

Lupine Lore

To tell stories of wolf encounters with human race is often equivalent to speak about feral children. Morbidly or candidly, laymen and media, scientists, kings, monks and priests, all seem fascinated by such tales, but if asked *why*, they won't be able to tell you. This is a short history of mythical, fictionary and real children raised by dogs, coyotes and wolves.

By Walter Tarello (DVM)

The dominant dogs in the pack tried strenuously but in vain to protect their *alfa* individual, registered at the Municipality as Ivan Mishukov, born 1992, when he was captured by police officers in the immediate outskirts of Moscow after intensive shadowing. Ivan had been wanted for some months. Despite turning his life in canine companionship, he could speak fluently Russian having left his abusive family home at the age of four. Soon after learning to beg in the streets he built up friendship with a pack of wild dogs sharing his food and obtaining their protection.

The boy spent thus undisturbed 2 years roaming freely, eventually becoming the alfa male of the pack. He was in good shape and well mannered when he was caught in 1998 and this helped his reintegration in the human community. After a residence period in a pediatric department, Ivan Mishukov resumed a normal life, but often complained of 'dreaming of dogs'.

This is one of few true stories of children *adopted* by wild dogs. Thus, one can only infer that many mythical stories of the kind may have a substrate of truth. The legend of the foundation of Rome is one of those.

The Romans wondered for ages about the origin of their City. Many hypotheses came and went, but it was only in the time of Emperor Augustus (22 BC) that a generally accepted version involving a she-wolf named *Lupa* was encoded by the poet *Virgilius* in the epic poem *Eneide*.

Rome, he says, was planned in 753 BC by twin brothers Romulus and Remus, born to a vestal virgin named Rhea Silvia and fathered by Mars,

the god of War. Their paternal origin explains why the twins were uncommonly bellicose as we will see later.

On the other hand, vestal virgins are not supposed to give birth to children, even if the father is a God. No doubts that with such family background, troubles were round the corner!

The grand-father of Rhea Silvia, Numitore, was the local king and the shame for the undue pregnancy was obviously overwhelming for the whole family, sovereign included.

The brother cadet Amulius grasped immediately the long-awaited occasion to destitute Numitore and usurped the reign.

He ordered Rhea Silvia to be buried alive and the twins to be abandoned in a basket on the waters of the Tiber River. Luckily, after a perilous journey at the mercy of the current, the basket stranded at the foot of the Palatine Hill.

There came a she-wolf named *Lupa* who took the twins under a fig tree and started to milk them. *Lupa* had two puppies of her own, and that's why she was able to nurture the twins too! Later a shepherd named Faustulus brought the twins to his hut and with his wife Acca Larentia raised them as his own children. Once grown up, Romulus and Remus came to know the secret of their origin and killed the usurping king Amulius. Then they brought back the true king Numitore on his throne. As a reward for that, Numitore conceded a plot of land near the Tiber River to found a new town.

Romulus, who killed Remus in a futile fight over whether the city of Rome should be founded, was destined to rule but did not become a hero. Instead, the she-wolf *Lupa* became a myth, the emblem protector of the Republic first and the Empire later. A female wolf appears on many objects of the Roman tradition, including monuments, banners and coins.

The respect tributed to the *Lupa* became soon a cult and every year a *Lupercali* festival was held in mid-February, in remembrance of the wolf-wetnurse, a ritual purification assumed to bring prosperity and fertility to the town. To the inhabitants of the Empire, this she-wolf was not like any other, but a sacred animal delivering protection. Still today it is thought that caressing an image of the *Lupa* on his muzzle brings good luck!

Virgilius swear to it: Romulus and Remus were suckled by a wolf.

A legend says that the profet Zarathustra itself received the help of a she-wolf when he was in desperate need wandering in the Persian lands. Pecos Bill, the iconic American cowboy, is reputed to be rescued and raised by a family of coyotes after falling off a wagon near the Pecos

River. Bill was convinced of being a coyote and realized he was a man only when a hunter pointed out that he had no tail!

Can this happen in the real life? And if the answer is yes, then how often it occurred in the past?

Starting early in their 40 million years old history, canids have shown a key behavioural feature that may seriously account for such a lore. Wolves, in fact, are famous for their pair bond. Males hunt to provide food to their milking partners and also provision the immature young till their adult stage. In this way, females can dedicate their full time to the puppies enabling mothers to rear larger litters with up to 8 individuals.

