Io non ho paura del lupo™

Knowing wolves

A practical guide to how wolves live and behave, and how we can coexist with them.

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NOT FOR SALE

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For more information, visit www.iononhopauradellupo.it

Before You Begin

This guide was created to help you learn more about wolves and find answers to the questions their presence may raise. Through 21 questions and answers, we explore wolf biology, their role in nature, and the practical precautions that can help us coexist with this predator.

Every wolf is a unique individual. Although they belong to the same species, wolves may display different behaviours depending on their temperament, age, life experiences, and the context in which they live. For this reason, a single sighting is not always enough to interpret what we are observing, and the behaviour of an individual should not automatically be attributed to all wolves. The information provided in this guide offers general guidance and should always be considered in light of the specific circumstances.

You can read the guide from start to finish, or use the table of contents to go straight to the question you are interested in. The sections on encounters and prevention will help you identify the precautions you should take, while the references at the end provide further resources for exploring these topics in more depth.

We are available to answer your questions, address any concerns, and help you find useful information and resources. You can contact us using the details provided in this guide. In the event of an emergency, however, please contact the relevant authorities and follow the guidance provided in this publication.

Getting to know wolves also means learning to observe them with curiosity and respect, while maintaining the necessary caution when dealing with a wild animal.

1. What is a wolf?

Photo by Alessandro Barbieri

The wolf, whose scientific name is Canis lupus, is a mammal belonging to the Canidae family, which also includes the domestic dog, the fox and the golden jackal.

It is one of the main predators in terrestrial ecosystems and has an extraordinary ability to adapt, allowing it to live in a wide variety of environments: from mountains to lowlands, and from forests to agricultural and coastal areas.

In Italy, wolves are comparable in size to a German Shepherd dog. Their height at the withers generally ranges from 50 to 70 centimetres, their body length is around 110 centimetres, and their tail measures an average of 35 centimetres. Weight varies according to sex, age and physical condition: adults generally weigh between 25 and 40 kilograms, although some particularly large males may slightly exceed this range. On average, males are larger and heavier than females.

2. What is its role in nature?

Photo by Alessandro Barbieri

The wolf plays an important role in the functioning of ecosystems, and its presence influences many other species, including other carnivores, through numerous and complex ecological interactions.

It feeds mainly on wild ungulates, such as wild boar, roe deer, red deer and chamois, preying more frequently on the most vulnerable individuals, such as the young, the elderly, the sick, the injured or the weakened.

The presence of wolves can also alter the behaviour of prey, influencing their movements, their use of the habitat and the time they spend in different areas. In some contexts, this can help to reduce the pressure exerted by herbivores on natural vegetation, forest regeneration and agricultural crops. The extent of these effects varies from one area to another and depends on the characteristics of the ecosystem.

Alongside its ecological role, the wolf can also be an asset for nature-based tourism, attracting visitors interested in wildlife and natural areas. At the same time, its presence can lead to conflicts with livestock farming, especially where livestock are not adequately protected.

3. How does it live?

Photo by André Roveyaz and Francesco Guffanti / Nuovi Equilibri

Wolves live in family groups known as "packs", usually consisting of a male–female pair and their offspring.

They occupy an exclusive territory in which they do not tolerate wolves from outside their own "family".
In Italy, pack territories are estimated to range from 50 to 200 square kilometres, depending on the ecological context, wolf density and food availability. The breeding pair, formerly referred to as the "alpha" pair, produces 2 to 9 pups just once a year and is generally the only pair to breed within the pack.

Although they are social animals, wolves do not always move together as a group. Pack members may also move about individually, for example to hunt, mark their territory or explore different areas, before rejoining the rest of the group.

Young wolves, usually from their second year of life onwards, may leave the pack in search of a mate of the opposite sex and an unoccupied territory in which to settle. This behaviour, undertaken individually by each wolf, is known as "dispersal". During this phase, wolves may travel thousands of kilometres and face many risks: it is estimated that 50% of wolves die during this process.

