

The Carnivores Next Door



Credit Photograph by Ron Reznick/VWPics/Redux

In early November of this year, Danish scientists confirmed that a male wolf had crossed the northern border of Germany and taken up residence in Jutland, the peninsula that forms the mainland part of Denmark. The country's last known resident wolf was killed in 1772, a year in which the emotionally unstable King Christian VII was in the midst of a messy divorce from Princess Caroline Matilda of Great Britain. (Caroline Matilda's eldest brother, meanwhile, was preoccupied with his upstart colonies across the Atlantic.) Eight Danish monarchs and nearly two hundred and fifty years later, in spite of a sevenfold increase in Denmark's human population, the country is a remarkably safe place for wild animals.

The Jutland wolf may be a harbinger of a broader recovery. According to [a study](#) published today in the journal *Science*, Europe is “succeeding in maintaining, and to some extent restoring, viable large carnivore populations on a continental scale.” Historically, these same carnivores—bears, wolves, wolverines, and lynx—were zealously hunted. In 813, for example, Charlemagne established the *luparii*, an élite corps charged with killing wolves; though the animals held out against the *luparii* for more than a thousand years, by the nineteen-thirties they were believed to be extinct in France. (The *luparii*, for their part, survive in vestigial form as the *lieutenants de louveterie*, volunteer wildlife officers who help manage France’s populations of boars, jackdaws, and other nuisance creatures.) In recent decades, however, the European landscape has become considerably more predator-friendly. The Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, which took effect in 1982, greatly restricted the conditions under which large carnivores could be captured or killed. At the same time, urbanization was drawing people away from the countryside and its wild inhabitants. In 1950, about half of the European population lived in urban areas; today, nearly three-quarters does.

Carnivores have also learned, in a sense, to live with people. According to Adrian Treves, a wildlife biologist at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, European brown bears, which are closely related to grizzlies, are shyer and more nocturnal than their American brethren. “Over many generations, the brown bears of Europe have adapted to the risk posed by people,” Treves told me. Likewise, European wolves have broadened their diet, eating not only large prey, such as deer, but also small mammals and carrion—and, in the case of at least one Greek wolf, apples and figs. As the *Science* study notes, a third of the European mainland is now home to at least one large predator species. Wolves have established permanent residence in twenty-eight European countries, brown bears in twenty-two, and lynx in twenty-three; large carnivores can be seen in forests, farmland, and even, at times, in suburbs. Though the study’s authors acknowledge that some isolated populations remain critically endangered, they conclude that, over all, Europe’s large carnivores are an “often underappreciated conservation success story.” And the comeback, though not without its hitches, has elicited little public fuss. Run-ins with humans are rare, and in many places traditional livestock-protection measures—including the use of guard dogs and shepherds—have been sustained or revived. “If you

want to conserve large predators, you don't need to exclude people," Guillaume Chapron, one of the *Science* study's lead authors, told me. "You just need to have the political will to coexist."

In the Western United States, attitudes toward large predators are less measured. As in Europe, some species were nearly snuffed out by the mid-twentieth century because of fears of livestock losses and attacks on humans. Also as in Europe, wildlife-protection laws—primarily, in this case, the Endangered Species Act of 1973—ended the long open season on large predators. In 1995, the U.S. government began reintroducing gray wolves into Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho, a controversial program in a region that is reflexively suspicious of both predators and federal regulation. The effort was so successful that an estimated seventeen hundred gray wolves now live in Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho; Oregon and Washington State have several resident wolf packs, and lone wolves have been spotted in California and Arizona. Still, the animals remain hated in parts of the West, particularly among ranchers, for whom predation by wolves can be an economic burden. (As in many European countries, states compensate ranchers for the loss of cattle and sheep, but because livestock are typically allowed to range much more widely here than in Europe the claims can be more difficult to prove.)

Several states allow the lethal control of wolves that prey on livestock, and Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming have recently begun to allow wolf hunts. Though such policies seem as though they ought to reduce conflict, [a study](#) published two weeks ago in the online journal *PLOS One* suggests that they do just the opposite. It's possible that wolves respond to the loss of packmates by having more pups—which then require feeding—or that smaller pack sizes force them to switch from fleet-footed wild prey to more sluggish domesticated prey. In general, North America's large predators have not acquired, or been effectively encouraged to acquire, the unobtrusive behaviors that help keep their European relatives out of trouble. Wolves are likely to keep expanding their territories, perhaps even following the lead of coyotes and black bears into the northeastern United States. There, without the protection of national parks and other big nature reserves, European manners might prove their best refuge.

We often think of large predators as creatures of wilderness—of Yellowstone, or Glacier, or the Alaskan interior—and of humans as separate from wilderness, empowered to contain it. But this distinction, Adrian Treves says, has more to do with human psychology than with wildlife biology. “One of the main reasons these large protected areas are so important in North America is that, outside of them, people kill predators,” he told me. The European example shows that large carnivores and humans can, under certain conditions and in certain places, live alongside one another in relative peace. While those places don’t always fit our notion of wilderness, they are in one important sense more wild, because their throng of predators includes the most proficient of all: us.

