

A Tribute to Wakan, Gentleman Wolf

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On Thursday, February 27, 1997, Wakan, an exceptionally handsome tundra wolf, peacefully ended his struggle with crippling hip dysplasia and old age. He put up a brave fight, but in the end his heart failed, thankfully without much suffering. Wakan became comatose by mid-afternoon and was gently euthanized so as not to prolong his suffering. Now his pain is gone, and he is surely running wild across the spirit tundra.

Wakan was only 2 1/2 months shy of his 15th birthday, an age which he wore with great dignity and the bearing of an elder statesman. His "Spirit," as he was named in the Lakota language, was one of gentleness and quiet endurance.

Unfortunately, we never had a chance to know him in what must have been a magnificent youth. Most of his life was spent at Washington's Northwest Trek, where he was born the only male in a small litter. He and his sisters grew up and stayed together, even moving as a pack to the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle in 1994. When both of his sisters died suddenly in 1996, Wakan came to our sanctuary in order to pair two lonely, elderly wolves.

Kathleen had been alone and mourning the loss of her companion, Colorado, since 1994. We hoped that Wakan and she would accept and provide each other with the companionship both needed so much. The two took to each other right away, and the change in Kathleen's behavior was sudden and dramatic. Everyone at Wolf Haven rejoiced to see the bounce returning to her step as she began to act like a wolf half her age. Theirs was not a grand passion, but the quiet, gentle companionship of two elders who had long since put aside the turmoils of youth. They appeared content with their roles—the outgoing, exuberant Kathleen always ready to greet visitors at the fence, while the more timid Wakan remained in the background to watch her romp. As his hips deteriorated, he enjoyed just lying in a patch of rare sunshine and soaking up the warmth. Kathleen did not appear to need him to play with her, but was happy just having his quiet presence in her enclosure, often taking her naps curled up close to him.

As staff members were saying good-bye to this gentle spirit, a lone bald eagle flew low over where he was lying, as if to carry his spirit to what lay beyond.

Wakan was with us for only a brief time, but in those short months he taught us much of gentleness and strength. Most of all, he brought the sparkle back into Kathleen's eyes and, for that alone, Wakan, we honor you and thank you for gracing Wolf Haven during the autumn of your life.

