

Wolves of the World

WOLVES IN BELARUS

Researchers Begin Study of Wolves in Remote Country

by John Griffiths

Sandwiched between Poland to the west, Latvia and Lithuania to the north, Russia to the east and Ukraine to the south, the little-known former Soviet republic of Belarus is a small country, about the size of the United Kingdom. Despite its size, Belarus is rich in wildlife and landscape diversity. The northern portion, known as the Lake District, is dominated by almost continuous coniferous forests running along the border with Russia. The rough terrain is crisscrossed by a dense network of rivers and streams.

Numerous lakes, bogs and marshes dot this wild region. The southern part of Belarus is characterized by a landscape of broadleaf forests and rivers with vast waterlogged floodplains containing important bird and mammal species.

Belarus has suffered terrible hardships since a nuclear reactor at Chernobyl in Ukraine exploded in 1986, spreading radiation (Belarus received 70 percent of the fallout) and leaving many areas too contaminated for human habitation. The exclusion zone, established in the chaotic aftermath of the accident, is supposed to be off-limits to

people. Although a few residents have returned to their homes, the absence of humans has allowed wildlife, including wolves, moose, roe deer and wild boars, to flourish. The northern and central regions of Belarus are home to perhaps 1,500 to 1,800 wolves. However, recent studies in neighboring Russian and Poland show that wolf populations regularly cross back and forth across national borders. That phenomenon combined with a lack of data make population estimates unreliable.

Wolves in Belarus prey on large ungulates (elk and deer) and on wild boars. Wolves occasionally kill livestock on farms in areas where wild prey species are scarce, as they were from 1990 to 1996, according to a study by zoologist Dr. Vadim Sidorovich. During the years between 1997 and 2000, however, ungulates began to recover, and the frequency of predation on domestic animals was reduced.



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Above: Dr. Vadim Sidorovich was fortunate to witness the denning behavior of the breeding female of a wolf pack in Rossony. She dug her dens in hills of sand or peat.



Right: Dr. Vadim Sidorovich entered one of the dens very briefly to check the number and sexes of the pups remaining inside. He counted three females and four males.

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Nevertheless, as in other countries around the world, wolves in Belarus have long been persecuted because of fear and misunderstanding. The wolf in Belarus is largely unprotected except in nature reserves. It is designated a game species, and bounties ranging between 60 and 70 Euros are paid to hunters for each wolf killed. This is big money in a country where the average monthly wage is 230 Euros.

In 2005, Sidorovich assigned a research group made up of a small number of his Ph.D. students to carry out a wolf population study in three areas of the country. The main study areas are in Rossony and Poozerre, forested areas along the border with Russia. Although still in its infancy, the main purpose of the study is to compare the movements and numbers of wolves in these border areas to those of two stable packs located in Naliboki Forest in the center of the country.

As part of this work, Sidorovich plans to carry out an annual wolf population census, which will begin in November and continue periodically throughout the winter months, ending in late spring. In early summer, the research group will observe the movements of wolves as well as their hunting behavior and pack dynamics.

While working on data collection, Sidorovich was fortunate to witness the denning behavior of the

breeding female of a wolf pack in Rossony. She used not one den but several, up to a kilometer apart. Deep in the forest and close to water, she dug her dens in hills of sand or peat. Sidorovich observed that she often moved the pups one by one between the den sites. Whether or not the wolf knew she was being observed remains a mystery, but it could explain her behavior.

During one of the wolf's regular outings to move the pups, Sidorovich entered one of the dens very briefly to check the number and sexes of the pups remaining inside. He counted a total of three females and four males. After taking photographs of the pups and the inside of the den, Sidorovich quickly retreated to a safe distance. Upon her return, the female checked the area around the den and continued her routine of moving the pups.

Sidorovich will continue his work for as long as funds will allow, hoping to establish links with other scientists in the world of wolf research. His goal is to establish a wolf management and education program promoting protection of the wolf and its habitats and to teach the people of Belarus about the role it plays in the natural world. ■

John Griffiths has worked with wolf scientists at the Central Forest Biosphere Reserve in Russia for the past ten years. He recently worked in Belarus with Dr. Vadim Sidorovich. He lives in Liverpool, England.

WOLVES IN INDIA

Desert Wolves of India

by Cornelia Hutt

I wish everyone could see the good side of the wolf like Rudyard Kipling did in The Jungle Book.

—Dr. Yadvendradev Jhala

If asked to identify a major predator in India, most people would probably name the tiger. We think of Shere Khan, the menacing jungle cat in Kipling's mythical story about a child raised by a wolf family. In fact, wolves are also major predators that live in several regions of India, but they are often viewed as dangerous to people. For this reason and because of economic competition, coexistence between wolves and humans is difficult.

Dr. Yadvendradev Jhala, a member of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Wolf Specialist Group, has devoted 15 years to studying wolves in India. In the beautifully filmed and eloquently narrated BBC documentary *Desert Wolves of India*, Dr. Jhala takes the viewer with him and his research assistant, Kartikeya Singh Chauhan, as they search for signs of an ancient race of wolf whose home is the arid region of western India near the border of Pakistan. Little wild prey exist in this virtual desert. Therefore, wolves are sustained by feeding on domestic animals, thus fueling deep-rooted hatred among the local people.

In addition to supporting wild animals such as wolves, jackals, hyenas and honey badgers, western India is home to the Ribari, a pastoral