

## WOLF

Grey wolves are carnivores that often occur close to man. Sometimes living in impressive packs, with their imposing stature and howls that can dominate an entire landscape, they would have a frightening reputation even without their criminal record.

Early records from North America gave rather damning evidence against wolves, and great pioneers such as Lewis and Clark had some hairy tales to tell (Lewis 1997). But later, scientists denied it all. David Mech from Minnesota is undoubtedly the world's wolf expert. He did his PhD on predation by wolves on Isle Royal, Michigan, and he has made a long, very productive career out of studying the animals in America, writing several books in the process. Mech states categorically that there is no evidence of any wild wolf in North America ever having attacked people 'deliberately', except when rabid. He mentions several newspaper reports, but, in all cases when these were followed up, such reports appeared to be false (Mech 1970).

Mech concludes that one cannot say that wolves are totally harmless to man, and perhaps an odd case has occurred of an attack on people. But if so, it would be a great rarity. In fact, just such a rarity occurred in 2001, when a wolf carrying a radio-collar attacked a child in Alaska. Fortunately, there were no lethal consequences, but it showed that one can never say never.

The almost complete absence of wolf attacks on people in North America is confirmed by several other authorities, and it must be genuine, not just resting on a lack of information. It is in striking contrast to recent history in Europe, where stood the cradle of Little Red Riding Hood. That fairy tale is based on actual horrendous incidents, which were not that rare either. Why wolves in Europe (and Asia as well) should behave so differently from those in North America is still quite unknown – but the data show indisputably that wolves were (and still are) regular predators on humans, often on children.

In early 1996 I was working in Belarus, participating in a radio-tracking study of European mink. We lived in Zadrach, a small village close to the border with Russia, near Gorodok. It is very remote, with about a dozen families of peasant farmers; there were no cars (just a couple of tractors), no telephone and no shops. People walked or went on skis to go anywhere, and in winter, with over half a metre of snow, life was very difficult. Wolves were and are common, and they often raided the village in search of domestic dogs or livestock. On 21 February in the late afternoon, just 3 days before I arrived, 60-year-old

Michael Amosov returned from Zadrach to his house in the hamlet of Bolonitza. He was a man known to my colleague there, Dr Vadim Sidorovich.

Amosov had to walk for about 3 km through the forest, along a clear cart road. At least, he set off from Zadrach, but he did not arrive at his house. The next day, many wolf tracks were found at a site about halfway to Bolonitza, the snow was churned up and there was blood. However, the weather was very bad, and when I left 2 weeks later, Amosov's remains had not yet been found. There was no doubt in anyone's mind about what had occurred, because wolf predation just happens there; it is a fact of life.

Sidorovich told me that 2 months earlier, in December 1995, a previous wolf victim in the area had been taken in Hvoschno, about 15 km from Zadrach. A woodcutter of some 55 years old was out in the forest on his own, and when he did not return parties went out to search for him. Two days later the few bits that remained of the man were found, surrounded by wolf tracks – another victim. But perhaps the most harrowing incident took place only two weeks before that, when a 9-year-old schoolgirl was taken by wolves in nearby Usviatyda. In that case a teacher had kept her late at school, and she walked back home in the dark along a lonely track. Her father was worried about her being late, and went out to investigate in the dark. He found her head, the snow spattered with blood and covered with wolf tracks. Later, in

These events happened recently near a village and in an area that I happened to visit. No one there collects the statistics, and the authorities have other things to do. But I could not help wondering how much more of this would be going on there in the endless wilds of Belarus and Russia, never reported except in the odd newspaper article. Sidorovich, a scientist with vast experience in the area, informed me that wolf attacks are not at all uncommon. There are many wolves, and people are surprised that anyone in the west should doubt that wolves kill people.

Such horrific events must have taken place in Europe for as long as man and wolves have lived there. Almost unbelievable to me now, they happened and were well documented in my own country, Holland (Geraerds 1981; Poortvliet 1994). The date was 13 August 1810, near the village of Helden, only a few miles from where I grew up over a century later. Bartholomé Dahmen, 9 years old, was helping his elder brother and sister with herding a cow and a goat, about 100 yards from