

Wild wolves in crosshairs of German politics

February 6 2019, by Frank Zeller



An account by a gardener in Germany of how he was bitten by what he described as a wolf is at the centre of a highly politicised debate

The sneak attack happened at a cemetery and quickly turned into a whodunnit that fired up a heated debate about the return of wolves to the wild in Germany.

A municipal gardener reported kneeling by a cast-iron fence one November morning when a four-legged predator approached from behind and sank its fangs into his left forearm.

Stunned, the 55-year-old man, who has not been publicly named, struck the beast with a hammer and scared it off, according to his report to town authorities in Steinfeld, Lower Saxony.

"Man Attacked By Wolf," headlined the tabloid-style Bild newspaper, only adding a question mark—and thus, an element of doubt over whether the unconfirmed attack actually happened—lower down in the article.

Laboratory tests on the bite wound, the man's clothing and hammer found no saliva, fur or other genetic traces of a wolf. Some observers have wondered whether the culprit might have been a wild dog.

While the gardener walked away with a bite wound and a bad fright, the case has assumed fundamental importance in a highly politicised debate.

Wolves were extinct in Germany for over 150 years, only making a comeback in 2000 after they began crossing the border with Poland. Since then, no attacks on humans had been recorded.

Campfire vigils

Environmentalists have celebrated the return of the European grey wolf, a keystone species rooted in German folklore and the fairytales of the Brothers Grimm.

But the animals provoke fear and loathing among [sheep farmers](#), equestrians—and some mainly right-wing politicians, who have seized on the issue in a year with three regional elections in eastern Germany,

prime wolf territory.

The anti-wolf lobby points to wolf attacks like one last October when the hunters ripped through a fenced-in herd of sheep and wrought havoc, leaving some 40 bloody carcasses strewn across a field.

Farmers often complain that putting up electric fences and using dogs to guard their flocks is impractical and expensive.

A growing band of wolf opponents has staged campfire vigils and launched petitions and social media campaigns against what they see as a ruthless killer.

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, best known for railing against immigrants, was first to campaign against the furry newcomers.

Echoing their language on restricting the number of asylum seekers in Germany, they have demanded an "Obergrenze", or upper limit, for the wolf population.



For over 150 years, wolves were extinct in Germany but they made a comeback in 2000

"Animals lose their fear of humans if they stop seeing them as a natural enemy," said the AfD's main spokeswoman on [wolves](#) in Saxony state, in a recent statement.

"In the case of the wolf, this can lead to attacks... including on humans."

By coincidence, her name is Silke Grimm.

Some observers have suggested that many of the 700-800 wolves estimated to roam Germany are actually wolf-dog hybrids, which would exclude them from wolves' protected status.

"Bastards in Germany—Dogs in Wolves' Clothing?" ran a provocative

headline in hunting magazine "Jagd und Hund" ("Game and Hound").

Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservative CDU party, which has suffered heavy losses at the hands of the AfD, has recently voiced support for regional wolf culls to limit their population growth.

'Mafia wolf' mystery

Nature guide Stephan Kaasche's jaw clenches when he is asked about the proposed culls.

Kaasche, 43, is firmly in the pro-wolf camp, having turned his boyhood love for the animals into a full-time job as a wildlife lecturer.

"Ten percent of wolves are already shot illegally now," he said. "But that doesn't stop wolves from approaching towns, just as it doesn't stop wild boars. It just doesn't work like that."

On a frosty morning recently, Kaasche was standing, binoculars in hand, at the edge of a huge former open-pit coal mine turned [nature reserve](#) in Saxony's Lausitz region.

It was around here, near the Polish border, that Germany's first litter of wolf pups was born in the wild in 2000 to a female dubbed "One-Eye".

Scanning the post-industrial wastelands, Kaasche's eyes light up.

"There, a wolf," he exclaimed, pointing at a long-legged juvenile slinking through the distant underbrush.

Others at this point would have loved to pull the trigger.



Environmentalists have celebrated the return of the European grey wolf, which however provokes fear and loathing among sheep farmers, equestrians and some mainly right-wing politicians

In fact, some 280 wolves have been killed by humans in Germany since 2000, according to a police count.

Most were run over, but about three dozen were illegally shot, and several were beheaded.

Last June, a bloated wolf's carcass even surfaced in a Lausitz village lake. Since it had been weighed down with a concrete block, police

dubbed it the "mafia wolf" case.

The strange way the wolf was disposed of however is perhaps not such a mystery, given that harming or killing a wolf carries a penalty of up to five years' jail.

Some local hunters have reportedly adopted the "three-S rule"—short for "shoot, shovel, silence".

'Uncertainty and fear'

The debate over Germany's wolves is often portrayed as one between idealistic green urbanites and more hard-headed country folk, who just want to protect their livelihoods and families.

"The wolf is Germany's most politicised animal," wrote the news weekly Die Zeit. "You're either with them or against them."

Newspaper publisher Stefan Aust has argued that "the wolf was already mythologised under the Nazis as a kind of master animal.

"Now, for different reasons, it has become a symbol for a naive glorification of nature."

As for the cemetery attack, the jury is still out. No-one else witnessed it—apart from three other wolves, the gardener says were there.

While Kaasche insisted that wolves do not consider humans as food, he conceded that a curious juvenile might approach a kneeling person.

Fears of [wolf](#) attacks in Germany mostly date from the time when rabies was prevalent and a bite from an infected animal was fatal, he said.

But Germany has been rabies-free for a decade, he pointed out.

"What this story has certainly done," he added, "is stoke uncertainty and fear."

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