mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “Why do wolves howl at the Moon?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

VIDEO 1

Hi. It's Danni. Once, I went on a trip with a wildlife group to explore a forest in Alaska. It was out in the wilderness, probably the wildest place I've ever been in North America. There were no trails. As we walked through the forest, we pushed branches out of the way slipping and sliding in the mud. I kept my eyes open because I had no idea what we would see around the next tree. Would I see a bear cub, a moose with huge antlers, a bald eagle's nest? I kept my ears open too. Our guides had told us that this was wolf country. That means, especially as it got closer to nighttime, we might hear a sound like this. Someone named Gracie has a question about this unique sound. Let's call Gracie now.

[Video Call]

- Hi, Danny.
- Hi, Gracie.
- I have a question for you. Why do wolves howl at the moon?
- That's a great question.

If you're super lucky, maybe you've heard a wolf howling in real life. But even if you haven't, you've probably heard something like this before. Many cultures have told stories about wolves howling and the moon for a long, long time. Maybe you've heard someone howl while telling an old tale about wolves or heard a howl in the middle of a scary movie or maybe you've heard a

pet dog howling when they hear a siren or maybe you've given howling at the moon a try yourself. It's kind of fun. But what if I told you that in real life wolves don't howl at the moon at all. Wolves are most active when it's a little bit dark out like when the sun is rising or setting and the moon is usually easier to see when the sky is dark. So when wolves lift their heads to howl, it sometimes looks like they're howling at the moon, but that's just a coincidence. Sometimes wolves howl in bright daylight or times when you can't see the moon in the sky at all. But if they are not howling at the moon, why are they howling? I wonder what you think.

VIDEO 2

Wildlife experts, including official scientists and people who have lived near wild wolves for many years, have been studying wolves to figure out why they howl. Wolves may look like some of the dogs we keep as pets, but wolves are wild animals. Wild animals don't have humans feeding and keeping them safe, instead wolves often find food and stay safe with the help of other wolves. Wolves often live in groups or packs of six to ten wolves. They do everything together, hunt, play, sleep, travel, and yes, howl together. When wolves get together in a big group and howl, it can sound like this. That's called a chorus howl. Those chorus howls can be heard from a long way away, sometimes even as far as ten miles. Experts who study wolves think that wolves use howls to communicate with each other. Wolves and their packs can travel long distances each day, running over mountains and through forests and across meadows looking for food to hunt. Imagine you're a member of a wolf pack, but during a hunt you get separated from your pack. You look all around you but you can't see them anywhere. They must have moved to a different area. That's a big deal. Your pack is your family. They're supposed to help protect you, help you get food. Without your pack, you could be in danger. But what can you do? You can't pull out your phone and text the pack that you got lost. You're a wolf.

Sometimes when a wolf gets separated from their pack, they might make a special sounding howl like this. Scientists think that this wolf is calling to their pack, communicating. Hey. Where are you guys? I'm over here. If their pack hears the call, the pack might respond with a chorus howl like this. That might be a way of communicating we're over here. This way, the wolves in the pack can find each other again. Howling together might also help a wolf pack communicate to other wolf packs. Wolves protect the area of land where they live and they usually want wolves from other packs to keep out. Maybe you have a place that's just for you, like a cubby in your classroom or a secret treehouse. If you want to make sure other people don't go into your place without your permission, you might make a sign like a label over your cubby that says your name or a sign outside the treehouse ladder that says please keep out. But wolves can't do that so they find another way to communicate come on in or keep out to other wolves. One way wolves communicate this is by howling. Imagine you're a wolf running through the forest with your pack looking for food to hunt. Suddenly, you hear that sound, a chorus howl from a different pack. Even though you can't see the other wolf pack when you hear them howl, you know, uh-oh, there's already a big strong pack of wolves in this area. Maybe we should find some place else to hunt. Let's get out of here. So in summary, wolves don't howl at the moon, they howl to other wolves. Wolves howl to communicate their location and stay together. Howling helps them work together as a team. How do you communicate and stay together with the teams in your life? Does your teacher use a special call to get your attention? Does your family have ways of keeping track of each other when you're in a big supermarket? Do you have special cheers or chants you use with your favorite sports team to communicate with other fans or to tell the other team that your team is strong? If you do, it's kind of like you have your own wolf pack. That's all for this week's question. Thanks for asking, Gracie.