

# WOLFWATCH EUROPE

## NEWSLETTER



3 - MAY 2026



### LATEST SCIENTIFIC NEWS

#### TOO MANY WOLVES? TOO MANY PREDATIONS? TOO MANY HYBRIDS? FAKE NEWS IN SUPPORT OF CULLS; ETTORE RANDI (NATURE AND SOCIETY, APRIL 2026)

**Extract:** This article critically evaluates the recent **downgrading** of the conservation status of the wolf (*Canis lupus*) within the European Union, with particular reference to the Italian context. The paper examines the ecological, demographic, and political implications of **wolf management** policies, focusing on population dynamics, anthropogenic mortality, and legal culling practices. Particular attention is devoted to **wolf-dog hybridisation**, which is analysed from a **conservation genetics perspective**. The article discusses the distinction between recent hybrids and historical backcrosses, emphasizing the role of adaptive introgression and the absence of conclusive evidence linking hybridisation to maladaptive behavioural traits. Overall, the study criticises the politicisation of wolf management and advocates for **evidence-based conservation strategies** grounded in ecological monitoring, genomic analyses, and non-lethal prevention measures.

[Read the Article](#) (pages 2-9)

#### ANATOMY OF A 'PROBLEM WOLF': A MULTIDISCIPLINARY STUDY FROM BIAŁOWIEŻA, POLAND; KASPER ET AL. (HUMAN ECOLOGY, APRIL 2026)

**Extract:** As wolves recolonize human-dominated landscapes across Europe, managing risks amidst increasing reports of close encounters becomes essential. We present a retrospective, multidisciplinary analysis of a case from Poland involving the removal of a wolf for **bold behavior** toward humans. Our findings suggest that the wolf's unusual actions were **influenced by prior captivity exposure**, as evidenced by a dietary shift from domestic to wild meats and genetic connections to a region known for captive rearing. Camera-trap data showed that during the wolf's presence, local pack activity peaked, with a notable rise in single-wolf detections, contrasting with patterns during a control season without the case wolf. Although **the threat to human safety was minimal**, a public survey highlighted concerns about wolf-dog interactions. We advise evaluating bold wolves on a case-by-case basis, incorporating ecological and social evidence into investigations, and **emphasizing human responsibility** in preventing undesirable wolf behaviors.

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Newsletter curated by:  
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Matko Biscan, Ettore Randi.  
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## SCIENTIFIC HIGHLIGHTS

**MATKO BISCAN**

### **BOLD WOLF BEHAVIOUR: DEFINITIONS AND ANALYSIS OF REPORTED PAST CASES ACROSS EUROPE; FRYBOVÁ ET AL. (LIFE WILD-WOLF, DECEMBER 2024)**

**Bold wolves:** what are they – and how should we respond? Drawing on recent European research and expert guidelines, this article explains that **boldness** is not a separate “type” of wolf, but the extreme end of a behavioural continuum linked to habituation and risk-taking. Wolves that repeatedly approach people closer than about 30 metres – well inside the distance at which most wild wolves normally flee – are considered truly bold, especially when these close encounters happen again and again rather than as one-off events. Most documented cases across Europe involve **single young wolves**, often in newly recolonised areas, and are strongly associated with **human-created conditions:** food sources (garbage, pet food, intentional feeding), free-roaming dogs, or even previous captivity.

**Extract:** This report analyses cases of **strongly habituated and bold wolves** across Europe, and provides clear operational definitions for wolf behaviours associated with close human interactions. Based on all well-documented cases collected between 2012 and 2022, the authors identify only **20 wolves** that met the criteria for bold or strongly habituated behaviour, at a time when the European wolf population grew to around 23,000 individuals – roughly **0.09%**, meaning that the vast majority of wolves continue to behave as “normal” shy animals. In about 85% of these cases, **attractants** such as garbage, food leftovers, pet food or dogs were known or strongly suspected to be involved, and all non-rabid bite incidents were linked to wolves from captivity or to highly food-conditioned individuals, underlining how central **human-created conditions** are in producing “bold wolf” situations.

The **key message** is that not every daytime sighting or calm, passing wolf is “bold”: many reports reflect unrealistic human expectations rather than abnormal animal behaviour. When genuinely bold behaviour does occur, experts recommend a clear, stepwise approach: **prevent habituation** by never feeding wolves, systematically document and verify reports, remove attractants such as food and unsecured dogs, use non-lethal hazing where appropriate, and reserve lethal control for a very small number of carefully assessed high-risk cases. The authors therefore stress the importance of **standardized monitoring** and, above all, **preventive management:** early removal of attractants, rapid response when unusual behaviour is detected and clear protocols for handling rare high-risk cases, as key tools to support long-term human–wolf coexistence. In short, managing bold wolves is less about changing wolves and more about changing **how we behave**, what we leave in the landscape, and how quickly we act when the first warning signs appear.

