

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 42 (2015)
Heft: 6

Artikel: The quartet of predators is complete again
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907128>

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The quartet of predators is complete again

Switzerland is becoming wilder – indigenous but eradicated predatory animals are returning. City dwellers far removed from nature are thrilled at the prospect but sheep and mountain farmers are outraged. Especially as far as wolves are concerned, society fluctuates between glorification and primordial fear.



The last bear killed is proudly presented in 1904

MARC LETTAU

We are going back in time a long way. On 4 September 1904, Padruot Fried and Jon Sarott Bischoff, two hunters from Grisons, were trying to ambush chamois on the side of Piz Pisoc when a bear suddenly appeared nearby. Bischoff, the more experienced hunter of the pair, took aim. But his shotgun failed and no sound was heard other than a metallic clicking noise. Now it was down to Fried. He pulled the trigger and the

animal weighing just under 120 kilograms slumped to the ground. Fried became a hero, the much-lauded bear slayer, as he had killed the very last bear in Switzerland. The animal was dismembered, pickled and served to guests at the Tarasp casino.

State-supported eradication

The images from the time are part of the Swiss collective visual memory – including as a memorial. Because it was not just the bear that was wiped out – the last lynx was sighted on the Simplon Pass in the same year. The eradication of the otter, the agile fish predator which occupied all Swiss rivers at the time, was also approved through state bounties. The indigenous wolf had long been extinct. Even the chamois hunter Fried only knew of them from hearsay.

A clicking sound was nevertheless heard again in 2015. Only this time it was not the firing of a shotgun but the flash of a camera trap. Wildlife biologist Christof Angst was simply seeking to obtain photographic evidence of how happily the once extinct beavers were splashing around in the river Aare. Instead a whole family of otters passed by his lens. Experts were thrilled as the discovery marked a turning point: Well over a century after the accurate shot was fired on the Piz Pisoc, all members of the key quartet of indigenous predators – the bear, lynx, wolf and otter – are present again in Switzerland.

Wolves form first pack

The first to return was the lynx. It did not come voluntarily but was instead brought back. Lynx were relocated in 1971 and have since established themselves in the forests of Jura and the central and western Alps. In 1995, the wolf returned to Switzerland from Italy. Its offspring are today forming the first packs in Grisons, in the Calanda region, and in Ticino. Since 2005 individual bears have continually roamed into Switzerland from Trentino through the mountains of Grisons. The otter, whose fur was used as headgear until well into the 20th century, is the last of the quartet to return. “What’s really surprising,” explains Christof Angst, “is that the quality of our waters is now so good that the otter can breed here again.”

The otter has come home, proving how much the condition of the waters has improved. Wolves are back, un-

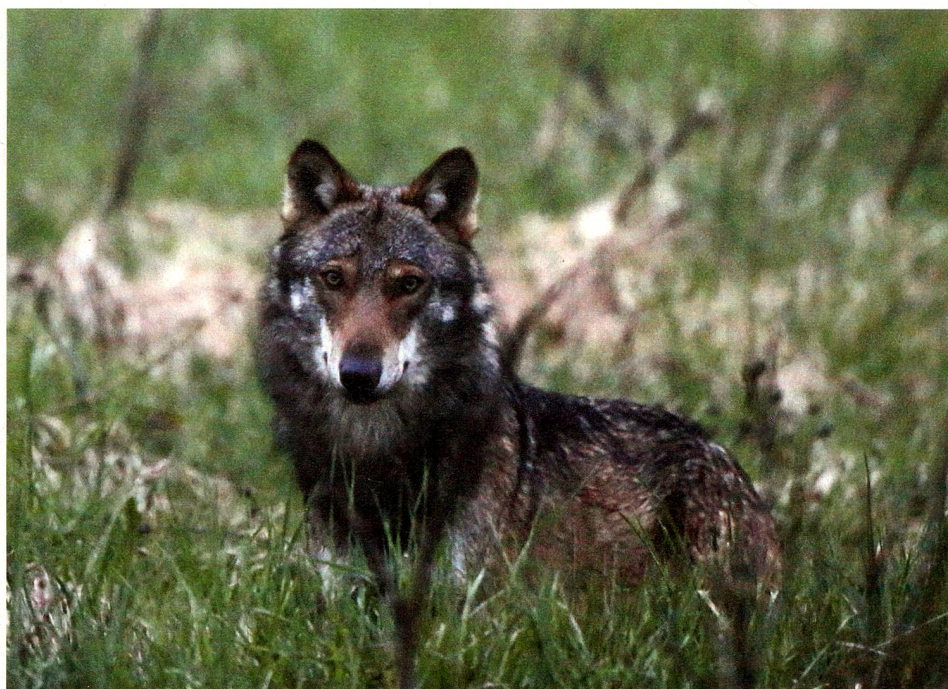


The M13 bear, photographed in Engadine in April 2012, migrated from Italy and was shot in February 2013

