International Wolf Center
Teaching the World about Wolves

Are Wolves Dangerous to Humans?

Two recent reports on wolf-human interactions conclude that attacks by healthy wild wolves do occur but are rare and unusual events despite growing numbers of wolves worldwide. Both reports also state that there has not been a person killed by wolves in North America during the 20th century.

The Fear of Wolves: A Review of Wolf Attacks on Humans, edited by John Linnell, documents worldwide wolf attacks during the past 400 years. The authors reviewed records of wolf-human encounters from a variety of sources and concluded that historically attacks on humans were very rare, and attacks in the 20th century were even rarer. The report also documents four factors that are associated with wolf attacks. These are rabies (a majority of attacks involved rabid wolves), habituation (many attacks involved wolves that had lost their fear of humans), provocation (wolves were provoked into attack when humans cornered or trapped them or entered their den), and highly modified environments (many attacks occurred in areas where humans have greatly altered the environment). The report also notes that a decrease in the incidence of rabies worldwide has led to a decrease in the number of rabid wolf attacks.

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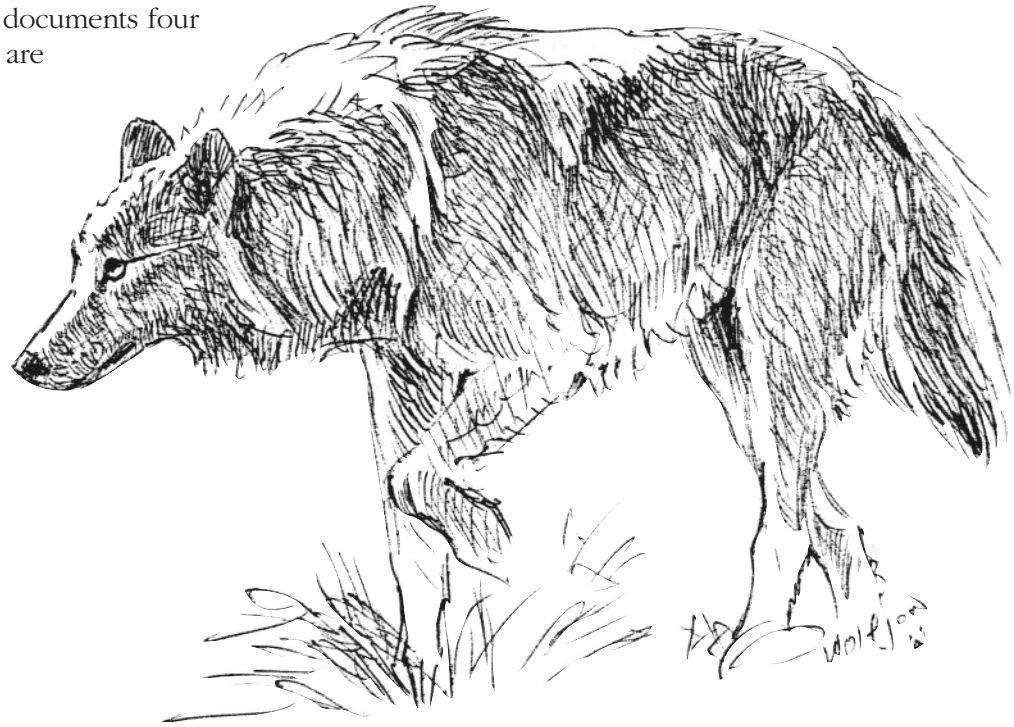

A Case History of Wolf-Human Encounters in Alaska and Canada, by Mark McNay, documents 80 cases of wolf-human interactions (aggressive and nonaggressive) that have occurred in the past 60 years: 36 in Alaska, 41 in Canada and 3 in Minnesota. Of the 80 cases described, none was fatal, and only 25 involved unprovoked aggression by healthy wolves (of these 25 cases, only 13 involved injury to humans). The other 55 cases consisted of interactions where wolves acted in self-defense (14), were known or suspected to have rabies (12) or showed interest but no aggression (29).

The findings of these reports show the importance of keeping wolf attacks in perspective. Currently, there are an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 wolves in Europe, 60,000 in the former Soviet Union, and 60,000 in North America. From the small number of documented attacks, it can be concluded that the vast majority of wolves do not pose any threat to human safety. A person in wolf country has a greater chance of being killed by a dog, lightning, a bee sting or a car collision with a deer than being injured by a wolf. Most of the unprovoked attacks by healthy wild wolves that have occurred were caused by wolves that became fearless of humans due to habituation. Nonetheless, like bears and cougars, wolves are instinctive, wild predators better kept at a respectful distance.

Both reports are available in PDF format from the International Wolf Center's Web site at www.wolf.org.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOAN OUELLETTE

For more information visit the International Wolf Center's Web site at **www.wolf.org**

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