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Abstract: This magazine reportage is about wolves in Italy. The reporter shows how wolves and humans coexist, what the main problems are and provides an interesting insight into wolf research.
The return of Il Lupo

By Thomas McNamee

An ancient white stucco house, with a roof of other tile, stands amid the olive groves and vineyards of Tuscany. Right-dated cypress incline along a lane to other farms, other villas. The February sun hangs low in the sky and the icy montemarites slant from the north, but the pines are already turned green and the trees are budding. Except for music coming from a radio in the nearby house, all is silent and still.

Next to the tile-roofed house stands a copse of olives in which a pack of wolves are sleeping. This is less than twelve miles from the city of Siena.

Lifting his radio receiver high, Eduardo Tedesco quits from beneath a ramped haystack of graduate-student hair. "Talk, go the receiver, talk. He has found his study wolves.

This is the second place of the wolf in our world: nearly unknown.

"Excellent," Tedesco informs me. "The shepherds do not kill them yet."

In a mile of green slope to the left below one moorridge ridge, a man is making a pipe and watching the sheep. There is a big white dog at his side. The flock is small, perhaps fifty sheep, but they are widely scattered—making them vulnerable to wolf attack.

"That is the very old guard dog of Italy, the Marumari," says Tedesco, "but these shepherds come from Sardinia, where there are no wolves, and they don't know how to train the Marumari, and when the wolves come, the dogs run away."

But surely wolves prefer their natural prey? In Minnesota and northern Montana, less than one percent of livestock is lost to wolves.

Tedesco smiles wistfully. A graduate student in wildlife biology at the University of Rome, he has been studying this pack for two years. Wolf range has been expanding steadily for the last twenty years from the province of Abruzzo to central Italy—150 miles from here. These wolves are new-comers. "In the beginning, they lived in the gorges—dense shrub vegetation, very good habitat for wild boar, roe deer, red deer." (The gentle landscape here is riddled with these steep-sided, people-proof gorges.) "But there were not so many prey, because of the poaching, and soon the wolves killed most of them, and then they began killing sheep."

Not many, surely.

"Two or three thousand last year, killed in the province of Siena only. Thirty, forty sheep this pack alone has killed!"

The shepherds tolerate this.

"In Italy the wolf is protected absolutely. The sheep owners are compensated 90 percent of the value, but this does not satisfy them. They tell me, 'We are going to kill your wolves.'"

So while the guard dogs go unnoticed, the shepherds sit their guns and made with one another for illegal poison. Italy has a long tradition of heedless wildlife slaughter—sought out, setting great populations of deer wiped out—and many laws are deemed too more than wishful guidelines. The human population has
been rare for hundreds of years, agriculture is nearly everywhere, and there is not one speck of what an American would call wilderness—yet Italy has wolves.

Come tawny, the gray wolf—the wolf of fate and gore, the wolf that pulls down moose in the Yukon and ambushed natives in the Siberian taiga, the same wolf reintroduced and thriving in Greater Yellowstone and central Idaho—it slives and well for every mile from the Dinaric Canyoliglos. There in the historic center of Rome, in the Capitoline Museum, the bronze wolf—mother of the city has tackled Romulus and Remus for cement.

Smaller than its American or Russian cousin, less dependent on cooperative hunting, and much less picky about its fare—perhaps as a result of intense selective breeding produced by generation after generation of being trapped, poisoned, and gassed down—

the Italian wolf is on the rebound from a historic low of about a hundred in the early 1970s; the population is now making perhaps more than five hundred.

One reason is all too clear, the profound flowering of education, industry, and prosperity is Italy in the halcyon since World War II. Among the boon's effects has been a massive exodus of Italians from the villages and small mountain farms to the cities and, in turn, reforestation of the land left behind.

Reforestation has led to the recovery of animal populations of the small red deer and the larger red deer (a European counterpart of the North American elk). In some areas, the wild sheep known as moufflon serve as a chief prey item for wolves. In a few high-

mountain refuges, the chamois and the ibex have also made a comeback. In places where these ungulate species had been entirely wiped out, government agencies and conservation groups have reintroduced native deer, exotic deer, and mouflons—with varying success, depending mainly on how favorably the local populace feels the game laws. Wild boars, with their tremendous reproductive rate and their ability to adapt to a wide range of habitats, are flourishing. All of these—all of these—when sickness, age, or hunger make them vulnerable—on potential wolf prey.

New national parks and nature reserves have been designated. A contemporary map of Italy, for example, shows many extraordinary patches of protected areas—the Parco Naturale delle Alpi Apuane, coastal wetlands, gray forests, wild rivers. Some of the parks are as yet undiscovered and hence protected only on paper, but plans have been laid for a new network of reserves. An increasingly urban and well-educated citizenry has insisted on the enforcement of anti-poaching laws. Many younger Italians have taken up the banner of conservation and are calling for still more reserves.

Habitat loss has also been slowed by Italy's declining birthrate, one of the lowest in the world.

