remain in cargo; the team wouldn't have had access to them until they arrived in L.A. 15 to 20 hours after leaving Alaska.

So Simmons drove a trailer to Bellingham, Wash., then flew to Seattle and on to Anchorage, where he met up with Lindner and five California veterinarians who had offered their services to spay and neuter the wolf dogs.

Meanwhile, the Alaska SPCA offered its box truck and several staff members to help

transport the wolf dogs from Palmer to Anchorage. "We are the only low-cost spay/neuter clinic in the state of Alaska, and so there was no doubt that we were going to help," says executive director Maureen O'Neil.

As it turned out, state law prohibits out-of-state veterinarians from providing services in Alaska, so Paula Schmidt, the clinic's veterinarian, performed all 29 surgeries—with two of the visiting vets serving in a technical role. Everyone had to watch the clock, because a cargo plane was waiting to fly the wolf dogs to Washington. The animals were placed in crates filled with straw to lie on, and given ice that they could lick to keep hydrated, or curl up on to lower their body temperature if they got too warm due to their thick fur.

The flight took about three and a half hours, and then the crated dogs were moved into the trailer for the 24-hour drive to the sanctuary. "They actually did extremely well," Simmons says. He speculates that "they knew they were going to a better place, and were on their best behavior."

The rescue and transport was a costly effort. Simmons estimates the cost of spaying and neutering the wolf dogs, getting them back to the sanctuary, and building appropriate enclosures for them at around \$185,000. Thankfully, they had some funding: Former game-show host and longtime animal activist Bob Barker donated \$100,000 to the project, the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) gave \$43,000, and The HSUS provided a \$5,000 grant.

The Alaskan animals joined 16 wolf dogs Lindner and Simmons had previously rescued from around the country—plus



Matthew Simmons (left), co-founder of Lockwood Animal Rescue Center, and Stanley McDonald, the rescue center's foreman, remove one of 29 wolf dogs in December from Wolf Country USA near Anchorage, Alaska.

three coyotes, three rescued German shepherds, and several of the couple's own dogs. They now live in a series of large, securely fenced enclosures that occupy eight acres, including a 2½-acre area dubbed "Wolf Mansion." Of the 29 wolf dogs transported to California, four have gone on to sanctuaries in Colorado and Washington state.

At first, the animals seemed overwhelmed by their new surroundings. But the couple has found it easy to bond with some of the wolf dogs, who are "very doggy. They want belly rubs, and they want to be totally petted up," she says. Others in the group are more timid, owing to their wild genetics and lack of socialization. But, Lindner says, they're adjusting to their new home—a home that allows them to behave a bit more like the animals they were meant to be. **AS**

In February, Werner Schuster, his wife, and Wolf Country USA were charged with a total of nine counts of illegal possession of, or intent to sell, a wolf dog without a permit.



Lorin Lindner, co-founder of the Lockwood Animal Rescue Center, hangs out with 3-year-old wolf dog Yoli, who was rescued from a house in foreclosure in Bakersfield, Calif.