PHYSICAL TRAITS: WOLF HAIR

Wolf pups are born with fuzzy dark hair. Wolves get lighter as they get older and old wolves have gray-white hair.

There are two types of hair: the long outer "guard hairs" and the soft down "undercoat." The guard hairs are coarse and allow water to shed off the wolf. The undercoat grows thick in the winter providing, the wolf with a warm insulated coat. This hair is shed in the spring and summer and, unlike the hair of most dogs, it sheds out in sheets and hunks. Wolf hair has been spun and woven and then looks like angora wool.

The color of a wolf's pelt can be anywhere from white to black. There are few if any white wolves in Minnesota, but several black wolves have been seen. More commonly the wolves of Minnesota are buff, tans with black and gray grizzled in, with more black on the upper back and hackles. This mixture of colors results in a gray and tawny look sometimes highlighted with rusts and browns. The hair follicles are arranged in "bundles" on the skin.

Hair is used in wolf communication; for example, the hair bristles erect when the wolf is angry or displaying dominance or aggression. We call this having the "hackles raised," and even use this phrase to describe how humans feel when they are disturbed: "That remark sure raised his hackles." The hair around the face can puff out also, enhancing an aggressive stare. Some might say that a beard or mustache on a human increases one's facial dominance as well.