



The wolf is one of the oldest mates of human beings in the process of evolution. Studies suggest we might have even learnt social behaviour from them. But, we continue to treat them as vermin. No wonder, the Indian Grey Wolf has learnt to remain elusive even in the midst of human population.

**TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS:**  
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Theories suggest that humans have evolved along with other species; one of the important co-evolutions has been of canid (members of dog family) from whom, a study has revealed, perhaps our ancestors learnt important traits such as sociability and cooperativeness, which laid the foundation of our social behaviour. But, interestingly, we observed a different behaviour in our interactions with the Indian wolves (*Canis lupus pallipes*).

Indian Wolf is one of the 32 sub-species of the grey wolf. Grey wolf was, at one time, the most widely distributed mammal on the planet. Except for the wolf found in the Middle-East, the Indian wolf is one of the smallest sub species of the wolf. The Indian wolf looks like a German Shepherd dog and is likely to be seen more outside the wildlife-protected areas as the number of their natural prey – the black buck – has declined. Also, this is the only wolf sub-species which breeds

Wolves often go on long foraging trips

INDIAN GREY WOLF

# IN THE LAIR

in the winter months.

Rajasthan has good habitats for the wolves; however, for a tourist their sighting is possible only in Velvadar Sanctuary in Gujarat and certain areas around Pune in Maharashtra. In Rajasthan, the Banas River that originates from Kumbhalgarh Sanctuary and meets Chambal River near Kailadevi Sanctuary, is conducive to the wolves' survival. Though both the sanctuaries are considered as good habitat for the Indian wolf, Banas River ravines are an ideal habitat for them. As these areas are held by the grazing communities, who use the region for their animals, the Indian wolf's main prey is sheep or goat these days.

Wolves, of course, face the brunt of people's retaliation: dens are burnt and they are poisoned. But wolves have learnt to survive: they are elusive, cover large areas and are fast runners. If they have place for breeding, then food is not a problem for them.

We observed a wolf family around Banas River; three adult wolves with four pups. An alpha female was heading the pack. In one instance, on seeing us, the female left the pups and disappeared. It was quite surprising. The pups, too, were confused. They tried hiding themselves in a nearby den, but immediately

came out and no one was there to defend them. We thought it was part of their strategy. In another instance, all seven members of the pack were there. The alert alpha female noticed my presence and she left the site, without even alerting others. After a while, another adult wolf saw me and left. Soon the third adult wolf walked in my direction with the three-month-old pups. On seeing me, this adult too left without taking the pups. These pups also got confused and scattered in different directions. In my understanding, the alpha female should have warned the others and taken the pups to safety. But, obviously, their instinct was to ensure their own survival first. Perhaps,



The Banas and Chambal river ravines provide a good habitat for the Indian Grey Wolf



The Indian wolf lives in medium-sized packs



## A cool place to be safe

Burrows and dens are safe homes for many kinds of animals in the wildlife. All rodents, most snakes and many mammals prefer such refuges. Wolves are one of such mammals. For them, these secluded spaces are not just ideal for staying safe and secure from predators, but also for raising their young. A burrow is not just a hole or a tunnel dug up by the animal, it is also a very significant way to control various climatic difficulties, especially extreme temperatures. In a desert or arid ecosystem, where forest cover is very scanty, most animals use such burrows or dens. They also live in burrows to get moisture from it and retain the water level of their bodies. They often dig and bring wet sand to cool down in the hot weather. Apart from wolves, this can be seen with foxes and hyenas.



## In mythology and literature

Wolves are occasionally mentioned in mythology. In the *Harivamsa*, Krishna, to convince the people of Vraja to migrate to Vrindavan, creates hundreds of wolves from his hair, which frightens the inhabitants of Vraja into making the journey.

In the *Rig Veda*, Rjrsava is blinded by his father for having given 101 of his family's sheep to a she-wolf, who, in turn, prays to the Ashvins to restore his sight.

Bhima, the voracious son of the god Vayu, is described as Vrikodara, meaning "wolf-stomached".

In Persian mythology, wolves were a creation of the evil spirit Ahirman.

In Turkic mythology, the she-wolf Asena is associated with a Göktürk ethnogenic myth "full of shamanic

symbolism". The legend tells of how after a battle, only an injured young boy survives. Asena finds the injured child and nurses him back to health. He subsequently impregnates the wolf, which then gives birth to 10 half-wolf, half-human boys. One of these, Ashina, becomes their leader and founds the Ashina clan that ruled the Göktürks and other Turkic nomadic empires.

The *Bible* contains 13 references to wolves, which are usually used as metaphors for greed and destructiveness.

Indian wolves take a central role in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, in which a pack in the Sioni area adopts the feral child Mowgli and teaches him how to survive in the jungle whilst protecting him from the tiger Sher Khan and the marauding *dholes* (wild dogs).



The Indian wolf looks like the German Shepherd dog. It is its alertness that allows it to survive in the face of increasing human population pressure



their tactic is more practical in order to survive the human-dominated landscape where self-defence is the key to survival of the species.

I followed this pack for four months – the parents would leave for foraging in the day while the pups left their natal dens and were seen spending time in a rendezvous site, which was a scrub forest. The wolves we spotted there lived smartly. Though four sub-adult wolves and three adult wolves lived there, and stalked goats at times, shepherders did not know about their presence. This was a relief because wolf dens often come under attack from the communities that suffer losses of their animals.

The playful pups dedicatedly followed small insects and other creatures like scorpions and ate them; they would play the entire day learning in the process. Sadly, once we saw a wolf eating leftover from a garbage dump, along with many stray dogs.

We hardly have any idea about the role of wolf in the ecology. It seems like now they are more dependent on livestock than wild prey. But we should give a chance to this charismatic species to survive.

Kailadevi Sanctuary, part of the Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve, is considered a good area for the Indian Wolf. The Banas and Chambal river ravines are also an ideal habitat. During one of our surveys in this area dominated by the grazing communities and their animal herds, we observed a wolf family around Banas River. They stalked the goats at times, but here too the community did not have a clue about a resident pack living in their area.

The wolf interacts more with jackals, hyenas and foxes, but in areas where there are leopards and tigers, they prefer not to live around them.

Wolf is a charismatic species, surviving around us learning to remain elusive. They have trained themselves well to stay away from humans. It is our deeds that may make us lose our oldest mate. Hence, it is important to start respecting their existence and the role they play in the ecosystem. ■

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