

# INDIA'S MISSING WOLVES

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

Indian grey wolves are unlike their European and American counterparts | Photo Credit: THE GRASSLANDS TRUST

'Wolf! Wolf!' The driver in the vehicle facing us silently mouthed, and pointed to his right. Within seconds, a pack of three magnificent Indian grey wolves appeared in the savanna grasslands, less than 100 metres from us. A large male, followed by what appeared to be a heavily pregnant female, and finally a younger male, probably from their previous litter. Eyeing us cautiously, they walked into the adjoining plantation and disappeared.

There were many things special about this sighting. We were observing the top predator of India's grasslands, in their natural habitat, but this was far from any national park or wildlife sanctuary. This was virtually in Pune city's backyard, a landscape full of people, agriculture and domestic livestock. The Grasslands Trust, an NGO based in Pune, has been observing packs in these landscapes for over a decade. They have documented over 10 different breeding packs that use this landscape of around 700 sq. km. The wolves share this incredible landscape with a suite of other endangered species, the Indian gazelle (chinkara), the Indian fox, the striped hyena, and scores of migratory and resident birds. This area is also home to tens of thousands of agro-pastoralists, and is used as the monsoon grazing grounds by the Dhangar community, a tribe of nomadic pastoralists, who wind their way with their herds of sheep and goat across the Western Ghats every year from the coastal regions of Konkan.

Unfortunately, for the wolves we saw, the ending was not happy. A few weeks later, the entire pack, including their new pups, was found dead or dying from the deadly canine distemper virus. The female was the only survivor.

Diseases such as canine distemper virus is one of the many problems that this enigmatic predator of the Indian savannas faces. A new study estimates that there may be as few as 3,100 wolves in India. This puts them in the same category of endangerment as tigers. Habitat loss is a primary threat to this species. No wildlife sanctuary is dedicated to the preservation of the Indian wolf, and a recent study shows that less than 5% of open natural ecosystems in the country are protected. The wolf, unlike the tiger, is not a creature of forests. It requires vast areas, and manages to live in the interstices of agricultural spaces that are left fallow by farmers dependent on rainfall as their only source of irrigation.

The semi-arid savanna grasslands and rocky areas of the Deccan plateau, in Karnataka, Maharashtra, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, along with some areas of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan are among the last strongholds of the Indian wolf. Pre-Independence, they would have likely shared their habitat with the Asiatic cheetah, coursing down blackbuck and chinkara. The cheetah is now gone, and so are the vast herds of antelope that roamed the Indian plains. Wolves are unfortunately following the same path and have declined across their entire range.

Indian grey wolves are unlike their European and American counterparts. They are smaller, leaner, highly adapted to the hot, arid plains of the Indian subcontinent. They are, along with the Tibetan wolf found in the Himalayas, among the oldest wolf lineages in the world. Scientists have given the Indian wolf its own sub-species status, *Canis lupus pallipes*, and some have argued that it should be its own unique species. If the Indian wolf were to disappear, this ancient evolutionary lineage would be forever lost, and India's savannas would be bereft of both their top

predators.

The Indian wolf's unique genetic signature is under attack from another unlikely source: its own domesticated brethren. The population of free-ranging domestic dogs has exploded in rural India. As the wolf's habitat becomes fragmented, there are more opportunities for dogs to come into contact with wolves. Wolves and dogs have an uneasy love-hate relationship. A solitary dog is likely to be chased away by a pack of wolves, and vice versa. However, if wolf populations are low, and a wolf is unable to find a partner, then it may also mate with a dog, resulting in wolf-dog hybrids. This genetic dilution of wild genes may eventually result in an evolutionary disadvantage for the wolf, robbing it of its ability to hunt prey and remain wild. Dogs can also pass on something more deadly to wolves. Diseases such as canine distemper, canine parvovirus and rabies could easily spread to wolf packs. This is likely to have happened to the pack that we saw near Pune.

While all these dangers continue to imperil the wolf's future, perhaps nothing is as bad as the ignominy heaped on the habitat that the wolf calls home. According to the government of India's *Wasteland Atlas of India*, much of the wolf's native habitat is barren wastelands that are actively prioritised for development activities. It is ironic that one of the greatest dangers to grasslands comes from 'green' projects such as solar energy and tree planting drives.

The survival of the Indian wolf depends on an unlikely ally: nomadic pastoralist communities who graze native sheep and goats in these grasslands. These are the main prey for the wolves, and in many pastoralist communities, such as the Dhangar of Maharashtra, the wolf is worshipped and not begrudged the occasional lamb. But this relationship is not always so rosy. In many other parts of the country, wolves are regularly persecuted by agro-pastoralists, their dens blocked with rocks and pups killed. However, the future of wolves, blackbuck, and that of the pastoralists and their stock is deeply intertwined with the fate of their habitats.

Only by granting the savanna grasslands of India their legitimacy as a natural habitat, and recognising the deep and intricate dependencies between the human and non-human denizens of these vast open landscapes, do we have a chance of saving the wolves.

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