

The wolf in Spain

by Pedro Alcántara and Marcela Plana

Spain has the fortune not only of having probably the greatest wolf population in Western Europe, but also of having being cot of the two sub-species of *Canis lupus* in Europe, *Canis lupus signatus* (Cabrera, 1907) and *Canis lupus deitanus* (Cabrera, 1907), unfortunately already extinct.

These wolves lived in most of the land in the South of Pyrenees until the beginning of this century. Nonetheless during the last hundred years they have been suffering a systematic prosecution and a series of indirect bonds for the correct development of their populations.

In the colours of *Canis lupus signatus* or Iberian wolf, brown tones are dominant, although there are darker individuals and other more red, the latter distributed mainly at the South of the Duero River. Young individuals have generally grey tones very dull in winter, while in summer they present a characteristic dark brown colour.

The main features that make the fur of the Iberian wolf differ from the one of the European wolf are the following:

- White marks in the upper lips,
- Black or very dark vertical lines that cover the front of their fore paws,
- Dark mark along their tails,
- Dark mark around their cross, known as “saddle”.

These marks are the origin of the name of the sub-specie, *signatus*, which means “signed”, that is, with signs or marks.

The weight of the Iberian wolf is between the bigger European and North American wolves’ and the smaller wolves’ that lived in North Africa. The adult males use to surpass the 40 kg. and the females the 30 kg. Besides this logic difference in weight and size and the characteristic organs of each sex, males and females nearly only differ in the volume of their heads, markedly bigger in masculine individuals.

Regarding the possible sub-specie *deitanus*, it was appointed exclusively to the territory of Murcia (Southeast coast), and featured its smaller size and the reddish tone of its fur. Nevertheless, the little information given and the fact that when it was described there were still in Murcia populations of *signatus*, have rested validity to the possibility of existence of this new sub-specie. Specifically, the described group lived in captivity in a zoo, which clay soil and red brick walls, besides the feeding and the selfsame confinement, could have something to do with their reddish look and their size.

The wolf and the Spaniards

The total amount of individuals of *Canis lupus signatus* that can be found in Spain varies according to the sources. The last reliable census was made in 1988, and pointed the existence of 1,500 to 2,000 individuals. Today the population can be estimated in approximately 1,500 individuals, distributed practically in the Northwest quadrant of the Peninsula. Whilst in the 50s the presence of wolf was patent in the whole West side of the Peninsula (do not forget its presence in Portugal) plus in the Pyrenees, a study recently carried out by the CSIC (Palacios, 1999) reveals that at the south of the Duero river (Sierra de San Pedro in Extremadura and Sierra Morena) the last wolf could have died in 1983 and that there is no confirmed presence nor biological traces of its existence in Eastern Spain, although it is possible that some groups persist in the Pyrenees and in Basque Country.



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Signatus es un servicio web sin ánimo de lucro para la defensa del lobo ibérico (*Canis lupus signatus*). Todas las contribuciones a este servicio son propiedad de sus respectivos autores.

The main problems faced by this species in Spain are:

- a) The increase of the human pressure on the wolf's habitat, with the continuous disappearance of remote zones in which the species has traditionally prospered.
- b) The woods fires that, both natural or accidental and provoked, destroy the Spanish forest and represent a reduction of the natural habitats of fauna in general, and most of all of great mammals that find great difficulties in conquering other feeding and shelter territories.
- c) The competition with livestock raisers and hunters, that settles systematically with hunting games after wolf attacks.
- d) The ignorance and superstition —hard words but not less true— of the agrarian population that both suffer wolf attacks on their livestock and fear the figure of the wolf as an animal linked by tradition with the most obscure aspects of humanity and mythology.
- e) The impact that large infrastructures, mainly highways and railways, provoke on wolf distribution areas, acting as real barriers that isolate population groups and cause accidents permanently.
- f) The unforgivable lack of interest and negligence of competent authorities, both regional and national, who limit themselves, in the best cases, to legislate, if they do not earn money by the deplorable method of auctioning the right to hunt wolves by amounts exceeding £ 2,800 per individual, as the Assembly of Castilla y León does. These same authorities refuse to pay compensations to the livestock raisers damaged by wolf assaults and keep a scandalous blindness that has allowed that no furtive hunter had ever been fined, despite of the laws that protect the species, whilst they admit that 80% of the wolves that die each year are killed by furtive hunters.

The wolf and the law

The European Union Habitat Directive, approved in May, 1992, and adopted by the Spanish law in December, 1995, establishes that the wolf population at the south of Duero river has to be considered as community prior interesting species and for which protection it is necessary to designate special conservation zones. This has caused the late reaction of Castilla-La Mancha and Andalusian governments, that consider wolf as strictly protected species and have established a compensation system to repair the damage produced by their populations, almost extinguished in this zones.