Cats and other felids don't have the pair bond that enables canids to develop more complex social systems.

The pair bond alone obviously does not explain the inclination to adopt and nurture human babies, but it helps to develop such a behavior when fearless she-wolves are raising a litter on their own, and favorable circumstances lead them in contact with human communities where babies may occasionally look like, and sometimes really are, abandoned or in need of help!

The 15,000 years old dog's history is a story of self-domestication, more of relating than taming, from the lupine to the current pet state. Wolves likely played a large part in their own taming, habituating themselves to humans before we took an active role in the process. In fact nobody would bring a ferocious predator such a wolf into its dwelling in the hope that thousands of years later it would become a lovely pet!

Probably, it all started with some individuals genetically prone, exceptionally fearless wolves than begun to prowl around human camps, following hunting parties to scavenge food, with plenty of occasions to meet babies as well! Constant contact led to familiarity.

Inadvertently wolves became our dogs and we started to assign them duties as hunting companions, sentinels, pets and baby-sitters long before any other animal was domesticated. Dog burials with grave goods as old as 17,000, 14,000 and 12,000 years found respectively in Russia, Israel and Germany can only account for such early human-lupine bond.

To the point that in the 1990s scientists changed the classification name of dog from *Canis familiaris* to *Canis lupus familiaris*, based on molecular evidence making clear that the dog is a mere variety of the wolf.

Lupine lore has endless stories to tell.

Stories of children tended by wolves abound, above all that of Mowgli, in Kipling's *The Jungle Book*:

'....A man's cub. Look! Directly in front of him, holding on by a low branch, stood a naked brown baby who could just walk – as soft and as dimpled a little atom as ever came to a wolf's cave at night.

He looked up into Father Wolf's face and laughed. "Is that a man's cub?" said Mother Wolf. "I have never seen one. Bring it here."

A wolf accustomed to moving his own cubs can, if necessary, mouth an egg without breaking it, and though Father Wolf's jaws closed right on the child's back, not a tooth even scratched the skin, as he laid it down among the cubs.

"How little! How naked and - how bold!" said Mother Wolf softly. The baby was pushing his way between the cubs to get close to the warm hide. "Ahai! He is taking his meal with the others. And so this is a man's cub. Now, was there ever a wolf that could boast of a man's cub among her children?"

"I have heard now and again of such a thing, but never in our pack or in my time," said Father Wolf. "He is altogether without hair, and I could kill him with a touch of my foot. But see, he looks up and is not afraid."

This is fiction, we know. Can such an eventuality possibly occur in the real life?

In the last 7 centuries, at least 100 cases of feral children reared by animals have been described. Species reportedly involved more often were wolves, apes, bears, gazelles, cattle and goats.

Archives and evidences scrutinized by historian Serge Aroles confirm that real stories of *feral* children are much less than previously thought and only associated with wolves and apes.

The *feral* or *wolf*-children and adolescents are typically fearful, speechless, naked, walking four-footed, eating and howling like wolves, reacting with anger when they are forced to resume a *human-like* sort of life.

The fascination of their stories lies in the possibility that human beings can be curbed back to the animal level, indirectly illuminating the essence of humanity. A debate about what makes us humans is not among the aims of this work and a simple definition is recognizably a difficult task.

More often, the story of a *noble savage* does not deal with the wider issue of what essentially humanity is, but with the moral that the teller wants to creep into the story. The account of a child raised by animals is used to suggest either the superiority of human beings or, on the contrary, the moral advantage of the animal kingdom. Morbid curiosity is disguised as desire of a benevolent Nature assisting all creatures, even though many feral children are probably unrecognized boys and girls with *special needs*.

The position of the Church differed. Demonologist Pierre Le Loyer (1550-1634) cites the famous case of the *wolf-boy* of Hesse (Germany), the first surviving account of wild child in Europe (1304), as evidence that sorcerers, in their witchcraft ecstasies, did not really transmute into animals, as they claimed.

In fact, if natural causes alone made the boy behave as a wolf and prefer the company of wolves, similarly the Devil occupying the spirit of sorcerers could easily persuade them that they were wolves and make them behave accordingly.

