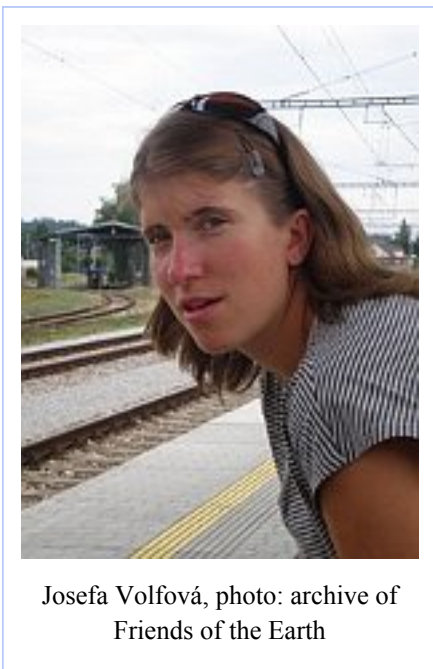


Panorama - Wolf patrols ready to come out with the first snow

[2014-11-27] By Daniela Lazarová

Europe's large predators were hunted into extinction in the early 1900s, but due to changing conditions and better protection wolves, bears and lynxes are slowly returning to countries across the Old Continent. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature the number of wolves in Europe have quadrupled in the past three decades to an estimated 25,000 animals. To find out which of these predators have returned to the Czech Republic I spoke to Josefa Volfová of Friends of the Earth.



Josefa Volfová, photo: archive of Friends of the Earth

“These animals have been coming to the Czech Republic from the east, from Slovakia where there is quite a big population of carnivores and now wolves also come to us from the north where there is a big population in the German and Polish border areas. This population was established about 15 years ago and now there are about 100 wolves living on the German side of the border. Several of these animals ventured into Czech territory so now we have our first pack of wolves in the protected area of Kokořín. In case of lynxes the population is also quite good. We now have two areas where these animals live. The bigger population is in southern Bohemia, in the Šumava mountains. It was introduced in the 1980s and now there are about fifty to seventy animals. The second area, which has a smaller population of lynxes, is near the Czech and Slovak border. There are about ten lynxes living in that vicinity, so it is also quite successful.”

And bears? Are there any bears?

“There the situation isn't so good because we do not have a stable population. We know that every year there are sightings of brown bears in the border areas with Slovakia but we know that the bears do not reproduce here, they just cross the border

and eventually wonder back to Slovakia. So we are still waiting for them to come home.”

Wolves and bears were hunted out of existence in this country in the early 1900s weren't they?

“That's true, it is a sad history and it does not concern only wolves and bears but also lynxes. All these animals were systematically hunted out. The last wolf was killed in 1914 I believe. “



Photo: Bernard Landgraf, CC BY-SA 3.0

I understand that they are now returning to Europe due to the depopulation of rural areas, is that right?

“That's true. And I think it is also due to the fact that these animals are now protected. They are protected in almost all countries of Europe by environmental laws and there has been a gradual shift in public opinion regarding these animals, we have more information about them and how important they are for the ecosystem.”

What conditions do they need? For instance if we are talking about wolves –how many packs can the environment here sustain?

“As concerns wolves, they do not need any special conditions. They only have one problem and that is people. They just need an area where they can hunt for food –for example roe deer and they do not need any special biotope, simply no interference from man. “

What are chances of cohabitation today? Is there a policy aiming for controlled numbers of wolves and bears in certain areas?

“I do not think there is any danger of large carnivores overbreeding in this country. They reproduce if they have a lot of food or if they have enough food. And when they no longer have enough food they disappear, they cross the border into another country where the conditions are better. There are not so many deer-filled hunting grounds in this country and so we do not have a policy on controlling their numbers because we simply do not need it.”

I understand there are wolf monitoring teams. How do they work?

“We organize special wolf patrols, but it isn’t for wolves alone, it is for the three species of large carnivores – wolves, lynxes and bears. We organize them in the Beskydy and Javorníky mountains and in the Šumava mountains and have been doing so for fifteen years now. These patrols are made up of volunteers who go out and do field monitoring in areas where the animals are known to live or have been sighted. They look for tracks and droppings and collect samples of scat and hairs which we use for DNA analyses. All this gives u more information about these animals which we use for their better protection. “

One of their goals is also to discourage poachers, I understand?

“We go to areas where we suspect poachers to be active and of course cover areas where these animals live or have been sighted and we leave warning notices saying that the area is monitored by wolf patrols. In other words we let poachers know that we are here and want to protect these animals. That is an important message I think. ”

And I understand that these patrols also spread more information about wolves among people living in the close vicinity, in nearby villages to do away with myths and so on?

goals of these patrols is to provide and spread objective information about wolves because it is very important for people to know that these animals do not present a danger to them, that they are generally shy and afraid of people. So we talk about these things to people living in these areas as well as hunters who are active there and I think that is probably the most important role of our wolf patrols.”



Lynx, photo: Silke Sohler, CC BY-SA 3.0

“Yes, there was a very bad situation about fifteen years ago in the Beskydy mountains when about five wolves came to us from Slovakia and settled in the border region. There was an enormous fear of these animals in nearby villages and hunters shot them all dead within a period of five years. That was the year when our wolf patrols were established and one of the