



Wolves on the Hunt: The Behavior of Wolves Hunting Wild Prey

By L. David Mech, Douglas W. Smith, Daniel R. MacNulty

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The interactions between apex predators and their prey are some of the most awesome and meaningful in nature—displays of strength, endurance, and a deep coevolutionary history. And there is perhaps no apex predator more impressive and important in its hunting—or more infamous, more misjudged—than the wolf. Because of wolves' habitat, speed, and general success at evading humans, researchers have faced great obstacles in studying their natural hunting behaviors. The first book to focus explicitly on wolf hunting of wild prey, *Wolves on the Hunt* seeks to fill these gaps in our knowledge and understanding.

Combining behavioral data, thousands of hours of original field observations, research in the literature, a wealth of illustrations, and—in the e-book edition and online—video segments from cinematographer Robert K. Landis, the authors create a compelling and complex picture of these hunters. The wolf is indeed an adept killer, able to take down prey much larger than itself. While adapted to hunt primarily hoofed animals, a wolf—or especially a pack of wolves—can kill individuals of just about any species. But even as wolves help drive the underlying rhythms of the ecosystems they inhabit, their evolutionary prowess comes at a cost: wolves spend one-third of their time hunting—the most time consuming of all wolf activities—and success at the hunt only comes through traveling long distances, persisting in the face of regular failure, detecting and taking advantage of deficiencies in the physical condition of individual prey, and through ceaseless trial and error, all while risking injury or death.

By describing and analyzing the behaviors wolves use to hunt and kill various wild prey—including deer, moose, caribou, elk, Dall sheep, mountain goats, bison, musk oxen, arctic hares, beavers, and others—*Wolves on the Hunt* provides a revelatory portrait of one of nature's greatest hunters.

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Wolves on the Hunt: The Behavior of Wolves Hunting Wild Prey By L. David Mech, Douglas W. Smith, Daniel R. MacNulty **Bibliography**

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Editorial Review

Review

“Fascinating. . . . Loaded with first-hand accounts of the various stages of gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) hunting, chronicled throughout mostly North America, the book is illustrated with a captivating collection of photographs and informative comparison data charts. . . . A celebration of . . . the emerging knowledge base about wolves.”

(David Kline *International Wolf*)

“[One of ‘The Best Books of 2015: Nature!’. . . . It’s not often in the world of nature-writing that readers get a chance to read a kind of summation written by the single most knowledgeable expert on a given subject, and in 2015 it happened a few times. Including this great book based in such large part on the research, insight, and vast personal experience Mech brings to the subject of wolves.”

(Steve Donoghue *Open Letters Monthly*)

“The authors represent three generations of career wolf ecologists. . . . This book is indeed unique and will be of interest to many readers, including ecologists and other individuals concerned with wolves and more broadly with wildlife, wilderness, and animal behavior and conservation. . . . A highlight of the book is its superb photography. The images are vivid, graphic, and enthralling. Poignant images are used to carefully point out, convey, or highlight hunting principles or strategies. As also explained in the book, a colossal network of volunteers has been instrumental in collecting the wolf hunting accounts. I have personally witnessed all this effort in the field, although I have not collaborated with the authors directly. I have been there, in Yellowstone and at other field research sites, and I have seen the volunteers, the three authors of this book, and also the wolves and prey, all in action. Readers will be glad that all this finally ends up in a such a cohesive book.”

(Marco Musiani, University of Calgary, Canada *Ecology*)

“Three experienced wolfy folk, scientists to the bone, with such amazing and lengthy exposure to wild lupines, were always going to produce something fascinating and valuable. I was not disappointed. . . . It reminds us . . . that science, rightfully, replaces assumptions and theories with fact. . . . An important reminder that to love the wolf, it is best to appreciate the whole animal—whether that be fairytale forest shadow, hunter or socially competent family-orientated creature. This impressive book is one for academics, scientists but also for the curious. . . . A book to admire and one that should make us appreciate that the wolf does not have an easy life, even if it is an apex predator.”

(*Wolf Print*)

“Public sentiments over wolves are polarized in the United States: many view wolves as icons of the wild; others consider them the epitome of evil. Significant misconceptions exist over how wolves hunt and kill and what they kill. The authors provide clear answers to these questions, using evidence. . . . Carnivore biologists, particularly those focused on canids, will enjoy it. . . . Recommended.”

(J. Organ, University of Massachusetts Amherst *Choice*)

“A gorgeous new book . . . , which represents in one slightly oversized popular volume some of the most comprehensive research to date on the way wolves hunt their prey. . . . It’s written artlessly but directly, with the aim of updating and broadening some popular misconceptions about the way wolves operate in the wild.

As a work of natural history, neither it nor anything else can match the lyricism of Barry Lopez's *Of Wolves and Men*, but as a general-audience monograph, it's one of the most valuable works of science-writing to appear this year. Kudos to the folks at the University of Chicago Press for giving it such a handsome volume."

(Steve Donoghue *Open Letters Monthly*)

"Highly useful for defining research questions and informing conclusions from such studies of wolf hunting behavior. Most investigators of these studies will be lucky to witness the pursuit of wolves just once even though this is their focus. Accordingly, this book will be a valuable reference (in more than 1000 hours of radio tracking wolves and moose, I have witnessed only three wolf-prey interactions). I expect the book to be of broad interest as well because the polarizing nature of wolves is due, in part, to their hunting and predatory behavior. As someone who participates in wildlife management meetings where wolves and their prey are common topics of discussion, I can personally attest to the latter. Stories are shared regularly at these meetings, but usually these stories are full of hearsay and innuendo with little fact. The facts contained within this book can inform these discussions, with the ultimate goal of fostering a better understanding of wolves and their interactions with prey."