The main causes include road accidents, poaching and other human-related factors, as well as disease, difficulty in finding food and clashes with other wolves. Dispersing individuals may cross territories already occupied by packs, which defend their territory against unfamiliar wolves.

4. Where does it live in Italy?

Photo by Gianluca Damiani

In Italy, wolves have historically been present throughout the country, with the exception of Sardinia, although over the past three centuries their numbers and distribution have been drastically reduced by direct human persecution.

By the late 1970s, only around a hundred individuals were estimated to remain in a few remote areas of the central Apennines. The species' current distribution comes from a combination of factors: the abandonment of mountainous areas and the consequent increase in forest cover; strict legal protection, introduced in Italy in the 1970s; the increase in wild prey; the species' great adaptability, which allows it to live in any environment where it can find food and shelter; and the natural process of dispersal.

For these reasons, wolves have returned spontaneously to occupy much of our country and are now present throughout the peninsula, from the peaks of the Alps to the beaches of Tuscany and Apulia. Furthermore, for several years now, their presence has also been firmly established in the Po Valley. Neither in Italy nor anywhere else in Europe have wolves ever been reintroduced.

Photo by Gaetano Pimazzoni

5. Will the population keep growing indefinitely?

Like all wildlife populations, the wolf population cannot grow indefinitely. Population size is regulated by numerous natural factors, including the availability of territory, the abundance of prey, competition between packs, disease, natural mortality and reproductive success.

In most packs, only one pair breeds, once a year. Cubs are born in spring, but not all survive their first year of life. Young wolves that leave their pack to find a new territory also face a particularly risky phase, during which many die before they manage to breed.

For this reason, the population tends to stabilize as available territories are gradually occupied and resources no longer allow new packs to be established.

However, human activities can alter these balances. The presence of waste, carcasses and other food sources can increase local food availability, changing wolves' distribution and behaviour and encouraging them to frequent inhabited areas.

6. What does it eat?

Photo by Francesco Romito

The wolf is a carnivore specialised in preying on wild ungulates, but it is also an opportunistic species: in other words, it can adapt its diet to the most readily accessible food resources.

It feeds mainly on wild boar, roe deer, red deer, fallow deer, mouflon and chamois, but may also prey on hares, marmots, coypus and rodents. It occasionally supplements its diet with fruit, berries and other plant-based foods.
If given the chance, it may also prey on domestic animals that are not adequately protected. This does not mean that it prefers them to wild prey, but that, like any predator, it tends to take advantage of resources that require less energy and involve less risk. For the same reason, it may feed on carcasses, food scraps, waste, animal feed and food left outdoors for domestic animals. Preventing access to these resources is one of the most effective ways to limit wolves' habituation to human presence and reduce their visits to areas near livestock farms and settlements.

Wolves require several kilograms of meat per day and can eat up to 5 kg in a single meal. If they are unsuccessful in the hunt, they can go without food for several days.
In certain circumstances, so-called surplus killing may occur: the killing of more prey than is needed to meet immediate food requirements.

This behaviour is observed especially when a predator encounters numerous prey animals concentrated in a confined space and unable to escape, as may happen, for example, with sheep confined in an enclosure that a wolf has managed to enter. Surplus killing is not exclusive to wolves; it has also been documented in numerous other carnivores, including dogs.

7. Does it only move around at night?

Photo by Claudia Bonini

Wolves are mainly active between sunset and sunrise and often use daylight hours to rest.

This behaviour is an adaptation that, in most cases, allows them to reduce the likelihood of encountering people and the disturbance caused by human activities.

For the same reason, many other wild species, including ungulates, carry out most of their activity at night or at dusk.

However, the wolf is not exclusively a nocturnal animal. It may also be active and move about during the day, particularly in areas with little disturbance, while raising pups, or when environmental conditions such as rain, fog or other situations with reduced visibility make it easier to move about and hunt.

Spotting a wolf in broad daylight is therefore not, in itself, unusual behaviour, nor does it necessarily indicate that the animal is sick, bold or dangerous.

