

## 5. Hunting and Predation

Wolves prey mainly on large hoofed mammals (ungulates) such as deer, elk, moose, caribou, bison, bighorn sheep and musk oxen. They also eat snowshoe hares, beavers, rabbits, opossums, mice and other small prey species.

Most wolves seem to prefer wild prey to livestock. Livestock predation problems at the turn of the century occurred mainly because settlers had decimated the wolf's natural prey base of deer, antelope and bison. In the past 20 years, livestock depredation has been monitored in Minnesota, where there are now more than 2,200 wolves. During this period, wolves never killed more than a fraction of one percent of the more than 200,000 cattle on the 7,000 to 12,000 farms within wolf range. Similar findings are reported in Canada and other areas where wolves have been reintroduced. Livestock loss rates in northwestern Montana, where wolves have been present for more than ten years, are also less than one percent. Compared to other forms of livestock mortality such as disease, accidents and birthing problems, which combined accounted for nearly 4.2 million livestock deaths nationwide in 1995, wolf depredation is insignificant.

Wolves have several different methods of hunting, depending on the size of the prey. For mice and other little tidbits, a wolf will listen for squeaking and rustling under leaves, then pounce with its front paws once it pinpoints the direction of the sound. Wolves will also eat birds, especially when the birds are molting their feathers and cannot fly well. Individual wolves will chase hares or follow beaver trails to try to catch the animal away from the water.

When hunting deer, all pack members frequently participate in locating and chasing down the prey. If the pack starts to fall behind in a chase, it will usually give up. Wolves cannot afford to expend precious energy in fruitless skirmishes. If the chosen prey is injured, weakened, old or very young and separated from the protection of the adults, however, the wolves often do catch up with it and attack. But even prey vulnerability does not guarantee dinner. The odds are rarely in favor of the wolf. For example, fewer than one out of ten attempts to kill a moose actually ends in success for the wolf. In fact, larger prey animals such as moose, caribou and elk do not always run when they encounter a pack of wolves. Wolves are frequently killed or severely injured by these animals; even a deer can break a wolf's back with its sharp hooves. Biologists who have done studies on dead wolves found in the wild report that almost 100 percent show some sort of old injury such as a fractured skull, leg or shoulder.

Contrary to many popular accounts, wolves seldom, if ever, "hamstring," or bite the tendons on the back of the legs of their prey; the risk of getting kicked in the face by sharp hooves is simply too great. Wolves tend to concentrate their bites on the neck,

shoulders and sides of the prey animal, causing blood loss, muscle and tissue damage and eventual exhaustion.

In consuming the kill, wolves do very little chewing. For the most part, they tear off chunks of meat and swallow them whole. And they eat every part of a kill, except the skull and stomach contents. What they don't eat immediately they will cache, or store, for later consumption or to provide for the pups in the pack.

The wolf's all meat diet requires a digestive system that functions quite differently than our own. Their simple stomachs are adapted for processing huge amounts of meat quickly and efficiently, processing it so thoroughly only bones and fur are excreted in their scat. Unlike us, they cannot supplement their menus with fruits, grains and other vegetable matter. They must, however, drink large amounts of water to aid in proper digestion.

Biologist L. David Mech once witnessed a pack of 15 wolves kill a 600-pound moose and eat about half of it in an hour. This works out to about 20 pounds of food per wolf! Mech estimated that these wolves averaged about 85 pounds each, which means that each ate 23 percent of its body weight. Gorging on a kill, however is often followed by a period of three days or much longer with nothing at all to eat.

After eating their fill, wolves either spend a few hours relaxing, sleeping and digesting or return to the den site to regurgitate food for the pups and other pack members who did not join the hunt.

Check Out Your Reading Skills  
**Hunting and Predation**

Peter Steinhart, author of The Company of Wolves says that "...we will always have difficulty separating what killing means to wolves from what killing means to humans." Discuss this quotation in small groups. What do you think Steinhart means? Many documentaries on wolves refrain from showing any scenes of wolves killing prey. What decision would you make in that regard if you were the director of a documentary? Does showing such a scene somehow imply that it is "wrong" for wolves to kill other animals? Do humans kill other animals in order to live?

1. List the wolf's main prey.
  
2. Why did wolves begin to prey on livestock near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the United States?
  
3. Why is getting enough to eat so difficult and dangerous for wolves?
  
4. How much meat can an adult wolf consume in one meal?
  
5. What percentage of its body weight can a wolf consume in one meal?
  
6. Wolves chew their food. True    False    (circle one)
  
7. What does "cache" mean?
  
8. How is a wolf's digestive system different from a human's digestive system?
  
9. How do wolves bring food back to the den or the rendezvous site to the pups and/or to the denning female or other adults who have not joined in the hunt?