Eighty or so vulnerable wolf dogs have found a protector and a sanctuary in the mountains of Stow.

CALL OF THE WILD
Fred Keating (right) began his avocation as a guardian of wolf dogs by first owning one himself, but he soon realized that the hybrids make unpredictable pets at best, which is why they are outlawed in many states. Keating’s Leki Clan Wolf Refuge has become a home for these seized and unwanted animals.
Keeping these animals on the straight and narrow is kind of like raising rebellious teenagers. By the time a wolf dog is about eight months old, Keating says, it has the IQ of a fourteen-year-old human being. And the attitude to match. “It may like you, but it doesn’t see any reason to do what you tell it to. If it wants to go for a walk, it will, and it will come back when it feels like it, not when you call,” Keating says.

So the way he sees it, whoever started trying to breed Canis lupus — the wolf — with Canis familiaris — the dog — was making a big mistake. At least, it’s turned out that way. According to research published by the United States Department of Agriculture, wolves have genes dogs don’t have. A purebred wolf is born to hunt, not to attack humans, and it socializes much better with its own kind than with Homo sapiens. Dogs, on the other hand, may want to be with their people but can also be more aggressive than wolves. The hybrid can sometimes merge the least malleable traits of both species.

That’s what Keating found out firsthand from the late, great Loki, named for the Norse god of mischief. “About a year into it, I realized he was training me, not the other way around. So I got him a companion, and we did some breeding. But four years later, I quit that. I guess I was part of the problem, and now I’m trying to make up for it.” He says too many breeders sell their puppies to uneducated or unscrupulous customers. “Most people just want a nasty animal for a watchdog. But wolf dogs are actually afraid of people, and when they don’t do what they are supposed to, they get tied to trees or heat up.”

Or dumped in a shelter where they will almost surely be put to death after the legal waiting period. Estimates vary, but advocates put the population of wolf dogs at more than a million, and they fear that half of them are at risk. Since launching the Loki Clan Wolf Refuge as a nonprofit in 1994, Keating has been getting as many as ten calls a day from owners or shelter operators who want him to take the animals off their hands. He’s had to quit his job as a wrecker driver to tend to the animals full-time. He’s also made a thorough study of Native American culture, which reveres the wolf as much as he does. “For them,” he says, “the wolf is a brother spirit, a good totem, so it makes no sense for people to kill their teacher.”

For Keating, the “brother” metaphor goes a long way, because even though wolf dogs are typically afraid of men, they aren’t usually afraid of him. He’s only been badly bitten once, a long time ago when he tried to rush a traumatized dog out of a shipping crate. Keating has launched the Loki Clan Wolf Refuge as a “transitional pen” near Keating’s trailer. Keeping these animals on the straight and narrow is kind of like raising rebellious teenagers. By the time a wolf dog is about eight months old, Keating says, it has the IQ of a fourteen-year-old human being. And the attitude to match. “It may like you, but it doesn’t see any reason to do what you tell it to. If it wants to go for a walk, it will, and it will come back when it feels like it, not when you call,” Keating says.

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Wolf Brother

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 67 is ruled by an alpha pair — a king and queen. There’s also a beta pair like a prince and princess, and, lower down on the ladder, omegas.

We bundle up and take a stroll to see how the newest immigrant is faring.

“That’s Taina,” Keating says, and begins to translate from wolf-dog body language into English. “I like people. I am a little cautious, but if I know you, I am a suck-up, so I am going to submit to you.” Taina rolls on his belly, looking not at us, but at the other two wolf dogs eyeing him from a few feet away. “I am submitting to you so you don’t need to beat me up,” Keating translates. A little farther up a hill, Keating pauses at a pen where a few old-timers are roughhousing. One of them could be a poster child for this place. “She’s from Rhode Island,” Keating says. “She was running loose, and when she was finally caught, her harness had grown imbedded in her neck, so it had to be surgically removed. The scars from the gashes were incredible.”

He remembers how another adoptee arrived with ears torn so badly they had to be sewn back on. Others have cancer. Keating doesn’t perform major surgery, but he does a lot of self-taught vet work that would make Doctor Dolittle blanch.