Apart from this community protection, Castilla-La Mancha has included the wolf in their Threatened Species Regional Catalogue. The wolves that remain in Northern Spain (Castilla y León, Galicia, Asturias, Cantabria and Basque Country) are considered as a species which exploitation must be compatible with the favourable state of population. This means that wolf must be respected if it does not collide with human interests; that is, that the law is still permissive for wolves to be hunted indiscriminately. Only the town council of Muelas de los Caballeros, at North Zamora and near the largest wolf populations in Spain, has demonstrated a true interest in wolf conservation and wants to forbid its hunting because they consider Iberian wolf as "emblematic species". The regional Administrations of Extremadura and Andalucía declared wolf as protected species since 1985 and 1986 respectively, that is, after this species disappeared from those regions.

The practical result of late laws, the lack of response by Administrations and mankind made-to-measure laws is that Iberian wolf is still considered in Spain as a hunting species.

This indolence in Spain also affects other *signatus* populations. Portugal shelters approximately 10% of the Iberian wolf individuals that inhabit the Peninsula, and there, although the law and the attitude of the people is more conservationist, wolf suffers a critical situation too. Wolves are strictly protected in the neighbour country by the same European Union Habitats Directive and by Life Programme; nonetheless, for some Portuguese wolves this protection is not effective. There is a population of about 150 wolves in the border between Spain and Portugal. These wolves, that live relatively safe on the Portuguese side, are killed indiscriminately when they pass to Spanish territory, specifically in Galicia and Zamora, so that many efforts made at the other side of the border for the welfare of wolves are spoiled.

A polemic issue is that of compensations by wolf attacks to livestock. Livestock raisers that live in wolf zones complain of not receiving the pertinent compensations from the administration, in part due to the difficulty of distinguishing attacks produced by wolves from the ones produced by bewildered dogs. These compensations would act as an instrument to balance the permanence of wolves and the interests of livestock raisers, and thus smoothing human population attitudes and making a pacific coexistence with wolf easier. This way, many illegal hunts, poisoning and provoked woods fires, consequence of rage and economic losses of livestock raisers, would be avoided.

Research and conservation projects

And on the side of good news, there are several scientific teams and ecologist organisations that work in favour of conservation and study of this species. Fernando Palacios, a researcher for the CSIC (*Centro Superior de Investigaciones Científicas*, Scientific Research High Centre) and the Natural Sciences National Museum, has developed his studies in several zones of Spain, among them North-Centre and South, and is now researching the possibility of carrying out a re-introduction project in Andalusia and Extremadura. Juan Carlos Blanco has been working for years in the study of *Canidae* (fox and wolf) in Castilla y León and he is currently making a project of study through radio-chase of individuals from populations living in the "green islands" of the Castillian cereal plains. Juan Carlos Gil Cubillo is devoted to the study of several native Spanish species, among them the Iberian wolf, about which he has written two interesting and thorough books (and is preparing a third) in which he speaks, among many other things, of the conflict between wolf and man and the behaviour habits of wolves in Spain. The biologists José España and Ángel Javier España have been carrying out a study about wolf presence in the province of Salamanca based on wolf attacks to livestock between 1995 and 1998.

The ecologist organisations are lead by CICONIA, an active association that maintains a risky and compromised conservationist position in a zone of continuous wolf attacks (in fact the zone with more wolf population density in Spain) that takes them to a difficult balance with agrarian organisations and to a continuous confrontation with the Assembly of Castilla y León. CICONIA is one of the few ecologist organisations that focus their work exclusively on wolf conservation, although there are others of prestige, like the group *Rómulo y Remo* from Sevilla, SECEM (*Sociedad Española para la Conservación y Estudio de los Mamíferos*, Spanish Society for Conservation and Study of Mammals), that has a Wolf Group, and the Spanish section of WWF (ADENA), some of which members are also working on the issue. Recently, most of the Spanish conservationist associations have joined and created the group *Ecologistas en Acción*. This arrangement seeks above all to form a strong and national pressure front to achieve measures from the Administration, traditionally indifferent to requests presented by local ecologist groups, that now find a mutual support in the rest of organisations that form *Ecologistas en Acción*.

With the concurrence of researchers, ecologists and members of the different administrations, a First National Congress has taken place, trying to study the uncertain situation of this species in Spain, as well as the different solutions to be found. The First Spanish-Portuguese Congress and the rest of the expert meetings still lack of the desirable co-ordination to carry out a pan-peninsular project of awareness and coexistence with this species that shares with the bear the sad privilege of being the last of the great Iberian carnivorous.

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