INTERNATIONAL WOLF

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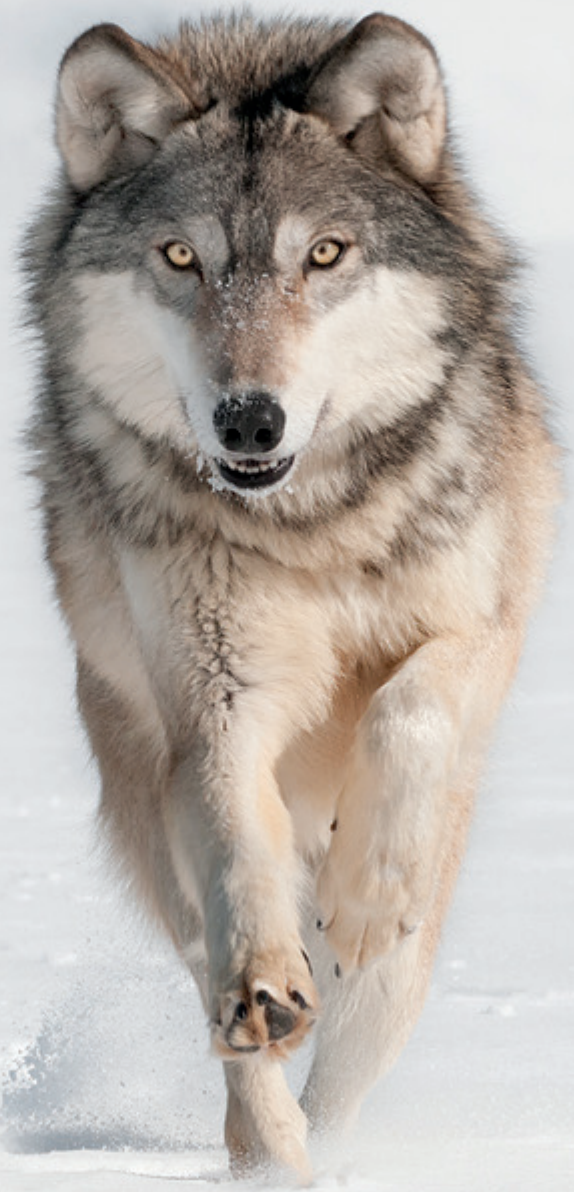


In Many Lands, Wolves Compete, Flourish in Adversity

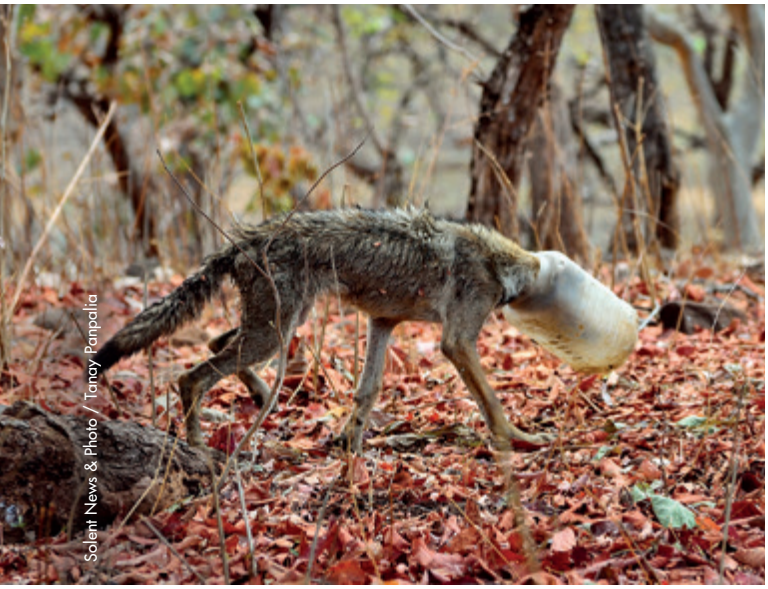
By Tracy O'Connell

Adobe Stock / Martin

INDIA

A malnourished, wild wolf found with a plastic container on its head was rescued when observers called the Nagpur Forest Department and waited with the animal for the rescue team to cut off the container, which had holes that apparently allowed the animal to breathe and drink water, but not to eat.

The Times of India and other media report that accountant and amateur photographer Tanay Panpalia, 26, from Nagpur, was visiting a lake at the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve with his friends when he saw a pack of 10 wolves. The men moved closer to take photos and discovered the unfortunate wolf's plight. "The other wolves watched us from a distance," he said. "We were scared, as there were only three of us and 10 of them." The wolf was released unharmed.