8. Is it normal to see it near homes?

Photo by Alessandro Barbieri

Italy is one of the European countries where human settlements are most widespread across the landscape. Forests, cultivated fields, pastures, villages and infrastructure often form a continuous mosaic in which both people and wildlife coexist.

Pack territories may extend over tens or hundreds of square kilometres and may include agricultural areas, roads, settlements and infrastructure.

For this reason, a wolf occasionally passing near homes, especially at night or at dusk, does not in itself constitute abnormal behaviour.

Red deer, roe deer, wild boar and other wild species may also frequent inhabited areas and occasionally be preyed upon nearby. Although it may have a strong emotional impact, this phenomenon is entirely natural and is very much part of the normal behaviour of this species.

Photo by Umberto Esposito - Wildlife Adventures

9. Is the wolf dangerous to humans?

No fatal wolf attacks have been recorded in Italy for over a century.

This does not mean, however, that the animal poses no risks at all: like other wild and domestic species, it can be potentially dangerous because of its size and strength.

Humans are not prey for wolves, which generally tend to perceive them as a threat and avoid them. However, population growth, the species' ability to adapt to human-modified environments and the resulting increase in interactions with people mean that incidents cannot be ruled out entirely.

Between 2017 and 2024, the Italian Institute for Environmental Protection and Research (ISPRA) reported 19 attacks on people, attributed to a total of seven wolves. Such events are therefore possible and must be taken seriously, but they remain rare and isolated. These incidents do not reflect the usual behaviour of the several thousand wolves present in our country.

Understanding this predator and learning to behave responsibly and with awareness in its presence are the most effective tools for fostering coexistence within the same territory.

10. What should you do if you come across a wolf?

Photo by Stefano Manfredini

Coming across one or more wolves is a rare event.

Thanks to their highly developed senses of smell and hearing, these animals generally detect people from a considerable distance and, in most cases, choose to move away before they are even seen.

If you come across a wolf whilst out walking, stay calm and never try to approach it. Stop and make your presence known by speaking loudly or clapping your hands.

These signals are generally enough for the wolf to move away of its own accord, as happens in the vast majority of cases. Carry on your way without following it.

If the wolf shows interest or tries to approach you, keep making noise and move away without running. Report the incident promptly by calling 112.

If you find a wolf that is in distress, injured or dead, do not approach it or intervene directly. It is essential to avoid any contact and call 112 immediately.

Photo by Gianluca Damiani

11. What should you do if you spot one from a car?

Like many other wild animals, wolves are accustomed to the presence of cars, other vehicles and farm machinery.

They may therefore consider them a normal part of their environment and not move away immediately when they pass by. You are consequently more likely to see a wolf from a vehicle than while on foot. If you encounter one or more wolves, or other wild animals, on the road, slow down or stop only if it is safe to do so.

If the presence of the animals poses a danger to traffic, report it to the relevant authorities. Do not chase the animals, deliberately try to approach them or stop dangerously to photograph or film them.

12. How should wolf behaviour be interpreted?

The table below, originally intended for institutions and wildlife management authorities, **enables an assessment of wolf behaviour and the risk it may pose to public safety.**

If you have any concerns or wish to report an incident, always contact the single emergency number 112, the local Carabinieri Forestry Unit or the police.

The wolf passes close to settlements in the dark.	**Not dangerous**
The wolf moves **in daylight** within sight of settlements and scattered houses.	**Not dangerous**
The wolf does not flee immediately when it **sees vehicles or people**. It stops and watches.	**Not dangerous**
The wolf is seen **over several days** within 30 m of inhabited houses (repeated sightings over an extended period).	**Needs attention**
The wolf **repeatedly** allows people to approach within 30 m.	**Needs attention**
The wolf **repeatedly approaches people** to within 30 m. It appears interested in people.	**Needs attention Critical situation**
The wolf **attacks or injures** a person without provocation.	**Dangerous**

This table was drawn up by the Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe, a group of experts from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and is a document designed to support management interventions, available online at www.lcie.org.

