

LIFESTYLE

Wolfdog hybrids arouse trust, fear

By STEPHEN WIGLER
The Baltimore Sun

STEWARTSTOWN, Pa. — Cheyenne thrusts huge paws on a visitor's shoulders, stares at him through golden eyes and then, with the gesture wolves use to express affection, begins to mouth his face. Interspersed with slurpy licks, she gently closes jaws that could crack the skull of a caribou. The visitor throws his arms around the 90-pound animal; she rolls over on her back so that he can rub her belly.

Could it be that "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Three Little Pigs" got it wrong? That the Big, Bad Wolf isn't so bad after all?

Yet animals like Cheyenne — hybrids of dog and wolf also known as wolfdogs — have become as controversial as they are beautiful.

While wolfdog fatalities are far fewer than those involving such breeds as the pit bull terrier, there have been a number of highly publicized recent tragedies. In New Jersey several months ago, an infant placed his arm in a kennel to pet a wolfdog with pups, only to have the animal seize his arm. When his baby sitter tried to pull the child away, the wolfdog refused to let go.

people use hybrids as a way of connecting with something wild and beautiful; others are into the macho of it and buy them for the same reason they buy Akitas, pit bulls and Rottweilers."

It is illegal in the United States to own a purebred wolf without a federal permit, but wolfdogs (also known as wolf hybrids) such as Cheyenne, who is 95 percent pure wolf, fall between the cracks in most states. The government says that she is a dog, and only eight states have laws governing these animals.

Estimates of the number of wolfdogs in the United States vary between 100,000 and 500,000 — less than 1 percent of the country's 50 million dogs — but their numbers are growing rapidly.

Proponents of wolfdogs say that they are lovable, gentle, loyal pets whose greater intelligence makes them superior to ordinary dogs.

"When I look into Megan's eyes, I see intelligence and emotion looking back at me that I don't see in any of my collies," said Susan, a Maryland resident who owns two wolfdogs and who requested that her last name not be used.



VICKIE POE of Stewartstown, Pa., gets her wolfdog pup, Zuni, to start howling. Hybrids of dog and wolf — known as wolfdogs — have become as controversial as they are beautiful.

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most experts believe.

"If more owners were as responsible as Vickie Poe, we wouldn't see the same problems" with hybrids, said Monte Sloan, who studies wolf behavior at Wolf Park, a research institution in Battleground, Ind., and who knows Poe and her dogs.

Every week Sloan gets several letters and phone calls from people complaining that their hybrids are shy of strangers, cannot be leashed, trained and ignore commands.

"That's normal behavior for a high-percentage hybrid," he said. "Even if you tell people these things, you can't be sure that they will believe you and follow your instructions."

That was one of the reasons that Terry Jenkins neutered and spayed her wolfdogs. Jenkins, the head keeper at the Folsom City Zoo in California, had raised purebred wolves and hybrids since her teenage years.

"Year after year I sold animals to people who seemed promising — then something happened," she said. "They'd get divorced or change jobs or have to move, or they wouldn't build a pen for it."

Susan, however, who is now selling several wolfdog pups, she carefully screens potential buyers. She also takes the