(Bryce C. Lake, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge *Arctic*)

"For all wildlife lovers, this is a must read."

(Melanie Gade *Defenders of Wildlife* blog, "Weekly Wolf Wrap-Up")

"Across decades of writing about wolves and the science associated with their study, I've seldom encountered a more gripping opening to a natural history book. . . . *Wolves on the Hunt* is an in-depth analysis of how wolves kill prey to survive. This new book could not come at a better time. Even though the year is 2015 there remains in the American West some pretty puritanical notions about alleged wolf behavior that have little basis in reality. . . . Mech, considered the world's foremost wolf authority, and his colleagues deliver a hair-raising and at times grim narrative about how lobos stalk. . . . No matter what lobo camp you're in, you'll find *Wolves on the Hunt* to be endlessly fascinating reading."

(Todd Wilkinson *Jackson Hole News&Guide*)

"To be honest, I was a bit giddy having the opportunity to review *Wolves on the Hunt*. . . . The book is a fascinating account. . . . Each chapter is extremely detailed and exhaustive, covering all known wolf prey and how they hunt them. This truly is the capstone to first author Mech's outstanding >55 year career studying wolves, and the painstaking time involved in writing this all-encompassing book on wolf predation with first-hand . . . descriptions of wolves hunting various prey is a tribute to all three authors. It takes endless hours of dedication and perseverance to make these observations."

(Jonathan (Jon) Way, Eastern Coyote/Coywolf Research *Canadian Field-Naturalist*)

"Among the many hotly debated topics related to the appearance of dogs in the lives of humans is how often and where it first occurred. . . . We learn from *Wolves on the Hunt* that while wolves appear excellent at finding and trailing game, they are not very good at making the kill, succeeding perhaps half the time. It is dangerous work at which humans with their weapons excel. Imagine the scene: Human hunters locate wolves on the hunt by watching ravens who are known to follow them. Human hunters move in for the kill and take as many animals as they can. If smart, they might share immediately with the wolves. If not, the wolves might consume what the humans do not carry off or follow them back to their encampment to take what they can. The rest is a tale of accommodation through socialization—the ability to bond with another being—and all that entails."

(Mark Derr *The Bark*)

“If we underestimate prey animals in ecology, we risk overestimating predators’ impact on prey populations and on landscapes. . . . This extraordinary book . . . captures that complexity very beautifully. The authors are three of the most experienced wolf biologists in the world. They have conducted many fundamental studies of wolf biology and together they have seen wolves actively hunting more than anyone in their field. The volume centers on rigorous analysis but is enriched and enlivened by firsthand observations and photographs that are meticulously curated to help readers see the hunt for themselves. The result is an already classic account of an archetypal predator-prey interaction. But, to me, the book’s most important value may be to demystify the wolf at the very same time it builds our respect for the animal and its sophisticated prey. That is the greatest honor the creatures within its pages can be paid.”

(Arthur D. Middleton, Yale University *Quarterly Review of Biology*)

“In reading *Wolves on the Hunt* you will learn that death has shaped life for millions of years. You’ll learn that no activity is more important to the wolf than predation; and although it’s a tough and frustrating habit that often fails, wolves survive only because they refuse to give up. By shedding light on these and other important findings, *Wolves on the Hunt* will be incredibly valuable to conservation scientists and citizens alike who appreciate wild places and wild things. It’s a great illustration of the constant battle between predator and prey and of dogged determination.”

(Ted Turner, Chairman, Turner Endangered Species Fund)

“This exhaustive account of wolves hunting and killing wild prey could only be compiled by the foremost wolf biologists of our day—Drs. Mech, Smith, and MacNulty. The easy-to-read book cites all the primary and secondary literature as well as many previously unpublished observations. *Wolves on the Hunt* will not only fascinate biologists and those teaching wildlife management but also the general public, including outdoor, environmental, and hunting groups. These detailed observations of predation let us imagine the struggles that our ancestors must have encountered as we competed with wolves to become the earth’s supreme hunters of ungulates.”

(Ed Bangs, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Wolf Recovery Coordinator from 1988 to 2011)

“Very detailed. Never before has the predatory behavior of any carnivore been presented in such depth. *Wolves on the Hunt* is a contribution not just to our knowledge of the wolf but to our understanding of predation in general. The authors, experts in wolf predatory behavior who are in the best position to interpret these data from a scientific perspective, review a great amount of information and add an impressive number of accounts of hunting events observed by very few people. Their interpretations of the appropriate literature are clear and elegant. Very well written, easy to read both for specialists and for the general public interested in wolves and wildlife, *Wolves on the Hunt* is unique.”

(Juan Carlos Blanco, former adviser to the Ministry of the Environment on the Coordinated Plan for Wolf Conservation in Spain)

About the Author

L. David Mech is a senior research scientist with the US Geological Survey and an adjunct professor in the Department of Fisheries, Wildlife, and Conservation Biology and Department of Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior at the University of Minnesota. He is the author or editor of many books, including *Wolves: Behavior, Ecology, and Conservation*, coedited by Luigi Boitani and published by the University of Chicago Press. **Douglas W. Smith** is a senior wildlife biologist and the Wolf Project Leader in Yellowstone National Park. He is coauthor most recently of *Decade of the Wolf: Returning the Wild to Yellowstone*. **Daniel R. MacNulty** is an assistant professor of wildlife ecology at Utah State University.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Carol Castaneda:

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