

INTERNATIONAL WOLF

A PUBLICATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL WOLF CENTER
WINTER 2024



Through the eyes of a wolf **4**

Wolves and "Herdenschutz" **8**

Do wolves really change rivers? **12**

Recipients of 2024 fellowships are hard at work **16**

Project “Herdenschutz Niedersachsen”

Practical support for effective livestock
protection against wolf attacks in Germany

By PETER SCHÜTTE & ANNETTE SIEGERT



Peter Schuette

Practical training for volunteers

In Lower Saxony, Germany, the country's largest nature conservation organization, The Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union, launched a project to help foster co-existence between humans and wolves (*Canis lupus*). This unique undertaking encourages volunteers with nature conservation interests to build wolf-deterrent fences together with livestock owners, thus bringing together usually opposing stakeholders and enabling a long-overdue dialogue between these two parties. The project started in 2017 and is still going strong due to word-of-mouth promotion and ongoing demand for support by farmers. The project's overall objective is to safeguard livestock grazing in the long term, as numerous habitat types in Lower Saxony, especially those of significant nature conservation importance such as heathland ecosystems, are dependent on ongoing grazing or even evolved because of it.

Wolves in Brothers Grimm country

The wolf was considered extinct in Germany for about 150 years but began recolonizing the country at the turn of the millennium. This expansion originated from Poland where wolves were never extinct, and was made possible by re-opened borders after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Since then, the species has continued to increase and spread to more regions. With 83.4 million inhabitants and a population density of 236 inhabitants per square kilometer (615 people per square mile), as well as a landscape that is heavily influenced by human activity, the return of this large carnivore entails many challenges. In addition, wolves are strictly protected in Germany by the Bern Convention, the European Union Habitats Directive and the Federal Nature Conservation Act and therefore may not be hunted. The recolonization of wolves in the federal

state of Lower Saxony in north-west Germany began in 2008. The population has been growing steadily ever since. In the monitoring year 2023-24, 52 packs, three pairs and two territorial individuals were confirmed (Fig. 1). Since their return, attacks on hobby and farm animals such as sheep, goats, captive deer, cattle and horses have posed a challenge for pasture animal husbandry.

In Lower Saxony, which is largely characterized by agriculture and forestry, there are 18,600 cattle farms with approximately 2.3 million animals and 1,040 sheep farms with approximately 172,000 animals. In addition, the state is home to approximately 233,500 horses. In Germany, wolves prey mostly on roe deer, wild boar, red deer and fallow deer. The population densities of these prey species tend to be high due to active feeding for hunting purposes. Farm animals make up a very small proportion of around 1.6% of wolves' total diet, but attacks occur time and again. Sheep and goats comprise 88.6% of the livestock attacked by wolves, followed by cattle at 6%, captive deer at 4.2%, and 1.2% other animals. In Lower Saxony, the comparatively frequent attacks on horses are causing particularly emotional debates. The purchase of materials for wolf-deterrent fences and for livestock guarding dogs is subsidized by the state with up to €30,000 per year (about \$39,950 USD) per farm. While sheep, goat and captive deer farms can be subsidized throughout the government, horse and cattle farms are only subsidized in exceptional circumstances and within narrow regional boundaries.

The project "Herdenschutz Niedersachsen" (Livestock Protection



Figure 1. Wolf territories in Lower Saxony, Germany. The circle diameter (16km) results in an area of 200km², which is consistent with the approximate size of a wolf territory.

Lower-Saxony) supports livestock producers in implementing protection measures with the involvement of volunteers, as scientific findings show that non-lethal approaches such as wolf-deterrent fencing are significantly more effective at preventing attacks on grazing animals than lethal removal of wolves. The basis for best possible wolf-deterrent protection is the diligent and correct installation of the recommended fencing systems, while it is also particularly important to consider each pasture area individually as well as aspects like operating procedures of each farm, the topography of the terrain or other special features and other factors that could restrict fencing (such as drainage ditches that cross the fence line). In addition to providing on-site advice to livestock producers and practical support in setting up wolf-deterrent fences, the project also aims to contribute to minimizing conflict between wolves and livestock farming by educating farmers about wolves. Where opportunities arise, prevention measures are implemented in hotspot areas of recent kills, but also in various natural areas and in areas without established wolf territories.

