

Year(s) of the wolf: no doubt about it!

In last December's editorial of *Lutra*, La Haye & Verboom (2017) forcefully argued the case for declaring 2017 as the year of the wolf in the Netherlands. After several years when wolves had occasionally been spotted in the country, reliable observations of wild wolves showed a clear increase in 2017. It was considered inevitable that, sooner or later, wolves would disperse into the Netherlands and that it would become an extension of their natural range. In 2000, wolf pups were born in Germany for the first time in about 150 years (following their earlier dispersion from Poland), and a steady westward recolonisation and dispersion have been observed since then. Seventeen years later, La Haye & Verboom (2017) judged it as safe to state that wild wolves have once again become part of the Dutch mammalian fauna.

However, it looks like Flanders, the northern part of federal Belgium, is doing even better. In October 2017, Naya, a she-wolf who was radio-collared with a GPS transmitter by Norman Stier of the Technical University of Dresden travelled all the way from Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in Germany to the very north of the Netherlands and then headed due south all the way to the vast military areas in the Flemish province of Limburg, where she arrived on 3 January 2018. After being on transmigration for over 600 km during more than two and a half months, it soon became obvious that Naya had decided to settle in the

vast military areas in the Flemish province of Limburg.

In March 2018 a ten month old male wolf arrived in the same region, but was killed by traffic a few days later. Only five months later, on the 3rd of August, another potential partner appeared in Naya's home range. In the first weeks after his arrival, some sheep were killed (the voltage of the electric wire nets that were there to protect them dropped as a result of low humidity in the soil because of last summer's drought), but soon also 'August' appeared to focus on wild prey, just as Naya was doing. This was a nearly ideal situation: nature with wolves and livestock grazing grounds without wolves.

So, in Flanders we do have not only a real settlement of a first wolf, but even of a pair of wolves – and so we can expect a first nest of young in spring 2019. In the meantime, within a short period the Flemish government, established a 'wolfplan' (Everaert et al. 2018) with the aim of increasing as much public support as possible for this very new situation and assuaging the concerns of livestock owners.

One might have expected the settlement of wolves in Belgium to have first occurred in Wallonia, in the southern part of the country, a less inhabited area with more vast forests and open landscapes that are directly con-

nected with a similar vast area in northern France. A first video recording of a wild wolf was made in 2011 in Gédinne (province of Namur) and broadcast on Flemish television, but since then not much has been heard about wolves in this region. Indeed, the northward spread of the French-Italian wolf population is actively being limited in France in response to local public antipathy, which is largely due to inappropriate handling of damage risk in sheep farming. We should do well to learn from this lesson and not make the same mistakes, being the clear advice of Michel Meuret (INRA, France – the French National Institute for Agricultural Research), who is in charge of studying coadaptation between predators (such as wolves) and humans.

In the meantime, in July 2018 another wolf was camera trapped in the Walloon province of Liège (Luik) and based on DNA-typing of some excrement samples its origin was traced back to Germany, just like some material collected in 2016 (but only analysed in 2018) from a sheep carcass in the province of Luxembourg.

So, La Haye & Verboom's prediction of last year that 'maybe 2018 will prove to be an even better year of the wolf' certainly became true for Belgium and particularly for Flanders – apart from the ongoing increase of observations in the Netherlands.

The reappearance of a large carnivore such as the wolf is great news for nature conservationists in general and, especially, for mammalogists: not least because of the crucial role of the wolf as a top predator, a role that has been unoccupied in the low lands in recent times. However, for some years the future development of wolves in Europe has been much debated, especially because of the pressure of complaints about the damage they cause to domestic livestock. Besides the concerns of (sheep) farmers, FACE, the Federation of Associations for Hunting and Conservation



'Naya', 4 September 2018. Photo: INBO.

of the EU is challenging the strong protection status that the European Habitats Directive offers wolves.

Despite intensive lobbying for more possibilities to legally kill wolves, the EU very recently decided to relax the rules on reimbursing farmers for wolf (and other large carnivores) damage, hoping that this will lessen the need for farmers to kill these species. Under the new arrangement, member states will also be able to fully compensate for putting appropriate preventive measures in place. So, from now on there is some more hope that the wolf will re-establish normal population structures in Europe in the coming years: 2018 as year of the wolf also from that point of view.

These developments clearly pose new challenges to mammalogists, especially given the public attention that the wolf attracts, and demonstrate once again that studying – observing,

analysing and discussing – mammal species in their ecosystem is of great importance: in order to protect them, as well as to handle conflicts of interest in the best possible manner.

The study of mammals and improving our knowledge about them are once again the driving forces behind this new issue of *Lutra*. While the species studied in this issue are perhaps less headline-grabbing than wolves it, nonetheless, covers a wide range of interesting mammal topics: the origin and history of the distribution of the root vole, the presence of moles in road verges, a morphological determination of small toothed whales, on bats' hearing, and bone disorders of a roe deer. Scientific knowledge on mammalian biology and ecology is the result of steady efforts and researchers' passionate engagement in developing new findings or putting together pieces of a puzzle, whether small detailed aspects or looking for global patterns.

We trust that this issue makes another important contribution to this process.

Koen Van Den Berge

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Last spring, Maurice Lahaye left the editorial board of Lutra. The Board would like to thank him for his steady input and serious involvement in the five years that he was an editor of Lutra. His spontaneous, prompt and direct comments on the manuscripts Lutra received were sometimes provoking and challenging but always clearly formulated. We wish Maurice good luck, particularly in the forthcoming defence of his PhD thesis on the ins and outs of the reintroduction of the common hamster (Cricetus cricetus) in the Dutch province of Limburg.

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