derlining just how much the forests destroyed by charcoal burning in the 19th century have recovered. The return of the wolf nevertheless divides society. Wildlife biologists and urban nature-lovers are delighted, but sheep and mountain farmers are furious. Those who are pleased obviously include the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) which has been observing the wolf's return for years: "Wolves are an asset for Switzerland," remarks Martina Lippuner of the WWF. Their increasing numbers are changing the balance in the Swiss animal kingdom for the better, she says. The settlement of wolves means an improvement in mountain forests in particular. These forests, which also protect valley communities against avalanches, have been adversely affected by extremely high numbers of deer in many places. Deer eat the shoots of young trees on a large scale, damaging the vitality of the forests. "The deer are becoming more timid due to the presence of wolves and are behaving in a way more appropriate to their species. "That is having a positive impact on young forests," indicates Lippuner. The lynx had a similar effect to wolves 20 years earlier in the Bernese Oberland.

Using the shotgun against the "wolf problem"

The lynx, the silent hunter on soft paws, is also flourishing. Lynx numbers have already climbed to around 200 adult animals, which means the authorities responsible occasionally intervene with corrective measures. Animals are caught and released elsewhere – such as in Germany or Slovenia – without making any headlines. It is a very different story with wolves. The question of how many of these predators confined Switzerland can sustain has been at the heart of fierce debate for years. The outcry



A wolf photographed in May 2013 in Obergoms in Valais



Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf

"My, what a big mouth you have, grandmother." "All the better to eat you with!" The wolf had scarcely finished speaking when he jumped from the bed with a single leap and ate up poor Little Red Riding Hood. As soon as the wolf had satisfied his appetite, he climbed back into bed, fell asleep and began to snore very loudly.

is particularly loud in Valais where herds of sheep until now spent the summer on the Alps without shepherds or protection. This is not altered by the fact that federal government invests three million Swiss francs a year in the protection of herds despite a situation where damage caused by wolves – around 300 sheep attacked a year – only amounts to around 150,000 Swiss francs on average.

Relaxing protection of the species?

Those opposed to wolves are now trying to force Switzerland to leave the Bernese Convention, the species protection agreement supported by 42 European countries. This would mean the wolf losing its protected species status, allowing it to be hunted. The association known as Lebensraum Schweiz ohne Grossraubtiere (Swiss habitat without large predatory animals) is vehemently campaigning for this. The wolf "simply no longer has a place here" says Georges Schnydrig, the association's president. He is also opposed to livestock guardian dogs whose task it would be to protect herds from wolves. Such protected herds would not be in keep-

ing with the "traditional self-perception" and would present new problems in tourist regions. Having "snarling guard dogs" blocking the path of tourists is not a feasible option, in his view. Alleviating people's fear of wolves is also an impossible task. "Our children are growing up with computers and cannot suddenly be expected to deal with wild animals again," says Schnydrig. The return of the wolf is therefore "out of the question". While in mountain regions the wolf signifies the loss of civilisation, urban nature-lovers like to see in them a warning against excessive civilisation.

The homecoming affects everyone

The federal hunting inspector Reinhard Schnidrig (see interview) advises against drawing city-county boundaries: "The return of the wolf will have implications for us all." Sheep farmers now face a significant challenge, he says. However, the wolf will not remain in the mountain regions. "It will also roam into central Switzerland," points out Schnidrig. Urban Switzerland, in particular, where the alpine region is heavily used as a "recreational arena", will be faced with

changes: “People from the city with little direct experience of nature will suddenly find themselves confronted with real animals when hiking or mountain-biking, most likely a livestock guardian dog that will bare its teeth and defend its sheep.” The hunting inspector said his most difficult task two years ago was ensuring objective debate about wolves in his home canton of Valais. Today he faces an additional problem: “The difficulties presented by city dwellers who are not prepared for dealing with the consequences of the return of wolves.”

Around 30 wolves are today roaming the Swiss Alps. Asked what that figure could rise to, Schnidrig replies: “Leaving aside people and their needs, Switzerland has space for around 300 wolves or some 50 to 60 packs. “That’s ecologically feasible.” However, if the question is how many wolves are required to ensure the

survival of the wolf population in the Alps over the long term, the answer is: “Around 125 packs between Nice and Vienna of which 15 to 20 would be found in Switzerland.” What is socio-politically feasible – in other words, the answer to the question of how many wolves people consider

An otter on a log in the river Sihl in the canton of Zurich

acceptable – lies “somewhere in-between”.

Countless endangered species

A further question: Is the reappearance of the lynx, wolf, bear and otter evidence of Switzerland’s fauna



“Large predatory animals remind us of where we come from.”

“Swiss Review”: Once extinct animals are returning to Switzerland. That has to be good news for you, doesn’t it?

Reinhard Schnidrig: Most certainly. However, the good news began with the introduction of the first Swiss legislation on the forests and hunting in 1876. Switzerland was responding to the major biodiversity crisis of the time. Our forests were being overused and the wildlife overhunted. There were no deer, ibexes, wild boar or roe deer left.

