

Nouvelles

Wolf at our doorstep - The Wolf's European comeback is approaching our region

This article, published in German in Regulus 4/2014, is by Laurent Schley and Raoul Reding and can be downloaded [here](#).

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The Wolf (c) Raymond Gloden

Extermination and re-colonisation

The last Wolf in Luxembourg was shot on 24 April 1893. So wolves have been absent from our area for more than a hundred years. In that time, all natural habitats have suffered a high degree of destruction or fragmentation. So the comeback of the Wolf has always seemed an unlikely prospect. Until now...

Species protection programmes alone, bolstered by international protection agreements like CITES, the Bern Convention and the EU flora, fauna and habitats directive, have enabled small remnant populations to stabilise and expand – slowly but surely. Wolves reappeared in France in 1992, with Germany reporting in 2001 the first successful reproduction since the great extermination.

Wolves have high reproduction potential and are extremely adaptable. As a result, there can be no doubt that they are well on their way to re-colonising Western Europe. And it can only be a matter of time before the first wolves are spotted in Luxembourg, or at least in the Greater region.

Origin and expansion



Agenda

- 22.07
Bee in Solidarity with Pollinators
- 29.07
Escapardenne et réserves naturelles
- 05.08
Jardin méditerranéen à Schwebsange
- 14.08 - 15.08
Assomption
- 18.08
Visite guidée Schlammwiss by night
- 26.08
Porte ouverte à la Schlammwiss



The remnant populations, scattered throughout Europe, were the 'base camp' for this extraordinary ongoing expansion (the green areas on the map show where wolves are currently resettling their ancestral territories). Polish wolves are moving into Germany; the Carpathian population is expanding into the Czech Republic; Baltic wolves are heading northwards; France and Switzerland are being re-colonised from Italy; and the Iberian population too is covering an ever larger area.

In France, wolves are now to be found in virtually all mountainous and hilly regions. The French Alps hold the largest population, with more than twenty packs. This population is presently expanding into the Jura and the Vosges, and westwards into the Massif Central and the Pyrenees. The first pair was spotted in the Vosges in 2012, followed by the first cubs – and hence the first pack – in 2013. In 2014 the first wolves appeared not all that far from Luxembourg's borders: in the Mame, at the Lac de Madine, and near Walsheid. The German-Polish population too is growing fast, centred in the Lausitz, followed by Lower Saxony and other parts of Germany. Germany currently accounts for at least 25 packs, seven pairs and thirteen individuals.

Biology and behaviour

Wolves are highly sociable animals, most of them living in packs. A pack comprises two parents (the alpha pair) and their cubs, making a total of 5 – 10 wolves per pack. The first-year cubs help the parents in hunting and finding food and in bringing up the next litter. Once the cubs are two years old they leave the pack or are ejected by the alpha pair. They then set out to establish packs of their own, often covering huge distances from their home territory: from several hundred kilometres to as much as 2000 km. Depending on landform, food availability and outside interference, a typical territory in central Europe can vary between 150 and 350 square kilometres.

In terms of habitat and food, wolves are highly adaptable. They can thrive in just about any environment – from intensive farmland to untouched woodland. In central Europe the main food items are Wild boar, Red deer and Roe deer. As such, wolves can help hunters keep these populations in check. Further prey items are Fox, Hare, Rabbit and various small rodents. At the bottom end of the scale, there are insects, amphibians, carrion and food waste from refuse dumps. Occasionally, wolves will take domestic animals, mainly sheep.

Herd protection

Wolves generally shy away from direct contact with humans. But sometimes there are conflict situations, e.g. when a Wolf takes an unprotected domestic animal, like a sheep. Various methods have proved effective in Europe for preventing this from happening, or at least for lessening the risk. These include electrified mesh fencing, sheepdogs and human shepherding. In most cases, there are government subsidies available for measure like these. Where all else fails, any financial losses attract government compensation. This is the kind of management regime we should be building up in the Ardennes region, including Luxembourg.

Instances of humans being attacked by wolves are extremely rare. Most have occurred where people were trying to save their animals, which were themselves under wolf attack. Rabies is also a significant factor. Of only nine deadly attacks on humans recorded in Europe over the past fifty years, five have been attributed to rabid wolves.

Future prospects

The Wolf has an image problem. People have traditionally feared wolves and their habit of taking farm animals. If the Wolf really is to stage a sustained comeback, people have to feel easier about co-existing with wolves, and farm and domestic animals need to be protected. Luxembourg's Natural History Museum is currently running an acceptance study to gauge the attitude of the public at large and of special interest groups like sheep breeders and hunters. The results are eagerly awaited.

The important thing is for wolves to be viewed in a realistic light. The Wolf is a predatory carnivore. It normally avoids humans and plays an important ecological role as a top predator. But it can also be the source of conflict and of problems. When talking about the wolf, the two extreme positions – glorification and demonisation – are equally inappropriate: what is needed is a realistic approach and a management system which defuses potential conflict.

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