Volunteers with nature conservation background and farmers work together

The heart of the project activities is the practical support of livestock farmers to implement concrete measures in livestock protection. The use

The heart of the project activities is the practical support of livestock farmers to implement concrete measures in livestock protection. The use of new fencing is often accompanied by changes or at least greater efforts in pasture management.

of new fencing is often accompanied by changes or at least greater efforts in pasture management. The installation of wolf-deterrent permanent electric fences is the common practice on sheep and goat, cattle and horse farms in Lower Saxony and requires sound knowledge of the materials and components used as well as professional installation. It is often difficult for farmers to install an effective wolf-deterrent fence on their own due to a lack of knowledge and time. In many cases, it is just as difficult to finance the construction by a specialized company (especially in the case of part-time or hobby farmers), even if the purchase of the material is subsidized by the state. This is where the activities of the project “Herderschutz Niedersachsen” have proved their worth, with trained and experienced volunteers working under the coordination of project staff. In this way, additional

workload and increased costs for livestock farms can be minimized.

The only prerequisites for volunteers are physical fitness, the ability to cope with all kinds of weather and a willingness to interact with farmers who may have a different attitude - especially towards wolves. Also, there is no fixed duration for voluntary work. While some people regularly invest a lot of hours, others may help only on and off, depending on their professional and family commitments.

Since the start of the project in 2017, more than 275 individuals have been trained and a total of 55 volunteers have supported the project practically. Volunteers invested more than 875 working days in practical project work. More than 450 animal owners have been visited for consultations by project staff. Approximately 250 livestock producers have been supported practically by the project with new fences, resulting in more than 450 pastures. Of these husbandries, 49% were cattle farms, 27% sheep-goat farms, 22% horse farms and 2% captive deer enclosures. Sixty-two percent of those were sideline businesses, 28% professional operations and 10% hobby farms. Twenty-three of the livestock producers had recorded wolf attacks prior to the implementation of livestock protection measures, but all of the supported ones remained without depredations afterwards, if the fence was maintained correctly.

Word of mouth and dialogue

The fast response and expert advice provided by the project, which contributes to the implementation of livestock protection measures, is usually highly appreciated and gratefully accepted. The project can be helpful on many levels through direct talks, on-site visits, knowledge transfer or by providing contacts. Once a wolf-deterrent fence has been built with the practical support of trained and experienced volunteers, word gets around in the immediate vicinity and later in the wider livestock farming community. In a nutshell: “When we build a wolf-deterrent fence on Saturdays, half the village comes around to see it.” You will find a modern, durable and low-maintenance pasture fence, which replaces the old, dilapidated fence often built with barbed wire. This new fence also deters wolves and wild boar but is permeable to other game. The experience of more than seven years’ worth of project activities shows that the effect of professionally installed livestock protection fences can be observed not only in the field, but also in people’s minds, namely when livestock farmers share their positive experiences with their colleagues, friends and rural communities. Farmers rely on peer-to-peer support and pressure. They influence each other more than do outsiders. Some enquiries for support are based on such positive experiences with the implemented livestock



Annette Siegert

Volunteers constructing a wolf-deterrent permanent electric fence



Peter Schuette

Wolf-deterrent five row electric permanent fence

protection measures and can be traced back to recommendations from already supported livestock farms. This effective word-of-mouth propaganda is a remarkable recognition of the project's achievements and a positive signal for livestock protection and the possible coexistence of grazing animals and wolves.

Satisfaction of farmers involved

As part of a master's thesis, an evaluation study was done using an exploratory approach to conduct interviews with livestock producers who took advantage of the support offered by the project between 2017 and 2020. The core of the work was to record their subjective assessments of aspects relating to wolves, livestock grazing and livestock protection as well as cooperation with "Herdenschutz Niedersachsen." To generate data, a total of 19 semi-structured guided interviews were conducted in the summer of 2020 with livestock producers supported by the project. The main challenges concerning the project were, in addition to the financial aspects, the lack of time and the lack of expertise regarding suitable

materials, professional installation, the necessary voltage and correct grounding. Another aspect cited was the difficulty in finding a competent contact person who could provide them with sufficient information about the options for protecting their animals.

All interviewees stated that co-operation with the project had brought them concrete benefits and mentioned especially the personal relief resulting from the reduced amount of personal labor as an important and tangible added value of the project's support work. The interviewees saw the project's un-bureaucratic and flexible approach as particularly supportive and felt they were provided with customized support. Practical support work was particularly important for hobby or sideline farmers. In addition, they emphasized social aspects that had the potential to moderate existing conflicts.