From the commentary of the monk Peter of Erfurt:

1304. A certain boy in the region of Hesse was seized. This boy, as was known afterwards, and just as the boy told it himself, was taken by wolves when he was three years old and raised up wondrously. For, whatever prey the wolves snatched for food, they would take the better part and allot it to him to eat while they lay around a tree. In the time of winter and cold, they made a pit, and they put the leaves of trees and other plants in it, and surrounded the boy to protect him from the cold; they also compelled him to creep on hands and feet and to run with them for a long time, from which practice he imitated their speed and was able to make the greatest leaps. When he was seized, he was bound with wood to compel him to go erect in the manner of a human (or "in a human likeness"). However, this boy often said that he much preferred to live among wolves than among men. This boy was conveyed to the court of Henry, Prince of Hesse, for a spectacle.

The Hesse story, as many medieval stories of children suckled by carnivores, suggests the human superiority over animals. The child's innocence protects him, and his longing to be back among the wolves reveals his wish to abandon his humiliated position in the corrupt human world into which he's been cast.

From Jacques de Vitry's thirteenth-century chronicle:

A she-wolf stole and suckled some children. When, however, one of the children attempted to stand upright and walk, the wolf struck him on the head

with her paw, and would not allow him to walk otherwise than like the beasts, on his hands and feet.

From Heisterbach's thirteenth-century *Dialogus Miraculorum*, a monk speaks of a girl kidnapped from her village by wolves:

I saw a certain youth who was snatched up by wolves as an infant and was raised by them into adolescence, and he knew how to run on hands and feet in the manner of wolves, and how to howl.

They're just so stories, they're everything. All are variations on a theme, manifesting different ways of thinking about animals, childishness, and wilderness.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) adopted the story of the wolf-boy of Hesse as a model for his philosophical description of the noble savage, asserting that civilization brings more defects than benefits.

In *Discourse on Inequality* Rousseau glorify the State of Nature where men are essentially animals, or *noble savages*, pointing out that only by acting together in civil society and binding them to its laws do they become men and degenerate. His fellow philosopher Voltaire accused Rousseau of wanting to make people go back and walk on all fours!

Nonetheless, readers were attracted by the idea of the *noble savage* and stories about feral children were always well received.

The case of Victor of Aveyron (1797) for instance, which is depicted with a certain amount of realism in the 1970 cult movie of Francois Truffaut '*The wild child*', remains the most controversial.

A naked boy unable to speak was captured in the wood near Saint-Semin-sur-Rance (France). He soon escaped and showed up again after 3 years, in 1800.

Scientists and teachers try to rehabilitate the feral boy. Naturalist Bonaterre requested permission to study him. Physician Jean-Marc Itard published the case naming the boy 'Victor', because he overcame the wildness of his habits and learned to walk and to speak. There is no evidence that Victor was raised by animals. However it is an emblematic case of successful re-education, though modern psychology refutes the possibility of successful rehabilitation if the child becomes isolated at a very young age.

Some savages boys and girls are only occasionally spotted, becoming living legends, as it was the case of the Lobo Wolf Girl of Devil's River,

an orphan whose mother died in childbirth that was adopted by lobo wolves near the Mexican border of USA in 1835. Not far from there, ten years later a boy saw a girl in the midst of a pack of wolves attacking a herd of goats. Then in the village of San Felipe, a Mexican woman a few months later noticed two large wolves and a girl eating the meat of a freshly killed goat and noticed that the girl was running off first four-legged and then on two. She was captured 3 days later and locked in a ranch but managed to escape with the help of her lupine companions. She was spotted again 7 years later, in 1852, by a group of cow-boys on the road to El Paso. She was suckling two wolf cubs by the river and suddenly ran off with them, and was never seen again. According to historian Serge Aroles this case is a hoax, a fascinating legend and nothing more.

More trustworthy is the report of General Major Sleemann (1788-1856) published in India in 1852: "*An account of wolves nurturing children in their dens*", that remains a fundamental text to understand the true extension of the phenomenon. The article includes the testimony of a policeman that witnessed the capture of a *wolf-boy*. Many reports of wolf-children come from India, such as the case of Ramu, from the town of Lucknow (1954) who reportedly was taken by a wolf as a baby and raised until the age of seven, when he was rescued.

Perhaps the best known case of *zoo-anthropy* (humans living with animals) is the so-called case of the two wolf-girls of Midnapore.

An Indian missionary named Jal Singh reported in 1920 the case of two girls, Amala (aged 18 months) and Kamala (8 years), reared by female wolves near the town of Midnapore, India. Rescuers removed the girls from the den where two wolf cubs were sleeping and brought them to an orphanage.

