



Wolf – forgotten Irish hunter



Dr Kieran Hickey describes the final years of this native Irish predator that was eventually driven to extinction

(features)

The howling of wolves is considered to be one of the most frightening sounds in nature. The wolf is one of the most feared creatures on the planet but its howls are alien to us in Ireland. This was not always the case. Our more recent ancestors were familiar to some extent with this mammal that roamed the island for at least 25,000 years. Irish wolves were finally exterminated in 1786. This is the last authenticated date for a wolf killed in Ireland, and occurred in Co Carlow after a farmer lost a number of sheep to a lone wolf on Mount Leinster. The animal was hunted down and killed. This extermination even further impoverished a very poor mammalian fauna in Ireland, even by British and European standards. Only for the introduction of a number of species of mammal which have gone wild, for example, the rabbit, hedgehog, and grey squirrel, Ireland would have one of the poorest mammalian faunas of an area of its size anywhere in the world.

As a result of the long history of wolves in Ireland, there is an enormous wealth of

evidence of their existence, much of which has been overlooked in the past. This includes evidence from a wide variety of sources including archaeology, folklore, place names, monastic annals, and a huge variety of other later historical documentary data. Of course, the existence of the Irish wolfhound or dog is evidence alone of a significant wolf population stretching back thousands of years.

Folklore, place names and history

Wolves play a very important part in Irish folklore in a number of ways. Firstly they are associated with many of the great Irish myths and legends, secondly in the form of common stories about encounters with wolves, and thirdly the use of pieces of wolves as charms against evil and ill health. For example, the wearing of a band of wolf skin like a girdle was considered a preventative for falling sickness. One of the most surprising stories stemmed from the belief that a man and woman from Ossory had to become wolves for a period of 7 years – this helps to explain beliefs in creatures such as werewolves.

There are a considerable number of Irish place names associated with wolves. A few of these are in English, for example, Wolf Island in Lough Gill, but the vast majority of them are embedded in Irish place names. This is because there are a number of Irish words for wolves, including Mac-tire, e.g. the townland of Isknamateera in Co Kerry; and faolchu, e.g. Feltrim Hill, Co Dublin. There are also numerous place names containing breagh and its variations, e.g. Breagh (wolf field) in Drumcree, Co Armagh, and Breaghva (wolf field) in Kilrush, Co Clare.

There is a vast array of historical documentary information on wolves in Ireland from the earliest monastic annals up to the end of the 18th century. These include lists of animals found in Ireland in the monastic annals, Brehon laws, legislation and bounties, early natural histories and descriptions of the country, descriptions of wolf encounters, hunting, wolf attacks on farm animals and very rarely humans, and notes in letters and diaries.

How did Irish wolves survive?

Wolves survived in Ireland up until the end of the 18th century due to a number of factors. The first was the extensive wilderness areas that existed around the island of Ireland up until at least 1700. These included extensive mountain ranges and large forests with few human inhabitants. Ireland's population in the 1600s was probably around 1.5 million. So there were extensive areas for wolves to hunt and breed unaffected by human activities. Wolves are opportunistic feeders and will eat everything from large mammals, such as deer and domestic cattle, down to fish, worms, and slugs. Clearly, sheep were easy prey for hungry wolves. The evidence for Ireland suggests that pack sizes were small, probably consisting of no more



than the dominant breeding pair and one or two other adults, juveniles and that year's cubs. This small pack size was a reflection of the relative scarcity of large mammals, such as deer, and the absence of farm animals in many of the forest and mountain areas. Interestingly, like urban foxes today there is some evidence which shows that wolves had begun to skulk around the outskirts of Dublin and Cork scavenging for human waste and refuse. In a letter dated 1698, a Mr J. Howel, an alderman of Cork city, wrote of having both wolves and foxes in the district.

Living museum

Opposite page: A wolf paces in the Irish landscape – only now reduced to a captive animal in a zoo. The long history of wolves in Ireland predates the arrival of humans some 9,000 years ago. Wolf bones aged at 27,500 to 23,500 years old have been found in Irish caves. At that time, wolves would have lived in Ireland alongside giant Irish deer, bears, reindeer, and woolly mammoths

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Above: Portrait of a wolf by Finbarr O'Connor

Population Size

One of the big questions around the Irish wolf is: how many animals are we actually dealing with? Are we looking at a rare animal, a small number of packs amounting to a few hundred individuals, or a creature that was much more common than any of us today could imagine? Three approaches are adopted to tackle this issue, based on a number of assumptions.

The first approach is to look at the records of wolf skin exports from Ireland as evidenced by the port books of key Irish trading ports like Bristol. While this



research has only just begun, the Bristol accounts alone show an average of between 100 and 300 wolf skins exported from Ireland each year throughout the 1500s. Most astonishingly, in the year 1558-1589, some 961 wolf skins were imported from Ireland into the port of Bristol. This indicates a very substantial wolf population in Ireland during the 16th century.