The return of the predators does not come as a surprise to you then?

From a long-term perspective, it is an entirely logical development. Short-term it is remarkable. When Switzerland put wolves under protection 25 years ago, nobody anticipated that they would return within a few years or that we would have to consider how to deal with damage caused by wolves.

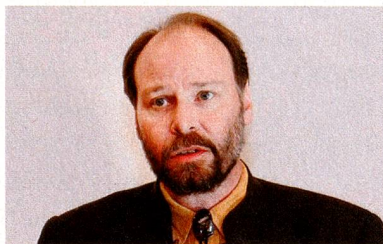
Sceptics say that confined Switzerland cannot sustain any large predatory animals. Wolves have more room to roam in the Carpathian Mountains.

The notion that wolves are better suited to Siberian expanses or Carpathian forests is incorrect. Large predatory animals also play a key role in the structure of fauna here. But above all,

we share – as part of a family of countries – a common habitat in which we wish to adopt a unified approach to protect the species which have a right to live in their ancestral habitats. This also applies to wolves – if they find a habitat in Switzerland, they have a right to live there.

Not everyone sees it that way.

Think about it on a small scale. What would happen if farmers in Fricktal suddenly declared that wild boar would be better suited to regions where fewer crops susceptible to damage are grown. How could this unreasonable request be conveyed to the wild boar? What about the other farmers? The example shows that we require a unified approach to the protection and management of wild animals that roam extensively and can potentially cause damage.



Wildlife biologist Reinhard Schnidrig, head of the wild animals and forest biodiversity unit at the Federal Office for the Environment, provides an insight into the habitat of predatory animals and their coexistence with humans

Could the demand for an “alpine region with no large predators” not actually be met then?

This demand is illusory. This option no longer exists. If we were to decide to keep Switzerland free of large predatory animals, such a proposal could not be implemented. The ani-



being intact? Martina Lippuner from the WWF does not believe so. The red list of flora and fauna at risk in Switzerland is “constantly growing”. The population size of many animals is “in clear decline”. Natural diversity should not just be measured by the number of ani-

mals but instead by the diversity of habitats in particular. No all-clear is given here either.

In fact, quite the opposite, according to Reinhard Schnidrig: “Humans have taken many types of habitat away and radically transformed them, such as through urban development

There are supposedly around 200 lynxes in Switzerland. They are very shy and rarely sighted

or intervention in bodies of water. “There are lots of losers in the animal kingdom,” he says. It is particularly striking how the straightening of rivers and intensive use of hydropower has changed Switzerland’s waters: “They have been drained over the course of the past 100 years.” The once extensive marshlands, flood plains and wet mountain meadows have all but disappeared.

This is having dramatic consequences. 40% of all Swiss nesting birds are endangered. As many as 80% of all amphibians are deemed at risk in “drained” Switzerland. It is nevertheless the wolf that is stirring emotions.

MARC LETTAU IS AN EDITOR WITH THE “SWISS REVIEW”

mals would come in any case. Those who hold out this illusion are acting unfairly towards our sheep farmers: We have to help them to change their mindset and, in their own interests, come to terms with the wolf staying.

Many people are simply terrified of wolves, though.

Throughout human history wolves have been met with either adoration or fear and hatred. The mythology masks the experience that people and wolves actually coexist really well. The wolf clearly also always represents a certain wildness. We definitely move differently and more carefully when we cross a landscape where we know large predators live.

So, Switzerland should become wilder to teach us humility?

The primitive nature of wild landscapes contrasts starkly with the almost acid green that is found in many parts of Switzerland. From this perspective, we need the wild. The large predators not only convey a sense of wilderness, they also remind us of where we come from.

So, where is that then? From forests full of snarling beasts of prey?

We can look back on one and a half million years of human history. We have only been farming the land and living in towns for 10,000 years. That is a tiny fraction. We have lived through most of our history with wild animals, fearing, revering, hunting and eat-

ing them. Mankind’s behavioural repertoire emerged in that world, not in the digital age.

You think in large spans of time. What do you see when you look forward a mere 50 years?

The habitats of wolves and deer will expand because man will abandon certain areas. Wolves and lynxes will populate our country on a fairly widespread basis. I’m not sure about bears. The adventure of the bear has only just begun. There will be more vultures, beavers and otters.

That would practically complete the indigenous animal family?

In 100 years from now Switzerland will only be missing a few animals from the period when Europe was wild. There is little chance of the moose returning, though. They would clearly not find the extensive river landscapes. The reappearance of the bison is also unlikely. But we can anticipate seeing the jackal.

Excuse me? Is the jackal part of Switzerland’s fauna?

As far as the jackal is concerned, we’re talking about a “natural expansion of its area”. This is related to climate change and the lengthy absence of the wolf. The jackal is expanding its territory from south-eastern Europe into the area north of the Alps. It will soon enrich Switzerland, too.

INTERVIEW: MARC LETTAU