

A Rough Guide to Wolves in Western Europe

Once present throughout continental Europe, after centuries of persecution the wolf had disappeared from most of its former range, particularly in western Europe, by the middle of the 20th century.

In the last quarter of the century, environmental attitudes began to change, and the wolf was belatedly granted legal protection. This protection, combined with legislation and conventions aimed at conserving Europe's natural habitats, flora and fauna, has enabled the wolf to expand from its isolated mountain stronghold to recolonise (unlike in North America, there has been no reintroduction of wolves in Europe) areas where it has not been seen for over seventy years.

This article looks at the current status of wolves in the western continental European countries, where wolf populations suffered most at the hands of human expansion and development.



Iberian wolf *Canis lupus signatus*

R. Morley

The Iberian peninsula (Spain and Portugal) is home to what some consider to be a unique subspecies, the Iberian wolf, *Canis lupus signatus*, distinguished from other European wolves by its smaller size, reddish coat and characteristic dark markings. In Portugal, the Iberian wolf survives mainly in the mountainous north, in Peneda-Gerês National Park and Montesinho Natural Park, and Alvão Natural Park in north-central Portugal. There is also a small and geographically isolated population to the south of the river Douro. The most recent census of wolf numbers, carried out in 2002/3, estimates around 300 wolves in 55-60 packs. The population appears to be relatively stable, with no significant change since the last census in 1994/95.

In Peneda-Gerês, wolves subsist mainly on free-ranging horses and cattle, causing significant economic damage, and, despite low human population density in the region, there is a high level of illegal shooting and poisoning. In Montesinho and Alvão there are sufficient levels of wild prey (red and roe deer, wild boar and goats) to keep conflict with humans at a lower level. Wolves south of the Douro often visit garbage dumps.

Habitat loss due to human development and, in recent years, forest fires are a significant threat to survival and expansion of Portugal's small wolf population, as well as fragmentation of habitat by the construction of new roads (particularly the major IP3 highway) and dams. The population south of the Douro is split into two, in the west and in the east, close to the Spanish border. This eastern population is only fifty kilometres from a similarly vulnerable population in Spain, and cross border co-operation to connect the two would greatly enhance their future chances of survival.

The Nature Conservation Institute has implemented several measures for wolf conservation in Portugal, including improving the compensation system for damage to livestock, and introduction of a livestock guarding dog programme. There are also programmes for reintroduction and reinforcement of native prey species, such as roe deer and wild goats.

According to the latest International Conservation Union (IUCN) figures, there are approximately 2,000 Iberian wolves in Spain, and this is believed to be increasing. Most of these are found in the north of the country, in the regions of northern Castilla, León, Galicia, Zamora and Asturias. Some interchange between wolves in Spain and Portugal occurs across the border in Galicia and Zamora. There are small, isolated and highly controversial populations south of the river Duero around Guadalajara and in the Sierra Morena.

Wolf diet varies according to the region, with Galician wolves relying heavily on scavenging around chicken and pig farms, whilst to the north in the Cantabrian mountains, roe deer and wild boar are the main prey. In Castilla, rabbits are thought to be a significant prey item. Livestock depredation is significant, particularly in the Cantabrian mountains, and consequently there is a high level of illegal poaching.

Wolves in Spain, particularly those south of the river Duero, have survived several attempts to reduce legal pro-

tection in recent years, and wolf control measures have been implemented in the Picos de Europa in response to complaints from livestock owners. In the Sierra de la Culebra, where wolf density is believed to be one of the highest in western Europe, trophy hunting as a method of management has also attracted criticism from environmental groups.

In 2004 a wolf, thought to have originated in Italy, was reputedly found in the Sierra del Cadí, having made its way over the Pyrenees from France. This however appears to have been an isolated incident, and the Iberian wolf continues to be geographically remote from the nearest neighbouring population of the European grey wolf - *Canis lupus lupus* - in France and Italy.

Italy has been another traditional stronghold for the wolf in Europe, although in the early 1970s there were as few as 100 wolves in the Appenine mountains that form the spine of Italy, mainly in the Abruzzo region. Protected by law since 1971, a combination of increased environmental awareness, reintroduction of roe deer and wild boar for hunting, and a demographic shift away from the countryside to towns and cities, leaving large uninhabited areas and allowing farms to revert to woodland (a trend echoed in Spain, and which continues to this day in other European countries, improving conditions for wolves and other wildlife), resulted in an increase in Italy's wolf population to the current level of around 500 individuals.

