



Wolf - *Canis lupus*

The wolf is a charismatic large carnivore and the ancestor of the domestic dog. It looks quite like a large German Shepherd although with a shallower chest, broader head and thicker neck. Wolves are typically grey to greyish brown although their colour varies quite a bit across their range. In more northern populations they also have a bit of a reddish tint on the head, shoulders and neck. Wolves also have a distinctive collar or ruff of fur around their cheeks. They can be around 2 metres long including the tail. In captivity they've been recorded living up to 20 years although as is commonly the case, the life-span tends to be shorter in the wild. They have an incredible sense of smell and great sense of hearing. Their eye-sight is good at close range and they're also good at detecting movement at a distance.

Where we find them

Wolves were once one of the most widely distributed carnivores on the planet and they can survive in most terrestrial habitats. However they were heavily persecuted across their range. They were wiped out in England about 500 years ago and in Scotland in around the 1740s. However they are actually making a comeback across large parts of mainland Europe. They are both very intelligent and very sociable animals. Since they've been so heavily persecuted by humans, they've learned to become very wary of us and they are largely nocturnal.

Wolves usually hunt in packs and the size of the pack typically depends on the size of the prey they usually hunt in that area. A pack is made up of an alpha pair and their offspring. As wolves are such sociable animals, they communicate in a variety of ways including howling and other vocalisations, as well as through scent and body language.

Diet

Wolves eat a diverse range of prey including deer, wild boar, rodents, birds, carrion and occasionally livestock. However the impact on farm animals is usually greatly exaggerated.

Reproduction

The wolf's mating season is between February and April. The gestation is 63 days and the 3-7 cubs are born in March - May. The cubs are born in a den which can be an underground burrow or a cave. The parents and the rest of the pack help to feed the cubs.

Tracks and sign

Their scat can look similar to domestic dogs but tends to contain much more evidence of wild prey such as fur, feathers and shards of bone. When a pack has killed a large animal such as a

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deer the alpha female and male will get to go to the carcass first. They will usually go for the vital organs as a prized part of the kill; as these are so rich in blood their droppings will tend to be blackish in appearance.

Wolf tracks can look very similar to those of a large dog and they're similar in that they have four toes and are very symmetrical. With a wolf, the tracks tend to be a bit more elongated and as with the fox, you can draw a line behind the leading two toes without that line cutting into the two toes behind them.

Ecology

Wolves are known as a keystone species. This means that their presence in the ecosystem has huge benefits for loads of other species in that same ecosystem. For example there is a classic case study in Yellowstone National Park. When wolves were reintroduced there they had a really positive impact. They helped to reduce the overgrazing by elk that was happening down by the riverside. As a result, riverside trees started to regenerate and this encouraged beavers back into the area. Then the beavers themselves created dams and pools which were great habitat for amphibians and fish and many other forms of life including moose as well which like to graze in those wet pools. The wildflowers also regenerated and insect populations flourished. There were so many other benefits and it just goes to illustrate how just having this one animal in the ecosystem can have positive knock on effects for so much else around.

There have been proposals to reintroduce wolves to the Highlands of Scotland. Research shows that there is more than enough prey in the form of red deer which are actually currently out of balance and overgrazing these upland ecosystems. They could also be benefits for tourism and local economies by attracting people to the area who would be really keen to see wolves. However there is so much misunderstanding around wolves that there would need to be a lot of education and change in attitude before we could really welcome them back.

Folklore

It's a real shame that this intelligent and shy animal gets such bad press. Fairytales and other portrayals have contributed to that sinister reputation. But the reality is that wolves present almost no threat to humans. Human fatalities from wolves are extremely rare. Statistically far more people are killed being struck by lightning or by being attacked by domestic dogs or even horses than they are by wolves. The wolf hasn't always been despised, in many hunter gatherer cultures it was respected as a fellow hunter in the landscape.

I've been very fortunate to have been able to track wolves in the mountains of Slovakia and they're so shy that we had very little chance of seeing them. But it was such a thrill even seeing the signs of them and the fact that they had passed by the night before. It felt like a real treat to be in a landscape where these incredible animals roam.

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Tags

- Wolf, Tracks, Sign, Ecology, Knowledge, Animal, Predator, Carnivore, Teamwork