Solent News & Photo / Tanay Panpalia

ITALY

While in some places, wolves are seen as the solution to an over-population of wild herbivores, some farmers here are complaining that too many red deer—so many that domestic cattle must compete for grazing land, and farmers must purchase hay to feed livestock—are attracting wolves to the area, which in turn are eating their cattle, and not the deer. It is believed there are around 14,000 red deer in the region, and farmers fear parasites and infections are spreading from the deer to the cattle.

The issue hits hard in the Dolomites, a mountain range in northeastern Italy that forms part of the Southern Alps, near the fashionable Cortina d'Ampezzo ski resort. London's *Telegraph* newspaper quotes an area farmer describing how "Deer numbers are increasing all the time. In one night, they can strip a meadow."

Abandoned mountain farms and the decline of traditional agriculture have allowed farmland to revert to woodlands that attract deer, the article states—and last winter's conditions worsened the situation for farmers, as deep snow in mountain passes pushed the deer into low-lying meadows where cattle graze. The article compares the deer population in Italy with that in Britain and Scotland, where similar overpopulations of herbivores exist.

Wolves, meanwhile, are coming into the area from the east—Slovenia, for instance, where they are numerous—and there are believed to be as many as 2,000 in parts of the Alps and Apennines mountains that run down Italy's backbone. Rather than being seen as a way to control the runaway deer population, farmers see wolves as another threat to livestock, and regularly shoot and display them.

UKRAINE

Wolves are ranging outside the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone—the 2,672 square mile (6,920 square kilometer) area that has been sealed off due to safety concerns over radiation fallout since a 1986 nuclear accident in Pripyat, in northern Ukraine. The explosion is considered to have released 400 times more radioactive rays than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan.

While hundreds of humans fell ill and many died from the accident, and some studies have reported harm to wildlife, as years passed, many plants and animals have thrived there due to lack of human interference, turning the area into a type of nature preserve. Michael Byrne, wildlife ecologist at the University of Missouri at Columbia and author of a recent study published in the *European Journal of Wildlife Research* and reported by *Livescience,* says gray wolf population density around Chernobyl is up to seven times higher than in surrounding reserves.

He noted that a young male wolf, one of 14 fitted with GPS collars, left the exclusion zone in 2015 and was tracked for a couple of hundred miles (300 km) over 21 days, until its collar failed. While the other collared wolves were older and stayed near their home turf, scientists believe that some wolves are leaving the exclusion zone as their numbers rapidly increase within it.

The potential for the dispersing wolf to carry mutated genes and spread them to the larger population has been suggested by a rash of media in varying degrees of lurid imaginings, but Byrne says he has seen no reason to validate such concern. Bridgett von Holdt, an evolutionary biologist at Princeton University who studies wolf genetics, stated that "mutations are the bread and butter of diversity," and can be beneficial as well as harmful. She explained that they are generally caused by recessive genes, so an offspring must have two copies to manifest the mutation, and the genes must be "functionally linked," or relating to the same body part or process. Those factors reduce the likelihood of mutations outside the exclusion zone to almost nothing.

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AFRICA

In the Ethiopian highlands, researchers from nations including Ethiopia, Norway, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States studied interactions between African and Ethiopian wolves (neither of which is a true wolf) to determine the impact of their competition for food and territory on the survival of the endangered Ethiopian wolf. Published by the Royal Society, their work explored whether these two canids could successfully share space, or whether the African wolf, formerly called the golden jackal, would out-compete the larger but solitary and ecologically specialized Ethiopian wolf, of which only 500 remain.