Photo by André Roveyaz and Francesco Guffanti / Nuovi Equilibri

13. What precautions should be taken in areas where wolves are present?

Photo by Alessandro Barbieri

It is important to avoid leaving rubbish and organic waste near homes or placing pet food, such as wet food and dry kibble, in places accessible to wildlife.

Never deliberately feed wolves or, more generally, any wild animals.

Livestock farmers must pay particular attention to the disposal of carcasses and other organic waste, which must be placed in locations inaccessible to wolves. Improper disposal of these materials may encourage wolves to frequent areas close to livestock farms.

Allowing a wolf to feed regularly on food of human origin will alter its natural ecology: it will reduce its natural predation on wild animals and it will feed mainly on "easy" food provided by humans.

Wolves approaching settlements and farms could increase the risk of predation on companion animals, such as dogs and cats. Furthermore, if these situations persist over time, they could lead to wolves becoming accustomed to human presence, posing potential safety risks.

Photo by Simone Giosso

14. Are there any wolves that are not afraid of humans?

Wolves are generally afraid of humans; they keep their distance and try to avoid direct encounters.

This wariness is characteristic of the species and is passed on from adults to pups. Rarely, these animals may approach within a few metres of people without showing any sign of fear. The main cause of such behaviour is often the availability of food sources, such as food and scraps.

Individual wolves also have different personalities; an individual's temperament may therefore contribute to the development of less fearful behaviour towards people.

A wolf that is strongly accustomed to human presence, is not afraid of them and repeatedly approaches people on foot directly, coming within less than 30 metres, is described as "bold".

15. Is the wolf dangerous to my dog?

Photo by Alessandro Sgrò

Dogs that are managed properly and kept under their owner's control are usually not at risk in areas where wolves are present.

However, it is important to point out that a wolf may see a dog both as a rival that could take away valuable resources and, occasionally, as prey, leading to conflict situations.

Almost all incidents involve unattended dogs out of their owner's control. To minimise any risk, it is therefore important to manage your dog properly, keep it on a lead and secure it safely, especially at twilight and during the night.

16. How can livestock be protected?

Photo by Francesco Romito

The wolf is an opportunistic predator and may kill and feed on farm animals, such as sheep, goats, calves, horses, donkeys or other animals, if they are not properly kept and protected.

Preventive measures, such as fencing, are necessary to keep wolves away from livestock. Together with housing livestock at night where possible, the presence of a shepherd and the use of livestock protection dogs, also known as "livestock guardian dogs", these currently offer the best way to protect livestock and minimise the risk of losses.

It should be remembered that, in some cases, the terrain and the type of animals being raised can make preventive measures difficult to use.

Installing and maintaining such structures also involve considerable costs and additional effort.

In addition to compensating farmers for livestock killed by wolves, many Regions and Autonomous Provinces provide financial support and specialist advice for adopting preventive measures.

17. What should you know about livestock guardian dogs?

Photo by Simone Giosso

Livestock protection dogs, also known as livestock guardian dogs, are working dogs bred and selected to protect flocks and herds from predators.

The presence of livestock guardian dogs indicates that someone is working in that area. It is therefore important to respect the livestock, the farmer's work and the grazing areas, even when the shepherd is not immediately visible.
Before setting off on a hike, it is useful to find out whether grazing animals and livestock guardian dogs may be present.
If dogs approach you barking along the way, stay calm: this is normal behaviour as part of their job - they are signalling your presence and trying to determine whether you pose a threat to the livestock. Do not run, do not make sudden movements or behave in a threatening way. Stop or move slowly, giving the dogs the time they need to recognise you and realise that you are not a danger.
Avoid walking through the flock or herd and slowly go around the animals, keeping as much distance as the terrain allows, or wait for them to move on. In some cases, the most prudent choice is simply to change your route or give up on reaching your intended destination.

If you are accompanied by your own dog, it is even more important to keep it under your control and prevent any approach to livestock or livestock guardian dogs. If you are cycling, it is advisable to dismount and continue on foot until you have left the grazing area.