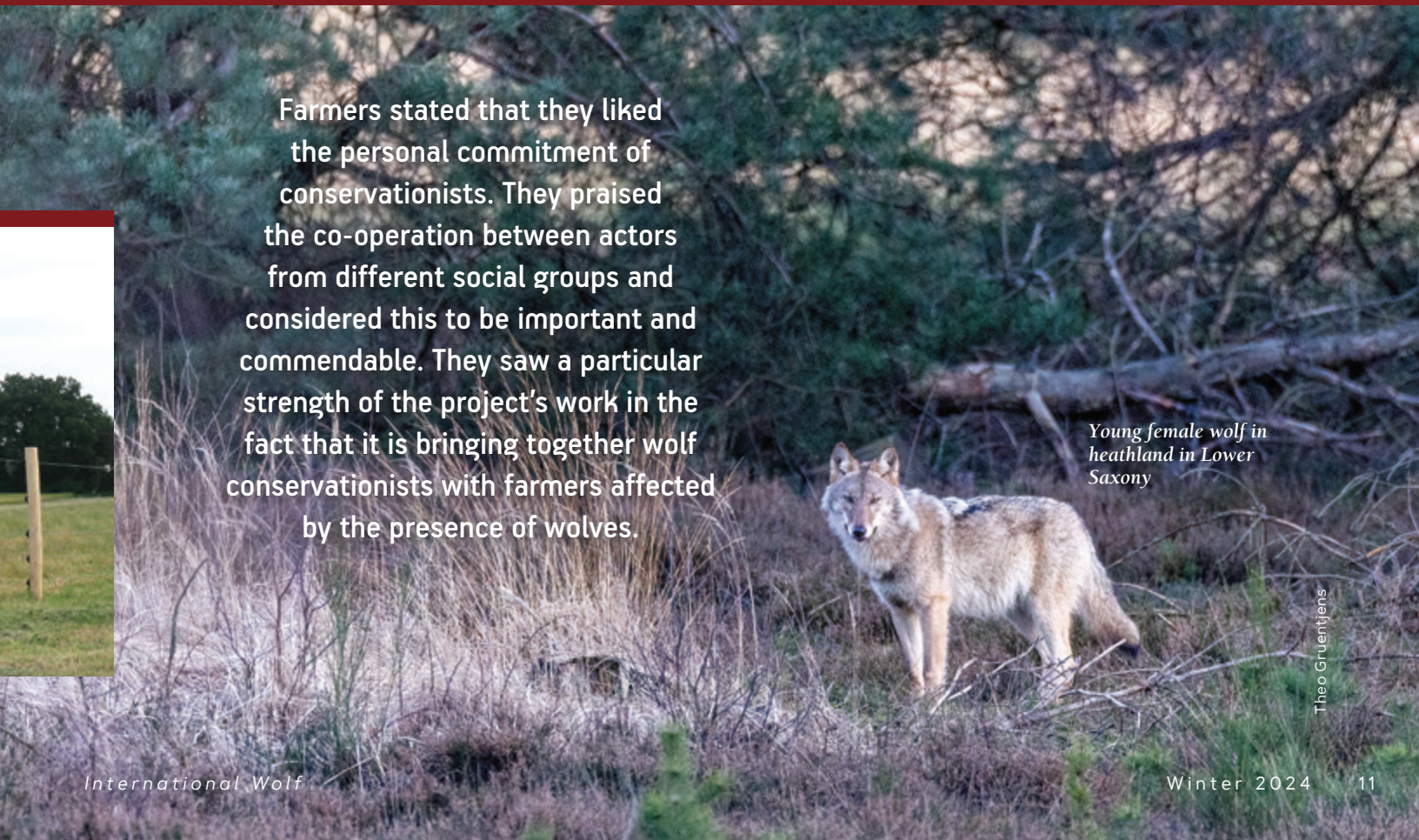
Commitment, co-operation and mutual understanding help to achieve shared goals

The farmers stated that they liked the personal commitment of conserva-

tionists. They praised the co-operation between actors from different social groups and considered this to be important and commendable. They saw a particular strength of the project's work in the fact that it is bringing together wolf conservationists with farmers affected by the presence of wolves. This would ensure a greater mutual understanding of each other's concerns and opinions. Thus, people with different views can work together and achieve shared goals, even when they have differences of opinion on some of the topics directly relevant to this work.

The project has attracted a great deal of interest and attention over the years, both from neighboring federal states and from other European countries, so hopefully similar activities will take root there in order to achieve a less conflictual coexistence of humans and wolves. ■

For more information on the project, visit www.herdenschutz-niedersachsen.de.



Farmers stated that they liked the personal commitment of conservationists. They praised the co-operation between actors from different social groups and considered this to be important and commendable. They saw a particular strength of the project's work in the fact that it is bringing together wolf conservationists with farmers affected by the presence of wolves.

Young female wolf in heathland in Lower Saxony