



The Killer Wolves of Maiwand

Wolf, A Symbol Of Troubled Times

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Manhunt

I first met Dmitry Vasnetsov when he was an ordinary machine operator. Once, in the mid-1980s, the future farmer waxed eloquent trying to convince me of the advantages of "non-regulated production units" schemes, and I was hardly surprised to learn that he soon became chief agronomist at the Kolobovsky state farm, in the Volgograd region. Then he became one of the first people in the region to trade off a relatively cushy job for the precarious existence of a private farmer. Today it is a fair-to-middling operation. The farm is not a thriving business, but the eight peasant families have little cause to grumble.

Wolf hunting has become a substantial source of livelihood for Dmitry and his fellow villagers. In the past season, he killed 11 gray predators and nine so far this year. This is a lucrative trade: Regional governments pay bounties of 1,200 rubles for each female wolf slain, 1,000 for a male wolf, and 300 for a pup.

The hunt dragged on, so I, accompanied by Kolka, Dmitry's youngest son, in his seventh grade at school, went out and walked toward the forest. On our way, the boy told me that since last fall, wolves have been hanging out at a local cemetery. At first, they killed several dogs there, but in November, a couple of half-eaten bull-ock carcasses were found among the graves.

"Bullocks? At a cemetery?" I was stunned.

"Well yes," the boy nodded calmly. "They roam wherever they like."

Kolka also told me some details about the recent tragic events in the neighboring village of Tsarevo. A female wolf had attacked an elderly man and then, five days later, a teenager. Although in both instances people rushed to their rescue as soon as they heard their screams for help, making the animal run away, both died of their wounds.



These are not the only victims of wolves. The death toll increased especially last fall and this winter. In the Sredneakhtubinsk district, a wolf bit five shepherds. Only two survived the attack. In the village of Glazunovskaya, two wolves attacked a tractor driver as he was trying to repair his machine. The man survived but received severe injuries, becoming a permanent invalid. In the neighboring Astrakhan region, 16 wolf attacks on humans were registered in the same period. Three people died as a result.

Wolves: an Aerial View

It is chilly in the clearing. The snow is damp and Kolka and I blaze a narrow trail. If you move a little deeper into the forest you will immediately feel the arduousness and hazards involved in the hours-long hunt for the animal, which requires patience, stamina, and excellent weapons handling skills.

Hunters themselves admit that it is a real challenge hunting wolves in local conditions. In central Russia they hunt timber wolves aboard the maneuverable Buran snow vehicles. In the Lower Volga region by far the most effective vehicle is the helicopter, one flight hour costing the regional budget 10,500 rubles. On average, wolves are hunted at a rate of one per hour. At first glance this seems a little too costly. But the fact is that if a population, which is roughly 1,200 wolves, is left alone during a hunting season, by fall it will have tripled in size.

Furthermore, statistics show what harm wolves can cause to agriculture. Two years ago, they did 4.3 million rubles' worth of damage across the region, as compared to 5.1 million rubles last year.

When the issue came up later in the evening, Dmitry said he suspected the figures were probably blown up: Presumably, this was done to write off the loss of cattle as a result of other causes. Even so, Vasnetsov is convinced that the use of helicopters in wolf hunting is well justified: "We get no peace with the gray ones around."

The hunting expedition proved a failure. The hunters had tracked down a large male and, judging by the blood trail, wounded him, but the animal escaped into the thicket.

As Dmitry gave me an account of the chase, his wife, Antonina, was plucking the wildfowl he had brought. Although his farm is basically a live-stock operation, gamebird, hare, and berries are among the family's diet staples. Until a couple of years ago Dmitry hunted roe deer, but now it seems to have disappeared from the flood-lands, which is blamed directly on the proliferating number of timber wolves.



Red Wolves Move In

Analysis of wolf extermination dynamics in the Volgograd region over the past decades reveals a rather strange picture. In the early-mid-1980s, between 20 and 40 wolves were slain each year. In 2001, the number rose to 738, further rising to 820 last year. This wolf population explosion and the growing number of animals hunted has to do with the fact that there was no centralized hunting during the most difficult period for the country's economy (1993-96). There was simply no money for that. Not surprisingly, the wolf population increased substantially. In recent years the regional budget has been providing funds for wolf hunting, in the form of bounty. As a result, the wolf population was brought down to around 1,200, but according to Viktor Zubov, head of the regional hunting and game administration, this is six times as much as the biological optimum.

Over dinner, the hospitable host showed me an issue of a district newspaper front-paging a dire warning from the sanitation service: There has been a marked incidence of rabies among domestic animals. The residents are asked to exercise vigilance.

"We spent several months trying to identify the source of the scourge," Dmitry says. "Recently veterinary experts confirmed that it was due to wolf migration."

Back in Volgograd, I went to the regional committee for the environment and natural resources, where I was shown expert conclusions pointing to the growing scale of the threat, including the mass migration of the ill-famed red wolf, which differs from the indigenous timber wolf not only in the color of fur but above all in its marked aggressiveness. Unlike its gray counterparts, the red wolf is not afraid of humans and can enter settlements and ambush a victim.

They say that predators from the south moved to the Volga banks because of the hostilities in the Caucasus republics. Even if this is the case, experts believe it is but a minor factor in the wolf migration. The main cause of the migration is a substantial decline in the game population. In other words, wolves moved north from the Stavropol region, Dagestan, Chechnya, and Kalmykia in search of food. Meanwhile, it is known for sure that a certain part of wolf packs has rabies. In particular, last year Elista city authorities officially announced that rabid wolves had been spotted in the Maloderbetovsky district, less than 100 kilometers from Volgograd.