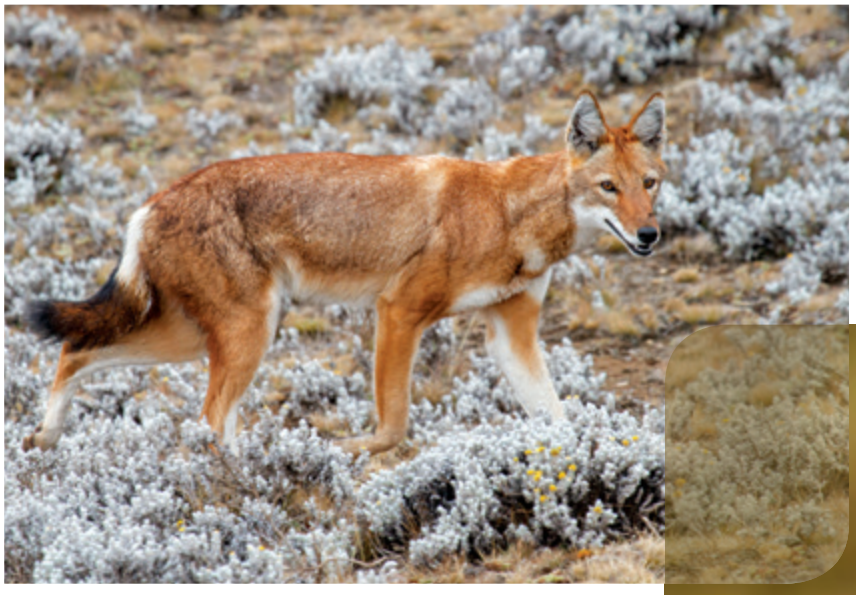
Scat samples were studied to assess diet, which included, among other things, rodents, hunted and scavenged livestock, insects, hares, domestic poultry, wild birds and potatoes. Rodents constitute a major portion of the diet for both canids; rodent density was therefore measured to determine habitat quality.

Researchers note that the African wolf is an opportunistic forager that regularly consumes livestock, and is thus relatively tolerant of habitat alteration by the humans who tend the prey animals. Thus they are more likely to inhabit a buffer zone surrounding the core wilderness that is the territory of the Ethiopian wolf, which feeds more heavily on rodents.

For this reason, both the core area of the wolves' territory and the buffer zone were studied and compared. Territorial dominance of their respective regions had a greater impact on the outcome of interactions between the canid groups than body size, according to researchers who note that where fighting did occur, there was evidence of biting. This caused them to be concerned with disease transmission as well as hybridization where territory for both groups overlap.

The report continues, "Rodent abundances and species compositions did not differ significantly between the core area and the buffer zone, suggesting that, in the absence of African wolves, Ethiopian wolves could also exploit the buffer zone habitat, facilitating an increase in population." Researchers add, "Our study calls attention to the behavioral mechanisms that underlie competition" between Ethiopian and African wolves, suggesting that increasing human encroachment and habitat loss may offer a competitive advantage to the latter over the former. They conclude that Ethiopian wolf conservation efforts would benefit from monitoring both groups of wolves where their territories overlap. ■

Tracy O'Connell is a retired professor of marketing communications at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls and a member of the International Wolf Center magazine and communications committees.



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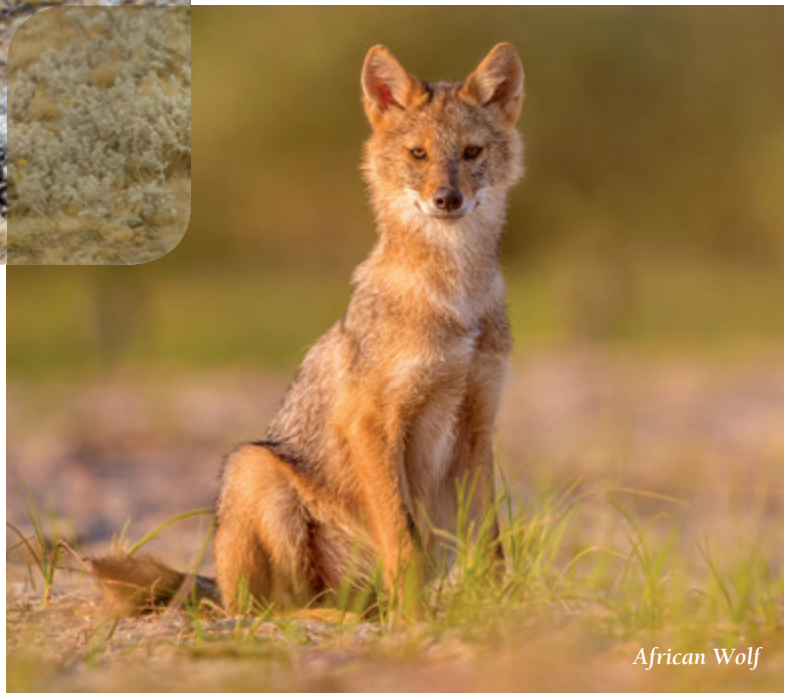
Ethiopian Wolf



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