

Hunting & Food

It is often said that a wolf is kept fed by its feet, meaning that they have to travel vast distances in search of prey. Pack cooperation is often employed and a number of strategies have been seen by scientists to obtain their prey. Darwin describes wolves obtaining prey as “securing some by craft, some by strength, and some by fleetness”. It is clear that as a species they are adaptable in not only what they eat but how they obtain that food.

It is not unusual for a pack to travel between 15 and 30 miles per day at about 8km (5 miles) an hour. All the senses will be employed in locating prey. They are flexible and opportunistic and will hunt prey between 1 kg (a hare) to 1000kg (Bison) although they will also take mammals as small as mice and voles. The



wolf is also known to eat carrion or even rubbish to survive. Up to 50% of time in the winter is spent locating and testing prey, but only a small portion of hunts will be successful. It is not unusual for wolves to go for several days between feeds. This is reflected in the wolf's digestive

system which is set up for feast or famine.

Once located, wolves will try to stalk the animal, getting as close to it as possible without being seen. They may use gullies or a ridge to help them do this. Once the wolves have been spotted three things can happen: the prey may remain in place, approach the wolves or flee. It tends to be larger prey that stands its ground or moves towards the pack. Wolves don't seem to like having eye contact with their prey and will wait until an animal turns away or runs before giving chase. This stand off can take hours, wolves can be very patient creatures, but generally they will leave if they can't get the animal to run. They will often test animals' health status by running at and chasing a herd or individual for a short distance. These chases often don't last long. If the animal is fit the pack will quickly stop the pursuit and find another animal to test. Generally they take the old, young, sick or injured animals. This benefits the herds by leaving the strongest individuals to breed, ensuring a healthy gene pool. The larger the prey the more cautious the pack will be in attempting to bring that animal down. A kick from a moose or bison can kill or fatally injure a wolf. Large animals will only be hunted if a weakness is detected. Even then the wolves may spend a long time harassing and running that animal until exhausted when the animal stumbles and becomes an easier target. There is a debate as to whether wolves use strategic cooperation to hunt, i.e. ambush, heading prey off or rely on running, but although there are examples of these there are also just as many examples of a simple chase.

Below is research on how wolves tend to bring down particular prey:

Elk - Elk depend on their size and speed or water to evade wolves. They are attacked from the rear and side, normally where the leg joins the abdomen but also by the nose and throat

Bison – Largest and most formidable prey of the wolf. Generally attacked in the thigh area. May be injured and left to weaken or harried to exhaustion before the pack can kill it.

Beaver – easy prey when feeding away from the water as they are slow. All the wolf has to do is track along a river bank until a scent leads inland. Wolves have also been seen trying to dig beavers out of their houses.

Arctic hares - Caught by pursuit or sometimes if young freeze in their hiding place, a wolf can walk up and grab them.

Mice – normally caught by a two-legged stiff pounce. An occupation of cubs, but also seen in adults.

Moose - The majority of moose killed are small calves, but as the dam will protect her calf vigorously, it is by no means an easy meal. Calves generally sustain injuries to their heads, ribcages and backs. Rarely, moose between the ages of one and six years are taken. For adult moose the first point of attack is the rump or hamstring area because it is far away from the front and hind hoofs, and out of view of the moose. There are no vital organs in this area but it's wide, meaty and affords a good hold and slashing and tearing the rump muscles hinders running ability. Wolves can hold on to this area and the weight on the rump helps bring the moose down. The nose is the second important point of attack. The wolf stands as far back from the moose as it can while grasping the nose to avoid being kicked. The usual technique would be to kill a moose in stages, wounding it and either waiting for the animal to weaken by not allowing it to rest, or returning once the moose is weakened or stiff from the initial attack. They may return days later to try again.

Deer - The deer is the most important hoofed animal but not easily caught. They are easier to catch on frozen lakes than in deep snow. Likely points of attack are the rump, flanks and abdomen.

Caribou – Wolves are thought to follow caribou herds and stay with them for most of the winter. They seem to become accustomed to the presence of the wolves and only those nearest the wolves will show concern. Wolves seem to concentrate on the front end of the caribou in contrast to the behaviour of the moose kills. They will race alongside, pulling the caribou down by grasping the flank, shoulder and throat. Once down the throat is seized. Caribou can easily out-run wolves or they use deep water as an escape.

Mountain sheep – will dash uphill to safety ensuring they are not easy to catch.



Wolves can eat as much as 20 pounds of meat in one sitting. Large carcasses can be stripped in a few hours. The breeding pair will take the best part of the kill, with the omega, the lowest ranking animal, only getting scraps. A kill is highly fought over by the wolves. They will eat everything from the

vital organs, muscle meat, stomach lining, bone and hide of the kill. The kill also needs to be defended from bears, medium sized predators like coyote and foxes, ravens and eagles. Statistics show that ravens consume a larger portion of a kill than any other animal feeding on the carcass. Once the pack has fed and drunk enough water to help with the digestion process they will rest to digest their meal. The large amount of food consumed makes the wolves appear 'meat drunk'. Food will move through the digestive system fairly quickly, enabling the wolf to eat again quickly which ensures the carcass is consumed rapidly.

Any spare meat will be cached for later or hidden by the den site in breeding season for the breeding female to feed on. Even young cubs will show this behaviour ensuring a meal even if a kill has not been made that day.

Carrion can be an important part of a wolf's diet and it is known that they can take advantage of human rubbish tips. In Russia people leave their dogs chained up outside over night and the wolf has learned to take advantage of this for an easy meal. The wolf is very resourceful.

Although mainly carnivore, they will often be seen eating berries, and nuts to compliment their diet. There is little research into wolves eating vegetation for either nutrients or self medication reasons but the wolves at the UKWCT will often eat blackberries, melons, pumpkins, apples, carrots etc.