In January of this year there was much media excitement after a seven-month old wolf was hit by a car in the Castelli Romani National Park, on the outskirts of Rome, the first wolf in the region for more than seventy years. This was claimed by conservationists as a sign of Italy's success in protecting its wolves, but farmers in the area have already reported livestock losses.

It is believed that poachers kill around twenty percent of Italy's wolves each year, and this has fuelled controversy over wolf management, with some biologists claiming that Italy's wolves are not suffering despite this illegal killing (the IUCN lists the status of the wolf in Italy as 'increasing'), and that the time has come to reinstate some limited legal hunting to manage numbers and prevent a backlash against the wolf.

In 1992, wolves from Italy crossed the Maritime Alps into Mercantour National Park in the south east of France, the first wolves to settle in France for seventy years. Despite high profile protests from livestock owners throughout the 1990s, the population has grown to the current official estimate of 55 wolves in 13 administrative regions, although some believe the real number of wolves is as high as 120 and are calling for stricter control of numbers.



European wolf *Canis lupus lupus*

V. Bologov

Despite falling livestock losses after the introduction of preventative measures and the pledging of four million Euros in government aid to provide guarding dogs and extra shepherds, in July 2004 the French Environment Minister announced a wolf cull in order to appease livestock owners. Four wolves were targeted, around ten percent of the population at the time. The cull went ahead despite legal challenges, and this year a further cull of six wolves has been approved. In yet another high profile incident, a wolf was recently killed after five heifers and a calf were killed near Isère.

Wolves from Italy have also dispersed northwards, into Switzerland. The first wolf, a male, was seen in the canton of Valais in 1995, and there are now believed to be at between six and fourteen wolves in the south eastern cantons of Valais, Graubünden and Ticino. This recolonisation has been encouraged by an increase in protected areas and improved land management practices leading to a recovery of mountain forests and prey animals such as red and roe deer and chamois.

The Swiss government pays compensation for livestock killed by wolves, and has initiated a project to provide shepherds and dogs to guard herds in areas where wolves have been sighted. Despite this, opposition to the return of the wolf is strong, and in 2001 regulations were introduced allowing the shooting of any wolf believed to have killed at least fifty sheep in a four-month period, or twenty-five in a single month. This was subsequently low-

ered to thirty-five sheep in a four-month period, and if losses continue, may be lowered further still, to 15 sheep within a year. Seven wolves have so far been killed under these regulations.

Swiss authorities have joined a growing movement calling for the wolf to be reclassified under the Bern Convention from “strictly protected” to “protected”, in order to allow for more flexible management.

To the east, wolves have migrated out of Poland, taking advantage of disused Soviet military training areas along the former East German/Polish border to establish two breeding packs in eastern Saxony, with local biologists predicting a third pack will expand the population in the direction of Berlin to the north.

Wolves were exterminated from Germany in the 19th century, but individuals have occasionally made the journey from Poland, usually ending up shot or killed in collisions with cars or trains. Germany introduced legislation to protect the wolf in 1990, and the first wolf of the new generation crossed the river Neisse from Poland in 1995, followed by a mate in 1998, and the first pups were born in 2000. By 2003 a second breeding pair had established themselves in an adjacent territory.

Some damage to livestock has occurred since wolves reappeared, but the use of electric fencing has helped to minimise conflict so far. In common with areas of Italy, Switzerland and the interior of Spain where wolves are expanding, this part of Germany has low human population density, with farms abandoned in the last few decades as people moved to the cities in search of work, leaving behind an elderly population and a declining birth-rate. It is this rural decline that holds the key to future recolonisation by wolves and other wildlife throughout Europe, which has 22 of the 25 countries with the lowest birth-rate globally – it is estimated that Europe will lose 41 million people by 2030 if current trends continue. Changes in the Common Agricultural Policy will also affect land-use in rural areas, making it more profitable to let the woodland regenerate rather than farm the land, creating more suitable habitat for wolves and their prey.

Of the other countries in western continental Europe, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg do not currently have wolf populations, although habitat restoration schemes and a continuation of wildlife friendly European Community policy-making, combined with demographic changes, may allow dispersing wolves to recolonise in time, with Austria already preparing a wolf management plan in anticipation of wolves moving across the borders from Slovakia, Italy or Switzerland.

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