“Sometimes I wonder,” he muses, “when I see tumors and arthritis and dental disease and all the rest of it, if I am really doing them any favors, prolonging their lives.”

Not that every life is long, in human terms. A wolf dog can survive in the wild for about six to eight years — double that in captivity. When there’s a death in a pen, the animals go into mourning. “They all get very quiet,” Keating says. “If it’s an alpha, they lie still, commiserate, and then decide who will be the next alpha. The successful candidate walks through the pack, and the others just peel off and roll, to show respect. It’s amazing to watch. But if a low-ranking animal does treat him like a bump in the road and walk over him.”

Moments like that are not easy for a man whose sole mission in life is to save these vulnerable, misunderstood creatures, allowing them to die with dignity when the time comes. This is not a foster home, it’s a last stop. That means Keating has to accept — even celebrate — the wolf dogs’ natural cycle. So do his growing band of apostles. One of them, Myrtle Clapp, read about Keating in the newspaper at a time when the state of New Hampshire was investigating his operation. Keating had sparked a minor media storm by testifying before the state legislature against a law that would have completely banned wolf-dog hybrids. Hoping for a compromise, he lobbied instead for regulation. He got his way. New Hampshire now allows wolf dogs but they must come from out of state — they can’t be bred or sold, and must be confined. They must have I.D.s tattooed or inserted via computer chip, and owners must keep neutering and vaccination records. Maine places the same restrictions on wolf-dog owners, but does not ban the sale of the animals. Neither state allows the animals to be abandoned or released into the wild. Controversy swirls around rabies vaccination. Some scientists claim it isn’t effective on wolf dogs, and others insist that it should be done. Since Keating’s operation straddles the border, he’s under close scrutiny from both states, though he says Maine regulators tend to be more friendly to him than New Hampshire inspectors.

At first, volunteer Myrtle Clapp was deeply suspicious about Keating’s refuge. “I’ve always been passionate about wolves,” she says. “I felt I should pay Fred a visit and see for myself how he treated his animals. If they were not well cared for, I figured I’d try to help the state shut him down.”

That’s not what happened. Keating took Clapp on a tour and introduced her to his charges. “An alpha leapt into my lap,” she says. “From then on I started helping out on Saturdays.”

At that point, Keating didn’t have nearly enough pens for the growing population of refugees. In fact, Clapp says, a number of dogs were tied to trees. So she drove to...
when more than a dozen workers can put up a new pen in a day and get rewarded with a barbeque. And supporters give more than time. The annual budget ranges from sixty thousand to a hundred thousand dollars. Keating takes just enough to survive in his trailer.

Despite a pressing need for refuges like his, Keating’s getting choosier about the animals he takes in. “We can’t save ‘em all,” he laments. And, at sixty-three, he hopes to groom one of his most skilled and dedicated disciples to take over his job. Naomi Levesque, a thirty-three-year-old social worker from Berlin, New Hampshire, has been volunteering here for more than four years and even enjoys doing what she calls “the gross stuff” — tossing smelly barrels of animal parts from nearby rendering plants over the fences for ravenous wolf dogs.

“I think I’ve kind of learned their language,” she says. “It’s not always the sounds they make, it’s more what their eyes say. Aren’t eyes supposed to be windows to the soul?” Still, even though she’s crazy about these animals, she’s not sure that she can make the whole-hearted, full-time commitment that Fred Keating made twenty-five years ago. She figures that would be asking a lot of her husband. But she can’t seem to get that first visit out of her head. “Every single wolf dog started howling,” she remembers. “It was like surround sound. I cried. I died. It touched me deeply.”

There is a way to rile up this soft-hearted caregiver, and to make the usually unflappable Fred Keating see red. Just bring up that misleading nursery rhyme about the unfortunate little girl in her riding hood. If that’s how people grow up thinking about wolves and their canine relatives — that they have big teeth and gobble up unsuspecting grandmothers — then the Loki Clan Wolf Refuge will be educating the public and taking in abused and neglected cast-offs for years to come.