

WOLF (*CANIS LUPUS*) DIET IN LATVIA: SEASONAL, GEOGRAPHICAL AND SEXUAL VARIATIONS

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Diet of wolves (*Canis lupus*) was studied in Latvia from 1997 to 2001. In total, 302 scats and 107 stomachs of wolves from different parts of Latvia were analysed. Prey species were microscopically identified by their hair structure (medulla and cuticula). In order to avoid bias due to the similar hair structure, cervids – moose (*Alces alces*), red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) and roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) were pooled together.

Wild ungulates – cervids, wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) and beaver (*Castor fiber*) – were found to be the staple food for wolves in Latvia. Cervids were found in 50% of samples (62% of the biomass), wild boar were found in 24.7% (21% of the biomass), and beavers were found in 13.7% (11.5% of the biomass). Beaver was an important prey in summer, its significance being much higher than elsewhere in Europe. Beaver may have been a buffer prey, assisting to maintain high wolf densities during the early 1990s, when the ungulate population decreased. Thus, wild boar was positively selected, especially in winter when its ratio in the diet increased to 33.9% from 20% in summer. It was more a common prey in the east of the country. The ratio of beavers, small rodents and plant food was higher in summer,

which resulted in a greater food niche breadth in summer than winter food niche breadth ($B = 2.53$ versus $B = 1.81$). However, the percentage of the biomass consumed was dominated by ungulates in both seasons. The role of domestic animals in the wolf diet was insignificant except for winter when they were consumed as carrion (13.1%). Livestock depredation was rather a seasonal and local problem that could have been prevented in most cases should the proper husbandry techniques have been used. Minor sexual differences in the diet of wolves were found: males consumed beavers considerably more often. 35.5% stomachs investigated were empty, the average weight (\pm SD) of full stomachs being 972.8 ± 850.7 g, female stomach contents weighing more – 1070.7 ± 938.0 g versus 850.6 ± 668.3 g in males.

Thus, it should be concluded that in Latvia wolves prey generally on wild animals, and conflicts with livestock owners are only local, the main source of conflict being competition for the ungulate prey with hunters.

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