

Good advice for people staying in a wolf area

Normally, the Scandinavian wolf is shy and encounters with it are quite improbable. The wolf has both a good sense of smell and hearing. If you want to be sure of avoiding an encounter however, you can sing or speak when in the forest.

In this leaflet you can find interesting facts about the wolf and some good advice about how to avoid encounters with it.

Tracks



Tracks of two wolves.



Footprints of two wolves. Above prints of hind paws, below of front paws.

Photo: Åke Aronsson



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Photo: Per-Anders Svensson

The cubs are born in a den

The alpha-couple digs several dens. After a pregnancy of 63 days the alpha female gives birth to between 4 and 5 cubs in one of the dens, usually between April and May. The den, which is finally chosen for the birth, may sometimes be dug just the day before. The cubs are breastfed for about eight weeks. In the first weeks, the female wolf is always near the den. Since she cannot hunt herself, the rest of the pack provides her with food. When 8-10 weeks old, the cubs emerge from the den. The pack then leaves the surrounding area.

Migration

When reaching one to two years of age, the young wolves migrate from their parents territory. They can cover long distances to find a partner and to establish their own territory. Some of the wolves roam around for a while and then begin to mark their territory so that they can be found by another single wolf. This strategy is more common among females than males. The longest distance, covered by a radio-marked wolf cub was 1000 km.

Choice of food

In areas of Scandinavia where wolves can be found, the moose is the most common item of prey. A single wolf is capable of killing an adult moose, but not without risk to itself. In some cases a moose may even injure or kill a wolf whilst trying to protect itself. Therefore roe-deer is often preferred in areas where it is abundant. Wolves may also eat beavers, badgers and forest birds.



Photo: Anders Björklund

Damage to dogs and cattle

In the year 2000 about 100 sheep were killed by wolves. Occasionally horses and cows are also attacked. In most cases such damage can be avoided by electric fences. The lowest wire should not be more than 20cm above the ground as wolves may try to dig their way under the fence rather than jump over it. Last year ten dogs were attacked by wolves, most of them were hunting dogs. Preventing such attacks is not easy. Several methods to protect dogs have been tested. In territories where there are radio tagged wolves the "wolf-phone" has been effective. The wolf phone informs people of the last reported position of the pack, allowing dog owners to choose where to hunt.



Photo: Henrik Andrén

If you encounter a wolf

Is the wolf dangerous?

The reactions of wolves towards humans have not been investigated systematically, yet. Though research will still bring new knowledge in the future, it is convenient and worthy to give you a short summary of our present knowledge.

Attacks on humans have been reported from those parts of the world, where the conditions of the wolves' life differ very much from those in Scandinavia. In most of those situations, the attacking wolf either had rabies, was starving, or had been fed by humans. Like bears, wolves can be taught to associate humans and settlements with food. This can lead to them losing their natural shyness and react aggressively under certain circumstances. For that reason, wolves should NEVER be fed. The wolf is a big predator and in principle is capable of killing a human. This last happened in Sweden in 1820 in the county of Gästrikland – it was a half tame wolf.

If you encounter a wolf..

Even if you go out into a wolf territory, it is very improbable that you will see a wolf. Should you encounter one though, the wolf will normally withdraw carefully, as soon as you make any noise such as speaking or singing. If the wolf doesn't withdraw and you feel uncomfortable or endangered, you should keep in mind the following advice:

- Go back slowly and noisily. Speak, sing or shout – but don't scream in a high pitch.
- Don't run – it could awake the wolf's hunting instinct or you could stumble, which makes an attack more probable.
- Should the wolf nevertheless follow you, stop and try to appear big and dangerous by holding up your arms, your backpack or anything similar. You should take a step towards the wolf rather than away from him.
- Should the wolf attack you despite these actions, don't pretend to be dead, kick and hit the wolf as hard as you can.

A wolf next to his prey

There is no evidence that a wolf next to his prey should be aggressive, as long as you stay at a distance and don't try to take the prey away. It does not matter whether the prey is a wild animal or cattle.



Photo: Stefan Quimth

If you are out with a dog...

The presence of a dog can make a wolf overcome its natural shyness towards a human. Under certain circumstances it can approach up to a few meters. To people, who have been in such a situation, it seemed as if the wolf was so concentrated on the dog, it hardly noticed the human's presence. Should you encounter a wolf while being out with your dog, the same advice is valid as listed before. If the wolf attacks despite the above actions, act as if it was a big dog: do not try to go between the wolf and dog but untie your dog's lead and throw something at the wolf.

Area and number

The wolf is common in large areas of the northern hemisphere. In 2000 there were about 100 wolves in both Norway and Sweden and approximately another 100 in Finland. Most of the wolves of Sweden can be found in the counties of Dalarna and Värmland and in the neighbouring parts of Norway. The population is extending, concerning both size and distribution. Migrating young wolves can be found in all parts of Scandinavia. The wolf is a very adaptable animal and can in principle be found in a territory anywhere in Scandinavia.

Appearance

The average bodyweight for the wolf in Scandinavia is 40 kg for the female and 50 kg for the male. The female is a little bigger than a German shepherd dog, whereas the male is bigger with a shoulder height of 80-90 cm. The coat is brown-blond with a darker colour on the back. Typically wolves in Scandinavia have a black tip on the tail and a white patch round the snout, never extending over the eyes as it does on Siberian huskies.



Photo: Pia-Lena Widen

Wolves live in packs

The wolfpack is a family group, which consists of a male and a female (the "Alpha-couple") and their cubs. Normally the cubs leave the pack when they are about one to two years old, but some can stay for longer with the parents before they migrate in order to establish their own territory. Usually, only the alpha-couple (the parents) mates. Within the pack there is a strict ranking, which can best be observed when the pack is eating: the alpha-male eats first, then the alpha-female, after that the cubs.

Defence of the territory

In Scandinavia, an average wolf territory is 1000 square kilometres. The largest wolf territory in Scandinavia measures 2000 square-kilometres and is situated in the county of Värmland, at the border to Norway. The borders of the territory are marked by the alpha-couple using urine-, excrement- and scratch-marks. Howling probably serves the same purpose. Unrelated wolves entering an established territory are often driven away or killed.

Mating season in the winter

In contrast to most dogs, the female wolf is in heat only once a year. The period of heat can begin in the end of December and end in the beginning of March. The time, when the male and female mate is in February and March. During this time, the alpha-couple strolls around often separated from the other pack.