



July 20, 2017

Someone this week compared my Irish wolfhound to the dire wolves in the Game of Thrones. It surprised me, but then, my wolfhound certainly surprised her. In person, they're far bigger and more jaw-dropping than most people imagine.

One of the guilty pleasures of living with an Irish wolfhound is going out in public with your friend and stopping traffic.

Literally.

Brakes squeal, there are stray shouts of disbelief and you'll see cars creep by for a second, closer look. It happens nearly every time I walk Oona or Oisin down the sidewalk.

Irish wolfhounds are commanding figures, big as ponies, a throwback to the days of knights and castles.

Admittedly, comments like "Where's your saddle, mister?!?" or "Who's walking who?" get a litttttle stale. But now and then you hear a fresh take on it. One winter's twilight, Finn and I were walking on the college campus and in the dim light, a student said, "Wow, I thought you were walking your polar bear."

But until the other night, I'd never heard one compared to a dire wolf. Oisin and I were in the local park when a young woman ran up to meet him. Just a year old, Oisin is already more than three feet tall at the shoulders. His head — when it's not stuck in the bushes on a scent trail — comes up to my chin. Oisin is a big....big boy, the tallest in a household of giants.

She said, "Wow, he's as big as a *dire wolf*!" I said, "Yes he is." She looked at me, surprised that I knew what a dire wolf was. We talked and I understood that she was thinking of the dire wolves in Game of Thrones, which was just about to open its much-anticipated seventh season. I had in mind the non-fictional canine who once prowled the frozen steppes for big game in the last ice age. Either way, Oisin easily filled the bill.

She was already floored so I didn't tell her about Oisin's aunt, Oona. Oisin is lean and lanky, a teen still. Oona is all muscle and drive from tail to nose tip. Her eyes gleam with cunning and amusement, as if to say, "You want to know why I'm in your grandmother's bed? Lean closer....closer...."

But the public doesn't see Oona when she flops on the couch like a big bug with her legs in the air, waiting for her belly rub. She's a loving girl with her family. But she's nobody's fool.

How does an Irish wolfhound stack up against a dire wolf? It depends on which version you mean, the extinct canid or George R. R. Martin's fantasy version in Game of Thrones.

Canis dirus, which roamed in packs in North America 20,000 years ago, competed with the saber tooth tiger for giant elk, horses and other big game. Dire wolves were larger than modern grey wolves, weighing as much as 160 pounds. They were more muscled, had a stronger bite, but walked on shorter legs than their modern-day cousins.

They were slower than modern wolves, so they most likely took advantage of incapacitated prey as much as they tried to chase it down. Southern California's La Brea Tar Pits are packed with dire wolf skeletons — more than 200,000 of them. Apparently they went after animals trapped in the tar and became stuck themselves. Dire wolves weren't as smart as modern wolves, paleontologists suspect.

The dire wolf disappeared about 10,000 years ago, apparently unable to compete with the saber tooth tiger for the rapidly disappearing mega-fauna of the prehistoric world.

Enter the Irish wolfhound, which may have come with the first men to the Emerald Isle as early as 8,000 years ago. Wolfhounds eventually finished off the dire wolf's cousin, the grey wolf, which so heavily populated Ireland in the Middle Ages that it was known as "Wolfland." When Oliver Crowell conquered Ireland and set about to make it more productive by clearing forests for farming, every livestock owner and every village were required by law to keep wolfhounds to fight off wolves. They did. A little too well.

In 1786, wolfhounds put themselves out of business by killing the last wolf in Ireland. Wolfhounds were faster, stronger and smarter than wolves and likely a match for their prehistoric cousins, too. Oona is 165 pounds, big for a female, but some males top out at nearly 200 pounds.

Despite their bulk, they're agile and shockingly fast. And they use the "thunder paw," a tremendous slap with their long, prehensile front paws. It's devastating when they're merely trying to get the attention of someone they love. Against wolves, it was a stunning surprise that addled or crippled the opponent. And then the teeth went in. In one recorded encounter, a female wolfhound dispatched four wolves in such a manner in seconds, wheeling, slapping and snapping.

The modern wolfhound is known for its rock-solid temperament. Aggression is practically unknown in the breed. But watch them play. It's a joyful, no-holds-barred clash of titans and you do not want to get too close as they spin and lunge and go airborne.

How does one compare to the fantasy version of the dire wolf in HBO's Game of Thrones? In the series, each of Ned Stark's ill-fated children is given a rare dire wolf puppy, which bonds with the Starks and stands by them in their dark adventures across the Seven Kingdoms. They're hulking, formidable and faithful companions in a violent, medieval world. They're as big as ponies.

Which is how people describe Irish wolfhounds, who before they were renowned for their hunting prowess, were war dogs, too. In old tales of Ireland, wolfhounds snipped the heads off ferocious Celtic warriors. They made war chariots crash to the

ground leaping into them. They were easily the equal of any warrior, including mounted knights, who they snatched from saddles and broke their backs.

Off the battlefield they were — and remain — warm companions, considered attentive and pleasurable friends. A wolfhound regards you as his or her equal. The more time you spend with a wolfhound, the more you understand that this is an honor.

A wolfhound is not a good guard dog, at least not when it comes to property. But most owners recognize that if they themselves are ever in danger, they have a fearsome protector. Wolfhounds read people like books. If they ever raise their hackles at someone, there's a good reason.

King Kong, Beauty and the Beast and The Jungle Book are popular fiction that play to our love of big brutes who are surprisingly human once we give them a chance. George R.R. Martin's dire wolves employ a similar trope, the thrill of the wild living at our side. It's easy to understand the appeal. As I write this, Oona is pressed up against me on the couch. I feel the incredible power of that muscular neck as she tucks her head against my thigh. Her chest swells and falls. Her mighty heart beats against my arm like a tom tom. I admire and respect her. I cherish my giant girl. And her eyes tell me she reciprocates. I don't have to be a Stark.

I just have to keep the belly rubs coming...