The second approach to estimating the wolf population is simply a habitat availability assessment, based on the landscape and human population of Ireland in 1600 and the requirements of a wolf pack in terms of territory. At that time, there were still large tracts of wilderness, including forest and mountainous areas ideal for wolves. It is estimated, based on an average pack size of between 5 and 10 individuals, that these areas could have supported a wolf population of between 400 and 800 individuals.

The third approach to wolf

Ancient hunter

Wolves were probably greatly feared by our ancestors, being capable of reaching 50kmph when chasing prey. But, in fact, there are no documented cases of wolves attacking humans unless they were suffering from rabies or defending young

Wolves, like foxes, are opportunists, eating almost anything, including berries, birds, and small mammals. This allows the species to survive in many environments

numbers is to look at the figure paid out for bounties. In 1653, the Cromwellian Government set bounties of £6 for a female, £5 for a male, £3 for a hunting juvenile, and 10 shillings for a cub. Only two bounty records have survived, and these were for 1655 or 1665 (date not legible). A payment of £243 5s 4d was made for wolves killed in counties Galway, Mayo, Sligo, and Leitrim. Unfortunately, no breakdown of the figure is given, but it can be assumed that the figure represents a mixture of females, males, juveniles and cubs, as it is likely that wolves would have been hunted pack by pack. Therefore, this figure can be taken to represent a wolf kill of between 75 and 150 wolves, and indicates a significant wolf population in this part of the country.

The second bounty figure of £3,847 5s applies to bounties for

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the whole island and was paid out between July 1649 and November 1656, a period of seven and a half years. This represents an average pay out of £513 per annum and indicates a wolf kill of between 200 and 400 individuals. Clearly, to sustain this loss, the wolf population would have to have been considerably larger than this, possibly between 600 and 800 individuals.

Putting all the figures together, it is clear that Ireland had a very significant wolf population, certainly in the 1500s and the early 1600s, of well in excess of 1,000 individuals. It had probably fallen below this level by the mid-1600s, followed by a rapid decline throughout the late 1600s and 1700s, until the last wolf was killed in 1786.

Causes of extinction

The extermination of the wolf from the Irish landscape resulted from a number of factors. These include significant landscape changes, in particular the loss of most of the remaining tracts of native oak forest, and a growing human population resulting in the spread of farming into areas not previously involved in agriculture. These two factors – landscape and man – would have significantly reduced the areas in

which wolves could breed undisturbed, and intensified the pressure on the existing wolf population. The next factors are legislation and bounties, in particular bounty orders by the Cromwellian Government in Ireland in the 1650s. The new settlers from England and Scotland were

horrified to discover that there was a significant wolf population in the country, a serious threat to themselves and their livestock. Very substantial bounties were introduced for wolf kills and this

led to systematic hunting, eventually leading to large areas being devoid of wolves throughout the latter half of the 1600s. This even led to the arrival of a number of professional wolf-hunters from abroad to help carry out the extermination. By the early 1700s, Ireland's wolf population was in serious decline and probably only existed in a few small areas where they remained well away from humans. The definite last kill of a wolf in Ireland occurred in 1786. There are a few references to wolves stretching into the early 1800s, but on investigation they are most likely to be bogus or erroneously dated.

Bringing back the wolf?

Worryingly, wolves are being kept as pets and in private animal collections throughout the country and two recent examples show the problems that this can cause. In Fermanagh, in 1995, a wolf escaped from a private collection and was roaming the countryside for a number of days. After a few attempts to capture it failed, the wolf was finally shot dead. In Co Wexford, two wolves kept as pets turned on and killed the family's dogs. This inevitably led to the two wolves being put down, even though they were only acting on instinct. Who knows what your neighbour has in their backyard?

Bearing in mind the nature of wolf packs and the range of territory required for them to survive, the likelihood of their re-introduction to Ireland in the next 50 years is slim. This is down to two key factors. The first is that Ireland does not have a sufficiently large wilderness area in which they could survive with minimal contact with humans and minimal impact on human activities, especially farming. Even

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our national parks, like Glenveagh and Killarney, are too heavily populated by people and sheep. Inevitably, sheep would be killed by the wolves for food and this would require a government compensation scheme similar to that operated by the French government in the French Alps. In addition, because of their ability to double their population every year, given protected conditions, a regular wolf cull would be necessary in order to control numbers and

Written in history

Below: Line drawings of a wolf, from Giraldus Cambrensis (c.1200 AD), *The History and Topography of Ireland*

Bottom: A page from the Book of Kells (c. 800 AD) showing a depiction of a wolf. Courtesy of The Board of Trinity College Dublin

keep the population within the designated area. The second factor would be Irish attitudes to this re-introduction, particularly in rural areas and amongst farmers. The case of the golden eagle re-introduction project is an example of the work required over a considerable number of years to change public attitudes. To re-introduce the wolf would be a much more difficult proposition. Exterminated so successfully from the Irish landscape, it seems, unfortunately, that the Irish wolf must remain confined to part of our history.