For more information, visit www.caniprotezionebestiame.it

Photo by Daniele Nesci

18. What are so-called "hybrid wolves"?

Wolves and the domestic dogs are closely related and can mate, producing fertile offspring. This phenomenon is known as hybridisation.

The introduction and spread within the wild population of genetic variants from dogs, which humans have selectively bred during the domestication process, represent a major conservation concern. These variants could alter some of the characteristics that wolves have developed through a long evolutionary process and that are useful for life in the wild.

Hybridisation may be facilitated by the presence of stray or inadequately controlled dogs and, in some contexts, by a shortage of potential mates or disruption to the pack structure.

Having a canine origin does not automatically make an individual more bold towards humans. Behaviour depends mainly on its experiences, social learning, the availability of food resources and the environment in which the animal grew up.

19. Can wolves be hunted?

Photo by Gaetano Pimazzoni

The wolf is not a species that can be hunted in Italy and continues to be protected under national and European legislation.

The recent change in its protection status from a "strictly protected" to a "protected" species, also incorporated into Italian legislation, does not mean that wolves may be hunted or killed indiscriminately.

The new legal framework allows management measures, including possible removal or culling of individuals, in specific circumstances, such as the protection of public safety or the prevention of serious damages to livestock farming.

However, such interventions do not form part of normal hunting activities and may only be authorised by the competent authorities. Any intervention must also be compatible with maintaining the species at a favourable conservation status.

Photo by André Roveyaz and Francesco Guffanti / Nuovi Equilibri

20. What are the causes of death among wolves in Italy?

Wolves can die from natural causes, such as disease, starvation, injury and competition with other wolves, and are also subject to a high mortality rate during their first year of life.

As shown by the data collected and analysed in our report on wolves found dead in Italy between 2019 and 2023, amongst the specimens recovered for which it was possible to determine the cause of death, a very significant proportion of deaths was directly or indirectly attributable to human activities. However, these figures must be interpreted with the understanding that different causes of mortality are not equally likely to be detected.

The most frequently documented causes are road collisions. Another particularly significant threat is poaching, which includes illegal killing, the use of snares, poisoned bait and other deliberate acts. This phenomenon is difficult to quantify precisely, as many illegally killed animals are never found.

For years, our association has collected and analysed reports of wolves found dead in Italy.

This work highlights the importance of human-caused mortality and the need for a single, standardised and continuously updated national system to monitor the species' causes of death and guide future conservation actions.

21. Why is there so much discussion about wolves today?

In recent years, the wolf has become one of the wild animals most prominent in public debate. This is mainly due to a specific fact: the species has returned to many areas from which it had been absent for decades, and the likelihood of encounters and sightings has increased.

This expansion has been accompanied by the increasingly widespread use of tools capable of documenting the presence of wolves, such as smartphones, camera traps and CCTV systems. Social media have also profoundly changed the way in which this information is shared. A single photograph or short video can reach thousands of people within a few hours, be picked up by newspapers, television and websites, and continue circulating for a long time, even when it concerns an isolated incident or one that took place hundreds of kilometres away.

Communication from public authorities – that is sometimes inadequate, fragmented or delayed – contributes to make the phenomenon harder to understand. This shortcoming becomes particularly problematic in the rare, more serious cases, when clear and timely information is needed.

At the same time, news media too often resort to alarmist headlines and sensationalist language when reporting on wolves. Isolated incidents are thus presented without adequate context, while limited space is given to data, scientific explanations and expert opinions.

The frequency with which we receive news, images and videos can therefore create the impression that wolves are everywhere and that sightings or dangerous situations are a constant occurrence. However, the increased circulation of information does not necessarily correspond to a proportional increase in the number of wolves or risky incidents.

To properly understand the phenomenon, it is therefore essential to distinguish between the species' increased visibility and its actual presence in the area. Transparent and timely communication, based on scientific data and the context of individual incidents, is essential to address the issue without underestimating it, but also without amplifying perceptions beyond reality.

Photo by Luc Thijs

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