Since the beginning of official protection in 1970, the wolves of Italy have spread from a few mountain enclaves to far-flung new homes. They now roam the country from the heel of the boot to the Alps. There are wolves in the coastal thalwegs of the far south, some of them scavenging from village dumps, where they have been seen raiding garbage cans, their fierce maws tearing at windshields of spaghetti. There are wolves in the mountain forests all along the Apennine chain: some hunt wild animals: some raid livestock. There are wolves in national parks, wolves on farms, wolves in suburbs. A few of Italy's wolves have moved on to colonize the Provincial Alps of southeastern France.

Few of Italy's wolves live in habitat sufficiently rich—or few enough of persecution by humans—to support the traditional pack structure, in which an
Alpha (dominant) male and an alpha female provide over an extended family that hunts cooperatively, defends a boundary territory, and howls in the night. But the wolves are adaptable. If in a given patch of habitat there is enough prey to feed only one wolf, one pure wolf will live there. If there is only enough for two, two wolves will be, expelling their young to find better work elsewhere.

(The wolves’ adaptability can cause problems. When a wolf cannot find another wolf with which to mate, it may hybridize with a domestic or feral dog. This has meant financial compensation hopelessly complex. What if your sheep were killed by a half-wolf? Dog depredations are not compensated, and worry of the killings attributed to wolves are in fact the work of wild or even domestic dogs.)

Not many of today’s local wolf populations are substantial enough to be self-sustaining, but they are linked together. The wolf’s reproductive rate is high, and when new litters arrive every spring, genetic subordinates wolves are forced out of their families. A wolf can breed at the age of two, and in Italy the typical litter size is from four to seven pups.

A few nonreproducing males may stay with the pack to help in the rearing of pups—well, they’re for a fancy at the top—but there is a steady supply of “dispensers” that leave home to join other packs or form new ones.

One of the two largest centers of wolf population is in relatively lightly settled country—the central Apennines east of Rome, including the Abruzzi National Park. In the park, there are roughly twenty to thirty wolves; in the region as a whole, between seventy and a hundred. The other biggest population is in the mountainous east divide the heavily populated landscapes of Tuscany and Emilia Romagna, where reestablishing proved difficult. The wolf population in Tuscany is estimated to be from sixty to eighty, no recent counts have been made in adjacent Emilia Romagna. Small populations dot the rural landscapes, appearing and reappearing like will-o’-the-wisps.

Yet even where wolves are abundant in Italy, they are rarely seen. Ask a villager at the foot of a mountain where a wolf pack is living, and he may well stare at you in astonishment. Wolves? Here? No, signore, no. Tell a Roman housewife picking out her fresh greens and spring lamb in the Campo dei Fiori market just she is standing within a half-hour’s bike ride of wolf country, and she may indulge you with the condescending smile reserved for foolish children.

Until the last twenty years, the fate of any American wolf that dare to dwell in the presences of humans was certain death. Extirpation has been the lot, as well, of wolves in France, Germany, Switzerland, and Scandinavia. Yet wolves have survived not only in Italy but also in Spain, Portugal, the Balkan States, and Greece. In western Europe, there is a north-south gradient of doom. Why?

The answer lies, partly in the traditional sheep bus-
his flock to safer pastures below. At night he brings the sheep back into the fold, close to his house, where the dogs will wake him should a wolf venture near.

But according to biologist Luigi Boitani, the wolves owe their survival to more than traditional methods of husbandry. Boitani, of the University of Rome, is the leading wolf scientist in Europe, a member of the Wolf Specialist Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature–World Conservation Union, a consultant on species survival for the European Community, and a director of the major research project on wolves in Italy and around the globe for more than twenty years, and he has found that wherever wolves live, with the sole exception of a few Arctic islands devoid of human settlement, the principal determinant of wolf life or death is the behavior of the people living near them. Furthermore, Boitani believes, cultural habits from the past often have more to do with how humans treat wolves than does present necessity.

For many centuries before the last two, from the British Isles across to Russia, from Scandinavia down to France and Germany, most northern Europeans were nomadic herdsmen. Resources were scarce in the cold north and unevenly distributed through the seasons. The herds therefore were kept moving. Humans nomads were small and villages few. The distances covered were so great that it was impossible for any herder to know the landscape in detail or to predict the movement of wild animals such as wolves. Wolf attack could come from anywhere, at any time. There was not much to be done but to kill every wolf you could. By contrast, in the rich, warm south, herds could be maintained on a small, year-round patch of pasture. Even very early in the advent of domestic livestock in southern Europe, sedentary herding was the rule. Here people have lived for centuries on small farms or in villages adjacent to grazing land—nearly always within an easy walk of rugged, densely forested, unpeopled mountains where predators could take shelter. Every
flock grazes year after year in the same place, and the
herd knows every spring, even, and thicker. He knows
where the wolves live up there in the winter, down
there in the spring. He knows how they move and how
to avoid them.

Generations pass, patterns hold, understandings ev-
dure, and three terms in both the wolf popula-
tion and the human community what Bot-
taxi calls an "information lineage," an intimate
knowledge of their world and its rules,
passed down within families through time.

"One of the com-
mon place names in Italy is "Paso del Lupo,"" says Boi-
taxi,—Wolf Pass. "A thousand years ago, the wolves
crested the road at this point. I can ride you there today
and you will see their tracks still."

