

SHASTA

MICHAEL WYATT, ANIMAL CARE STAFF



Throughout its history as a sanctuary Wolf Haven International has accepted and given a home to animals whose only future often would have been euthanasia. Here they are allowed to spend the remainder of their lives with care and comfort—a stark contrast in many cases to all they have ever known. They arrive with a wide array of dispositions formed through experiences that will remain forever unknown to us. As a result, many of these wolves, out of necessity, are housed in areas where they have minimal exposure to humans. Although not viewed by the public, their lives are no less meaningful—their lessons to us no less poignant. It is for this that I remember one wolf in particular, whose size and stature invoked images of the mountain for which he was named. His name was Shasta.

Shasta spent much of his first two years in deplorable conditions as an illegally owned pet. He was thin, frightened, and barely resembled the hulking animal he was to eventually become. In these early days, his coat was a smokey black, laced with bits of silver and a cape of silvery white. As the years passed, his coat turned a tarnished gray with a cape more white than silver, another irony in his resemblance to a snow-capped mountain.

Upon his arrival at Wolf Haven in December 1988, Shasta was placed with a female named Shadow. Although nearly half his size, she had in mind to be the dominant wolf of the pair. As the story is told, Shadow kept him in the deck enclosure for days without allowing him to come out. It must have made for quite an intriguing spectacle, but one which evidently had its limits. Shasta either grew weary of his situation, or hungry, or both, and left the deck enclosure to proclaim his own dominance. Shadow, although a spirited animal, was no match for his size. She was left with an impaired larynx which gave her a hoarse and rather curious "honk" as her chief means of vocalization. Shasta retained a dominance that was to last the rest of their lives. Though quite aggressive in this early encounter, it was never to be indicative of the truly gentle nature that he possessed.

Yet never was his nature more evident than on two rare occasions I still recall, both involving death. The first was in 1996 on a cold, clear October night. I had made my way to Shasta's enclosure to medicate Shadow, whose health had been steadily deteriorating. Arriving and finding her sleeping soundly, I began moving closer to attempt to rouse her. Shasta followed beside me. Most likely he was expecting the treats I had been in the habit of offering him during previous visits. As I reached the place where Shadow was resting, I began quietly calling her name, hoping to wake her gently. She remained in deep slumber. It was then that Shasta slowly moved to her side and began gently nudging her with his muzzle until at last she was awake and I was able to deliver her medication. Within only a few days she would be gone.

Shasta's mourning period was a short one, and he spent much of his time watching Hurricane, a beautiful female in the nearby enclosure. He remained in good spirits until March 1997, when we discovered him unable to rise. By mid-day he was walking, but with a pronounced limp and breathing heavily. Although his appetite never waned, his former quality of life did not return. The next two months were spent with little activity, and any exertion appeared to cause only discomfort. In May, a large swelling appeared on his right shoulder and increased in size in a single day. Later it was discovered that the swelling was actually bone cancer, which had grown from the shoulder and began fusing to his spine. The amount of pain he must have endured made his quiet dignity all the more remarkable.

At the time the decision was made to euthanize the gentle giant, his condition had deteriorated to a point where he could no longer enter his deck enclosure, and we had not observed him in it for the entirety of his illness. Our biggest fear that day was to find him deep within his den, as was the case weeks before when a veterinarian had arrived to examine him. What we found instead was remarkable. Shasta was resting in the corner of his deck enclosure, almost as though he'd been waiting for us and wanted to make it easy. He made no attempts to move and was euthanized with the quiet dignity and gentleness he had shown us throughout his life.