

## WOLVES IN BELARUS

# A Bold Conservation and Management Plan

by Vadim Sidorovich

*Belarus's action plan for the wolf may seem controversial, but it must be kept in the context of the geography and economics of the country. Most of the land outside the cities is forest or farmlands where people are trying to survive in villages, working on collective farms or their own land with maybe a cow and a few sheep to help them get by. These people are frightened for their livestock and often for themselves because they are afraid some wolves may be rabid. It is difficult to replace domestic animals, and the wolf is perceived as a threat to their modest means of making a living. Nevertheless, in Belarus human persecution is not so widespread that wolves are in any danger of eradication.*

—John Griffiths, author of  
“Researchers Begin Study in Remote Country,”  
*International Wolf*, Fall 2006


In Belarus, a nation slightly smaller than Kansas, natural and semi-natural vegetation (dry land, grassy marches, dry-land meadows, raised bogs) covers about 65 percent of the country. Additionally, large tracts of extended woodlands and forests remain intact. Wolves are present in all regions of Belarus, but their population density varies (see distribution map).

The most important factor shaping the variation in wolf numbers is the hunting harvest. According to Belarus hunting law, the wolf is a pest species. It is legal to hunt wolves freely during hunting season (October to February) or out of hunting season if one obtains a special permit. Also, anyone may search for wolf pups and take them from the den, and local hunting organizations pay for the wolf pups that are killed. Thus, human persecution markedly limits the wolf distribution and population in Belarus. Wolf numbers fluctuate since hunting goes on intensively in winter, so in spring before pups are born, wolf numbers are depressed. Census studies conducted in recent years during the early winter estimate the Belarus wolf population to be between 1,500 and 2,000 individuals.

To gather data on the diet of wolves in Belarus, a study was conducted by the Vertebrate Predation Research Group of the Institute of Zoology (Research Group.) In eastern Belarus, for



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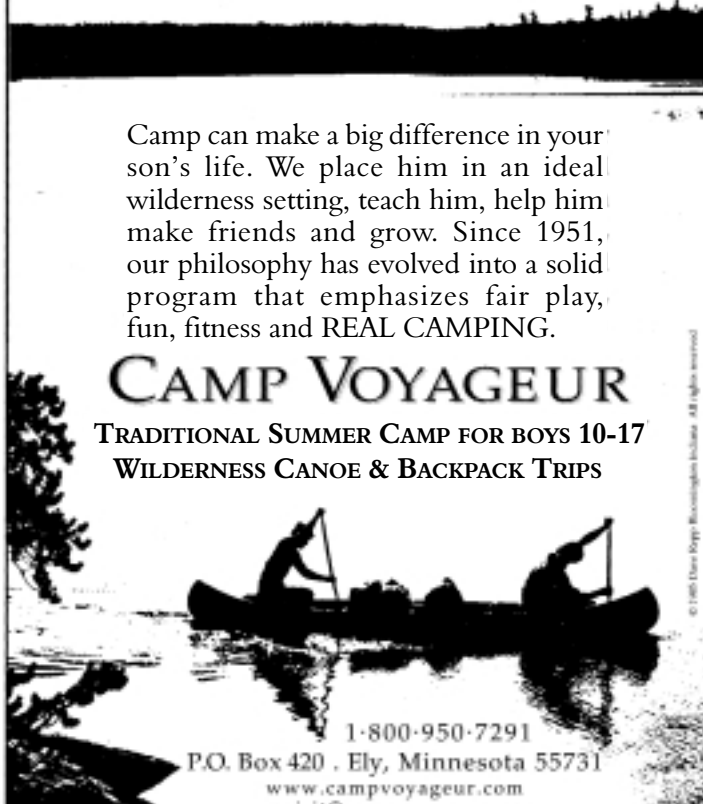
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example, the study revealed that wolves consumed wild ungulates when these animals were numerous. However, in years when wild ungulate numbers were low, wolves preyed on medium- and small-sized wild animals, such as beavers, and on domestic livestock. The rate of wolf depredation on domestic animals and the appearance of wolves both in and around rural villages increased exponentially when wild ungulate numbers declined, and decreased when wild ungulates began to recover.

To take into account both conservation aims and the demands of limiting damage to wild ungulates and livestock, a bold national action plan has been developed in Belarus. It is a two-part project. The first part is a study on numbers of wolves and their diet, both wild prey and livestock. The second and larger portion of the project is the management of the wolf population, taking into account both the need to decrease depredation on livestock and the need to save the wolf as a part of the country's biodiversity.

In the extended woodlands of Belarus, the plan recommends keeping all wolf packs but controlling the number of individuals within the pack. Breeding adults will be retained,



Vadim Sidorovich



**Distribution of Wolves in Belarus**  
Legend:

- The wolf is a common species; the whole district is occupied by wolves; approximately one pack covers an area of 200–300 sq. km. (80–120 sq. mi.).
- Wolf packs occupy an area of 400–600 sq. km. (160–240 sq. mi.); there is much area that is rarely visited by wolves.
- There are few residential wolves.

and population control will be done through “pup searching” by specially trained personnel whose goal will be to save the breeding adults and to cull all but one pup in each pack. Reproduction numbers will be maintained by pups in dens that will not be discovered deep in the vast forested areas of Belarus. Additionally, hunting will be recommended as a measure to limit the number of wolves.

Such an approach to population control of wolves in Belarus may seem drastic; however, it might be a great step toward combining contradictory aims: limiting the damage

from wolves and conserving the wolf as an important component of biodiversity. Moreover, such an approach to wolf management will promote a demographically well-structured population since the majority of wolf packs will be maintained instead of being eradicated each year. ■

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*To learn more about Belarus, please visit [www.ecoethno.org](http://www.ecoethno.org).*