So what has happened in Tuscany? Why are the
wolves killing sheep there, and why are the shepherds
hellbent on killing the predators?

"Disruption of the information lineage," replies
Botanasi. "The Italian shepherds, who are new to
Tuscany, and the wolves, which are also newcomers, do
not understand each other. That is the key to wolf sur-
vival in human habitat; mutual understanding."

When L-David Mech, the world’s best-known ex-
erp on wolves, began to study the lac wolves of the
lower forty-eight, they inhabited only remote wilder-
ness in northeastern Minnesota. But then they began
to spread across the farmlands of Michigan, Wisconsin.
"The critical factor in wolf recovery was legal protec-
tion," writes Mech. "With protection, wolves have adapted to human developments."

Mech, Botanasi, and most of the world’s other wolf
experts agree, however, that legal protection is not ef-
fecive without the support of a concerned public.
"It is a genuine question of culture," says Botanasi.
"We can help with certain passive defenses—better ex-
closures, for example—but unless we have a pact of
understanding, the wolves do not survive. If we had
the authority to remove some wolves—the livestock
killers—then I believe we would have some coopera-
tion from the herders, and the other wolves would live.

"There would be time, then, to teach the shep-

In Basilicata, left, a shepherd guards his
flock. Wolves survive in the area because
humans have not felt a need to exterminate them.

Shepherds often go armed on the slopes
of the rugged Maiella massif, above.

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good at his job after all, he has been doing it for several
thousand years."

Can the Italian wolf survive in perpetuity?

Botanasi considers the question, then answers,
"Humane culling mortality is 15 to 20 percent annu-
ally—they are hit by cars, shot, poisoned. But we are
still seeing annual population growth of about 7 per-
cent." He shrugs and smiles. "In perpetuity? I don’t
know. But with luck and if the people wish? Yes, for
the foreseeable future, certainly."

Edward Tedesco’s week on the Isernia pack had been
up and down since February 94, when he and I
found the wolf pack sleeping near that farmhouse.
Among those wolves was Fulvio, a six-month-old male that Telesco and his colleagues had radio-collared. They were hoping to track him when he dispersed from the pack. This would have been the first study of wolf dispersal anywhere in Italy. But eleven days after we saw him, Fulvio was run over by a car on the Via Cancio, the highway linking Siena to Rome.

Then Alivo, the alpha male, went off the air. The researchers contrived the entire province of Siena, and ultimately flew over all of southern Tuscany, but Alivo was never heard from again. This was a particular disappointment to Telesco, because Alivo's movements would have revealed that spring's den site. The most likely explanation for Alivo's disappearance is that shepherds killed him and destroyed his radio collar.

Nevertheless, wolf sightings continued. The researchers followed wolf tracks. They howled and watched through telescopes. They interviewed local people, collected zip-lock bags of wolf droppings. Weeks passed and they never saw a wolf.

The researchers asked the shepherds if they had suffered more wolf attacks. Many chose not to say anything at all to these unwelcome interlopers, but a few did talk. There had been wolf attacks, yes, many.

In the weeks after Alivo's disappearance, the pack began attacking sheep in broad daylight. Telesco believed that this foolishly risky could be attributed to the absence of Alivo and probably of his mate as well.

Finally Telesco found the rest of the pack. The alpha female was alive. There were also two subadults—and six pups. Frequent observations followed.

The researchers saw several confrontations between the adult wolves and wild boars. The boars showed no fear of the wolves whatever, and the wolves showed no inclination to attack. Telesco saw the adult wolves re-gorging food for the pups at a rendezvous site. Once he even saw a bull take place of a cow deer.

That summer, three weeks of attempting to trap wolves for radio-collaring proved fruitless. The young biologists were visited from the house they shared, and nobody else in the area would rent to them. The locals believed that these researchers were not studying wolves but reintroducing them.

Back at the university, the biologists began analyzing the wolf scat they had collected. The remains of domestic sheep continued to be the most common ingredient. A report—almost certainly false—caused that the pack had killed two hundred sheep in one night. In addition to the existing reimbursement policy, the Tuscan government introduced economic incentives to protect wolves—free wolf-proof fencing, free guard dogs, human helpers at no charge. Depredation was declined. The researchers hoped to return, but there was no funding. By the winter of 1994–95, it seemed fairly clear that Telesco's study pack had been wiped out, probably by the shepherds.

A war later, however, in February 1996, a young wolf was run over on the very outskirts of Siena. And in the spring, a group of farm workers were arriving at an abandoned house, to rest in the shade at the end of the day, when they saw a wolf bound out of the ruins and disappear in the wheat field. This was less than a hundred yards from the Via Cancio. The workers called the chiefgame warden. When he and Boitani (whose country house is nearby) went in to investigate, they found a litter of six wolf pups in the house.

Boitani refused leaving them alone, in the hope that the mother would return. She did so the very next night. Boitani reported, "taking all six away to a new den site (or a new country house)?"

"So, you see," continued Boitani, "the pack is still around and, be sure, there is more than one!"