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Wolves and fish.

Dave Person *- biologist from "The Alaska Fish and Game" and* ***Shelly Szepanski*** *a former "Alaska Fish and Game biologist in McGrath related research";*

Alaska's wolves eat Salmon.

Yep fish is a healthy and needed nutritional source for the wild wolf just as Mother Nature intended.

Photo above, a 5-month old male wolf pup from Honker Divide on Prince of Wales Island.
The wolf puppy was fishing in the intertidal zone, working the riffles where salmon were exposed in the shallow stream.
She waded into the water to grab a fish and pulled it flopping onto the bank, where she ate just the head.
The Alaska Fish and Game biologist Dave Person has witnessed wolves hunting and eating fish many times.
Dave Person has been studying wolves on Prince of Wales Island for 12 years, he documenting habitat needs, denning (breeding) requirements and a variety of behaviors.
He has monitored this fishing behavior with three packs of wolves over the past five years.
When people think of food for wolves (carnivores), big game comes to mind, deer in Southeast, caribou in the north, and moose throughout much of the state.
Big game is the mainstay for most wolves, but it is not all they eat.
Researchers are finding that Alaska wolves also eat salmon.
They are not simply scavenging salmon carcasses, they specifically hunt them.
In late summer, when pink and chum salmon are running, Person has spent hours watching wolves actively fishing - catching, killing and eating salmon.
"They are not as skillful as bears at fishing," Person observed.
Most of the fishing takes place when the tide is low, on the flats where streams are crossing through the intertidal zone.
The wolves target fish in shallow water and isolated in tidal pools and seems to know exactly where to go fishing–proving intelligence and memory.

The fish heads seems to be the best part of the fish preferred.
"A lot of the time, when they're all flush (fully eaten) with salmon, they will bite the heads off and just eat the heads."
Then again when fish are scarce the complete fish becomes a meal.

Salmon is an important seasonal food source, but it is especially important for the pups.
For the youngest members of the packs, the chance to fatten up on fish in the fall can mean life or death over the winter.
The packs Person has studied are structured around one breeding pair.
They mate in winter and the pups are usually born the last week of April or the first week of May.
In early summer, when the puppies are nursing, the wolves stay pretty close to their dens in the forest.
But in early July, when the pups are about two months old, the packs with new pups move out of their dens and relocate closer to the water (they seem to know where to go to).
“Each year they (with the pups) spend over a month in estuary areas.”
Person said. “It’s right in middle of pink and chum runs, and we watch them eat salmon all the time.
There are lots of places they could have gone, but they go there for the fish.”
Early fall is a vulnerable time for the pups.
As youngsters, they were nursed and fed regurgitated meat. But as they are weaned and begin to join the pack on hunts and their role in the pack changes.
These young pups are the low dogs on the totem pole.
When a deer is killed, they may be the last ones to get anything to eat. So salmon is a real bonus food supply and they overly supplied, that pays off for the wolf pups that Person has observed in Southeast Alaska.

This collared wolf id the alpha female of a wolf pack on Prince of Wales Island.

Salmon allows them to have a very high survivorship. In places like Minnesota, half the pups die in their first summer.

Here, we've noticed a 90 percent survivorship- salmon have played an important part in that."

Historically, salmon has been under-reported as a food source for wolves, in part because it does not show up in wolf scat the way evidence of deer or beaver does.

The bones, fur and hair in wolf droppings offer good clues to these carnivore's predators' diet, because wolves can completely digest salmon bones nothing solid is left as evidence in their droppings.

There are invisible clues, however, and biologist "Shelly Szepanski" has pursued those.

Shelly Szepanski,is a former Alaska Fish and Game biologist in McGrath, is now doing graduate work at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks.

Over the years, she heard stories about wolves fishing for salmon, and she decided to investigate.

Her approach was not to watch wolves, but to look at what wolves are made of." It's true that you are what you eat," Szepanski said.

The nitrogen, carbon and other elements in plants become the building blocks of animal tissue - and those elements can be traced as they move up the food chain from herbivores to predators.
Those elements have distinct signatures reflecting their origin.
Using a technique called stable isotope analysis, scientists can distinguish whether the carbon and nitrogen that make up an animal's tissue has come from a marine environment or a terrestrial one.
A predator's bone is derived primarily from the protein of its prey, and is an indicator of diet over the lifetime of the animal.
Szepanskiwas able to take small bits of wolf bone and trace what percent of that wolf's diet came from terrestrial sources – caribou or deer, for example – and how much came from marine sources, like salmon.
Szepanski contacted trappers and the University of Alaska museum for an assortment of wolf skulls and took small samples.
She analyzed samples from about 200 Alaska wolves, selecting about 50 representatives from four different geographic regions: Interior Alaska, coastal mainland Southeast, Kupreanof Island and Prince of Wales Islands.
The results indicated that wolves do and have indeed eat salmon.
As might be expected, Southeast Alaska wolves relied more on salmon than Interior Alaska wolves.
Salmon made up about 20 percent of the diet of wolves on the coastal mainland and on Prince of Wales Island, 15 percent of the diet of wolves on Kupreanof Island and about 10 percent of the diet of interior wolves.
"We always thought it was the bears that capitalize on salmon, but this shows wolves do too," Szepanski said.
Szepanski found for some wolves on Prince of Wales Island, salmon was about 25 percent of the diet.
The percentage was much higher for some wolves in northern Southeast, where deer and other terrestrial game are not abundant.

These Yakutat-area wolves showed extremely high reliance on a marine diet, Szepanski said, comparable to coastal black and brown bears.
She pointed out that marine-derived food could also come in other forms- wolves could be eating eulachon (hooligan) during the seasonal runs of those fish, and could forage in the intertidal.
Wolves have been documented hunting harbor seal pups as well, and seal bones are found in the scat of wolves in the Cordova and Yakutat areas.
But these marine resources are not available for the interior wolves - opportunist.
Szepanskilooked at the variety in the wolves' diet and found that Interior wolves' ate mostly caribou and moose.
For Southeast wolves, the diet is more varied - mostly deer, but including other herbivores – beaver, mountain goats and other small mammals.
But the salmon is significant, especially for the pups. It's long been known that wolves are opportunistic, but the varied diet and resourcefulness of Southeast wolves surprised Szepanski.
"Southeast is a gold mine for unique research," Szepanski said. "The thought has been that 'wolves are wolves,' but Southeast is a unique ecosystem, and the things they've done to adapt to this ecosystem are amazing."