Amala and Kamala accepted only raw meat as a meal and were more active at night walking on four legs as wolves. Amala, the youngest, died within 2 years, but Kamala, incapable of speech, survived for nine years, achieving a light degree of socialization. Unfortunately she could not walk bipedal, lapped water like a dog and carried any object in her mouth. Although Kamala and Amala may have lived in the forest, they were not raised by wolves, historian Serge Aroles says, speculating that this case might be a hoax to gain charity for Rev. Singh's orphanage.

Despite the popularity of stories about savage boys and girls reared by wolves, well documented incontrovertible cases are rare.

Self-induced domestication of canids, i.e. wolves, may have favoured the entanglement of our species. The hierarchic social structure of packs of wolves is ideal for domestication, because intruding humans can effectively take over the position of dominance.

Reversing the natural model that leads female wolves to adopt human babies as members of the group, young dogs of a pack also follow the human leader as they would follow the top-ranking female!

Both psychological and physical adoptive habits seem interchangeable, depending upon traits that endear dogs to us, common to wolves and humans, such as sociality and adaptability. As young animals grow up in such a social structure, they imprint on the animals that they regularly see at their side.

Under wild conditions wolves are members of their own species, but pack animals can also see human beings as dominant and imprint on them. Ivan Mishukov, for instance, lived with a group of wild dogs, which act socially as wolves, reaching the *alpha* male rank in the pack.

There is also the true story (2002) of Traian Caldarar, a gipsy child that lived for 3 years with wild dogs in Poland and now is a normal adolescent that play football and like mathematics.

Quite moving is the story of Lyokha (2007), a boy from central Russia (Kaluga) who lived with a pack of wolves acquiring their reactions and behavior. Unfortunately he was unable to speak, and was taken to the hospital for a medical check but soon after escaped and is thought to have joined again his pack.

Among mammals, she-wolves and bitches are the animals showing the higher incidence of *pseudo-pregnancy*, also named *false* or *hysterical* pregnancy. It occurs when hormonal mechanisms normally in place for estrus and conception get a bit out of control. It manifests with symptoms of pregnancy, including mammary development and milk production, abdominal distension, and mothering behavior. Female wolves affected by false pregnancy desperately need a cub to care for and to milk, and if it's not animal, can then be human? May be this is the **key clue**, justifying both mythology and the very few uncontroversibly confirmed *wolf-children* cases.

In November 2010 Spanish director Gerardo Olivares released a movie

titled *'Entrelobos'* (*'Among Wolves'*) centered on the remarkable story of Marcos Rodríguez Pantoja (1946 -) born in the province of Cordoba (Spain). The life of Marcos is a chronicle of misery and famine, with a father so poor that was unable to provide the bread for the family and a step-mother who ill-treated him.

Marcos was only 7 years old when was sold by his father to a goat shepherd that lived in the isolated Sierra Morena. The old man lives in a cave and began teaching Marcos how to herd the goats, as well as how to care for himself and how to survive in the wilderness.

The boy befriended the shepherd's animal companions: a ferret and an owl. Unfortunately the shepherd died soon after and Marcos found himself alone but able to cope with the environment. He lived in the mountains for 12 years, from 1953 to 1965, with no human contact, making friendship with a small pack of wolves and feeling, in his own worlds, like *'The King of the Valley'*.

Marcos found in the wolves a new family and when was captured by members of Spain's Guardia Civil returned to civilization aged 19. He never truly adapted to the civilized world and he dreamt frequently to come back to live among wolves.

Director Olivares came across the story in 2007, after reading a book on children who grew up with animals. He found that Gabriel Janer, professor of Anthropology wrote a PhD thesis on Marcos titled *"He jugado con lobos"*, translated in a book titled *Wild Child of the Sierra Morena*.

A few weeks later Olivares was sitting in the office of the mayor of Añora, the town where Pantoja was born. The mayor had never heard his story. However, she did a little research and came up with his birth certificate. Olivares worried that perhaps Marcos was dead when his producer José María Morales suggested hiring a private detective. Later that same night he received a call telling him that Pantoja was living in the town of Orense, in the region of Galicia and gave his phone number.

The phone rang several times before someone with a Galician accent answered. He asked if Marcos, the man who was isolated in the Sierra Morena for 12 years, lived there. The man was silent for a few seconds before answering. "Yes, he lives here, but what do you want? Then he added: "Well, my life has been hard..."

In the next two years Marcos Rodríguez Pantoja cooperated with the director on the filming of his fascinating story. He appears in the last scene of the movie, happily playing with a wolf.