

Personal Encounter

The Mysterious Wolves of Belarus

by Shannon Barber-Meyer

It was just after 3 a.m. as we very quietly exited the van, making sure our water-resistant clothes didn't make too much noise. A wolf researcher howled into the cold and murky mist. We waited in darkness, hoping for an answer. A single wolf howl from about 300 meters in front of us broke the silence. We peered into the agricultural and forested expanse, straining to get a glimpse of the wolf in the faint starlight. Suddenly, from behind, another howl countered. The expedition's leader explained that we were standing between two female wolves and their pups—both being tended to by the same male!

Our group, comprised of scientists, conservationists and policy-makers from over 20 countries, gathered in Belarus for the conference "European Large Carnivores: Problems of Small-sized Populations, Study on Reproduction, and Challenges of Reintroduction Programs." The conference was held at an ecotourism resort in Krasny Bor, an ecologi-

cal research base and game husbandry area, and was hosted by the Center for Biological Resources of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus along with a private company. Belarus is a landlocked country just north of Ukraine on the eastern border of Russia and west of Poland. Krasny Bor is a semi-natural, forested area in northern Belarus. The area contains numerous glacial lakes and rivers and hosts gray wolves, lynx (at about 23.5 kg or 52 lbs., quite a bit larger than the lynx in the US), brown bears, and multiple prey species such as bison, red deer, roe deer, wild boar and moose.

Foreign travel to Belarus can be tightly regulated, depending on one's citizenship, so we were very excited to have the opportunity to learn firsthand about these mysterious wolves of Belarus. Reports of unusual behavior among wild wolves, wolves breeding as yearlings, hybridizing with dogs, and producing multiple litters tended by a single male, had us hungry for details!

At the conference I presented research on the "Proportion of Breeders by Age Class in Wild Female Gray Wolves," coauthored by L. David Mech, to approximately 50 conference attendees. Researchers exchanged information on large-predator ecology, conservation and management, visited several local enclosures where large ungulates are being raised as prey for large carnivores and for human hunting, and took time out to feast on national dishes like draniki (fried potato pancake).

Following the conference, we departed for a 3½-day field excursion in Naliboki Forest, approximately 80 kilometers (50 miles) northwest of Belarus' capital, Minsk, to examine wolf denning habitat. Our expedition leader Dr. Vadim Sidorovich is a wildlife research scientist at the Center for Biological Resources of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus and author of 122 scientific articles and six books on predators. In addition to possessing an incredible depth of knowledge about local natural history and Belarusian history, he also discovered 41 wolf dens with pups during 2000-2013 in the approximately 1,900 square kilometers (735 square miles) encompassed within Naliboki Forest. While in



The sun rises over the edge of Naliboki Forest where wolves howled in response to the researchers. The agriculture in this picture is intended to provide food for the large carnivore prey species in the area.

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Naliboki, Sidorovich expertly led us on wolf-howling surveys starting at 3 a.m. and hikes through the forest dotted with brilliantly-colored, fantastically-shaped mushrooms in search of wolf, badger and red fox dens. We even detected sign from brown bear and encountered the invasive, but, nevertheless, by my vote, the cutest, raccoon dogs.

Without maps or navigational aids, Sidorovich guided us with his amazing field skills to numerous previously-used dens, described the detailed history of each, and expounded that often wolves will select dens under vegetation or in a burrow to escape mosquitos. International Wolf Center Wolf Curator Lori Schmidt has observed the Center's ambassador wolves selecting similar resting sites to find refuge from flying insects. As we wound our way through the lovely forest, I was struck by how similar the landscape was to the glacially-derived terrain in northeastern Minnesota. It makes sense—Minnesota is known as the “Land of 10,000 Lakes,” likewise, Belarus is nicknamed the “Country of 10,000 Lakes.”

Sidorovich believes the breeding by yearling wolves, hybridization of wolves and dogs, and multi-litter breeding are unusual occurrences, likely a consequence of low wolf population density due to the high human persecution of wolves (in some cases the killing of resident breeding females during the mating season), and also generally high prey densities. His estimates, based in part on winter censuses that he and others have conducted, is that some 800-1,200 wolves inhabit Belarus during early winter and about 600-800 are killed each year. Hunting wolves in Belarus is allowed year-round, but apparently most are killed during December-March. Although Belarus does have an important livestock industry, mostly cows and pigs, the main reason some people favor wolf eradication is because wolves are perceived as competitors for the economic resource of large-ungulate trophy game.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, hunting wolves became much more efficient with newly constructed forest roads and off-road vehicles resulting in



Piero Genovesi

Our group prepares for the 3 a.m. howl survey.

easier access to wolves by hunters. With so many wolves killed each year, how is an overall population of 800-1,200 wolves possible? Sidorovich suspects it is because of relatively high production, such as larger litters during lower wolf densities, earlier breeding of females, multi-breeding packs and, perhaps, dispersal from Russia. The wolf management plan that he authored in 2008 prohibited the killing of wolves in protected natural areas like Naliboki Forest, but there is not always adherence to

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Dr. Vadim Sidorovich describes the history of this particular den.

the prohibition policy, as is sometimes the case elsewhere in the world. Since 2000, wolves in Naliboki Forest have not been heavily persecuted, and Sidorovich estimates there are currently about five to seven packs inside Naliboki.

Sidorovich is interested in conducting further studies of the wolf-dog hybrid situation in and around Naliboki Forest over the next three to five years, and he is searching for sponsors for that research.

During winter 2014-2015 he tracked a female dog and large male wolf that have three pups on the outskirts of Naliboki Forest. It will be interesting to follow his research to learn if the unusual behaviors of the mysterious wolves of Belarus persist. If changes in wolf persecution occur, will breeding yearling wolves, multi-breeding packs, and wolf-dog hybrid packs become more rare? Only research and time will tell! ■



Dr. Barber-Meyer outside of a wolf den in Naliboki Forest. Note the black scat just inside the entrance of the den and to the right.

Dr. Shannon Barber-Meyer is the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) wildlife biologist implementing the Superior National Forest (SNF) Wolf and Deer Project under the direction of Dr. L. David Mech. Prior to joining the USGS, she taught graduate students in Grand Teton National Park, researched tiger conservation in Asia, emperor penguin populations in Antarctica, and helped reintroduce Mexican gray wolves into the Southwest. In 2001 and 2002 as a graduate student Shannon researched optimal foraging of wolves in the SNF and, in 2003-2006, elk calf mortality in Yellowstone National Park.



Belarus landscape.