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### SPATIOTEMPORAL PATTERNS OF LIVESTOCK PREDATION ACROSS CONTRASTING FARMING SYSTEMS IN AN EXPANDING GREY WOLF POPULATION; DEL RIO ET AL. (SSRN, APRIL 2026)

**Extract:** This study examines where and why wolves attack livestock in two expansion areas of south-western Europe with contrasting farming systems – sheep-dominated La Rioja and cattle-dominated Guadalajara in Spain. Using official damage reports from 2016 to 2024, the authors model **depredation risk** at both municipal and local scales, integrating ecological, topographic and management variables such as distance to wolf breeding areas, livestock and wild prey density, land use and key landscape features. Their results show that **risk drivers** differ between systems: in sheep regions, attacks concentrate in wolf-preferred habitats with high livestock density and close to breeding areas, whereas in cattle regions elevation, water availability and proximity to breeding areas are more important. At finer local scales, habitat suitability for livestock and closeness to wolf breeding centers consistently predict where attacks occur, even between neighbouring municipalities. Instead of blaming “the wolf”, the authors argue that these scale-dependent risk patterns call for **targeted prevention** – from improved husbandry and guarding practices to spatially focused support in mapped hotspots – offering a practical framework to guide more effective **coexistence measures**. EU instruments such as CAP, LIFE and state-aid schemes already allow funding for protection measures and compensation, but their impact depends on how actively individual member states choose to use them.

[Read the Article](#)

### ETTORE RANDI

### THE ITALIAN WOLF POPULATION IS NOT COMPOSED OF 47% HYBRIDS

Following a recent publication ([Lorenzini et al., Biological Conservation, 2026](#)), **alarmist articles** have appeared in Italian and international media reporting the news that 47% of the Italian wolf population is made up of hybrids with domestic dogs. The content of the publication presents some controversial methodological aspects that have been discussed in a rebuttal letter ([Randi et al., Biological Conservation, 2026](#)). The media report that 47% of the Italian wolf population is made up of hybrids contains at least two errors. 1) The cited study analyses only samples of wolves collected opportunistically from regions of the central-southern Apennines; the sampling is not random and does not include the Alpine regions; therefore, the conclusions must refer only to the Apennine population and not to the entire Italian wolf population. 2) The Apennine population is composed of a small component of recent **hybrids** (less than 5% of the sample analysed) and a predominant component of **backcrosses**. It is necessary to clarify that hybrids and backcrosses differ substantially, both in their different genetic composition and in their different evolutionary paths. Hybrids are born from matings between wolves and dogs and contain half their genome from wolves and half (50%) from dogs. During the first generations of hybridisation, this composition remains substantially unchanged. Hybrids living in nature are most likely disadvantaged and might disappear quickly, which explains their low frequency in the samples analysed.

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The few hybrids that survive in the wild can reproduce with wolves, generating backcrosses. The genetic composition of backcrosses changes very rapidly over the first few generations. The domestic genome halves with each generation. First-generation backcrosses contain 25% domestic genes, and so on.

After only five generations of backcrossing, the domestic genes are less than 1%. We know that anthropogenic mortality in Italy is very high and each generation is replaced within the first four years. Therefore, five generations of backcrossing correspond to only 20 years from hybridisation. Natural selection can also eliminate disadvantageous domestic genes even more quickly. But it is not ruled out that any advantageous genes could be permanently incorporated into the wolf genome. These events of **adaptive introgression** have been scientifically documented in wolf populations in North America, Spain and Italy. Black wolves in North America and Italy originate from recent or ancient backcrossing that introduced a melanistic mutation into wild populations, a mutation that not only alters the colour of the coat but also causes greater immunological resistance to certain pathogens. Therefore, the persistence of black coats is a symptom of adaptations acquired in wolf populations through backcrossing and gene introgression. We have known for some time that Apennine wolves are partly backcrossed, probably because of centuries of coexistence with humans and dogs in anthropized environments. Apennine wolves are scientifically recognised as a unique subspecies: *Canis lupus italicus*, and as such must be fully protected and conserved. The fake news that about half of Italian wolves are hybrids must be debunked, because at the time of the downgrading it could encourage requests for the indiscriminate culling of supposed hybrids, in addition to the so-called legalised culling under the quotas proposed by the Ministry of the Environment to the Italian regions.

### References

- [Lorenzini, R., et al. 2026. Genetic evidence reveals extensive wolf-dog hybridisation in peninsular Italy: warnings against ineffective management. \*Biological Conservation\* 313, 111615.](#)
- [Randi E., et al. 2026. Further research is required to clarify the genetic composition of the Italian Apennine wolf population. \*Biological Conservation\* 318, 111833.](#)

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Newsletter curated by:  
Gaia Angelini, Alessandra Conti, Matko Bišćan, Ettore Randi.  
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