

Do you know Brother Wolf?

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*"My brother, we meet here on the road
let us share the road equally between us
if you don't want it,
let's go our separate ways"*

The old Estonian saying describes well the attitude people had towards the wolf in the old days in Estonia. In Estonia, there is no debate about wolves being or not being, except at Saaremaa, where they do not want wolves at all. The wolf was and is still taken today as a natural phenomenon, as an evil spirit. They run in from Russia, so you can't get rid of them even if you wanted to. One must watch out for falling foul of the wolf. One must respect his right to life, right to a share in goods and to his "own share". Animal owners have always lived and still live today together with crows, ravens, foxes, lynxes, bears and wolves. They are part of nature in the same way that we are. In Estonia there is not discussions about exterminating wolves, but it is discussed how to best defend yourself against them. There is a quota on shooting wolves in Estonia. Of course it's annoying when the predators strike but at the same time you have to ask yourself - what did I do wrong? How could I have better defended my animals myself? As a farmer, you must have common sense, knowledge and good luck when protecting your livestock from predators. Especially good luck was trusted in the past and it was tried to promote the good luck in many different ways. Being a farmer means knowing the risks and acting in minimizing risks of losing a animal. This article is based on the Estonian Ilmar Rootsi's wolf research "Tuli susi soovikusta" (Estonia, 2005), Johannes Hastig's book "Från rovdjurstider i Lappträsk" (Finland, 1935) and on own and other farmers' experience with wolves in Estonia.

Common sense

Common sense means that a herd of around 30 animals or less is brought indoors night time and not released before it is well light in the morning, even summer time. The animals are brought in well in advance before it gets dark in the evening. (this is more important during July-September, not so important during spring and early summer). This can also be done with a larger group of sheep. In Estonia there are sheep owners with hundreds of animals who bring them indoor every night summer time. Common sense means not releasing your 200 sheep in large pastures far from the farm without constant supervision. Exceptions are islands where you don't have wolves. There you can look after your animals, for example, once a week or ask a summer resident to keep an eye on the animals.

In the old days, there was constant surveillance by shepherds, servants and often also children. Today, there is constant surveillance usually only by dogs. In Estonia and in Finland, the Maremmano Abruzzese alpine guard dog breed has been used with great success in recent years. Two guard dogs can manage the guarding of the pastures if a flock of sheep is approx. 50 ewes + lamb. If you have several animals, you may need several dogs. These dogs also defend the flock against attacks by ravens, foxes and eagles. The dog must be purchased from a farm that has sheep and whose parents also guarded sheep. The puppies must have grown up together with the sheep. These guard dogs are members of the herd. They bark and start running back and forth in front of the intruder as it comes, even as the eagle hovers in the air above the flock of sheep. This is usually enough to keep the attackers away, even the wolf. A lonely guard dog is not necessary able to keep wolves away, it is better to keep at least two dogs as they work best in pairs. It IS demanding to raise a good guarding dog and to keep it in check. The dog does not raise itself!

Common sense also says that you don't let old and sick animals go on large pastures together with the healthy ones in the herd. Sick and old animals are allowed to graze near the farm so you can keep an eye on them at all times. Animals that are soon to calve / foal / lamb are also not allowed to go with the large herd on large pastures further away from the farm. The risk of ravens gouging the eyes out of the lambs or holes in their heads is greater if the animals get lambs in the pasture. It is best if the sheep lamb indoors in the month of February. Then the lambs have had time to grow up before they are released on the pastures for the summer. The calves used to be kept in calf pens near the center of the farm.

Lynx like to eat domestic cats and wolves to eat dogs. Maybe because they feel them like rivals in the same field. The dog must not be kept on a leash, nor is the dog house a safe place for the dog if there are wolves in the area. At night, the dog must be able to move freely if it is outside or you bring the dog in for the night. The yard must be fenced and the gates closed. The dog must have a place of refuge in a shed or outdoor building if it is kept outside at night. The wolf does not like to enter through dark holes, it does not know what is inside. The dog must be able to get so far into the outbuilding that the wolf's paw cannot take the dog out. A small hole in the wall or door may be suitable for a herding dog. Take an extra look at the "cat hole" in the door that is found to sheds and outbuildings - doesn't it look a bit big for a cat - maybe even the dog used the hole in the past? Do you remember the two-part door that was on many farms in the past? Even this two-part door is said to be "wolf-proof". The wolf does not like to jump in through the hole if the lower part of the door is closed.



The cat hole which is also big enough for a Finnish Spitz, the native dog that was very common on farms in Finland in the past. Photo: Annika Michelson



This picture was taken at Reino Halin's home, Lammi, Häme, Finland. Reino told me that this door is wolf-proof. The toddlers were put on the floor inside to play. Photo: Annika Michelson



Even more substantial fences were made around the yards when courtyards were made wolf-proof. Reino Halin, Lammi, Tavastlands, Finland. The wolf can jump but prefers to sneak along line objects (until it finds an opening to crawl through). Photo: Annika Michelson



In Estonia, people had their courtyards fenced with a dense fence type. Pigs did not get through this type of fence. At the top, the fence gives a "spiky impression", maybe this keeps also the wolf out? Photo: Annika Michelson

Know your enemy

It is important to know your enemy well! The farmer must be able to think like the predators in order to defend own animals! The defense plan we make for our domestic animals is not the same throughout the year. It changes with the weather, it changes with the season, it changes with the age of the animals. It is the farmer's job to decide when it is time to bring in the animals. In rainy mist and fog, the animals are not safe for wolves. On such days it may be worthwhile to keep the animals inside until the fog clears or in rainy weather to keep the animals inside all day. Alternatively, you can let the animals graze near the farm where people also move. During the spring we can have the animals a little more freely, but already when we have passed midsummer we have to start being more on our guard. We need to know when the wolf starts training its pups for an independent life. That's when it attacks the flock because sheep are easy prey for young wolf pups in training. Watch your animals - they show clear signs (at least native sheep in Estonia do) when a wolf is around.

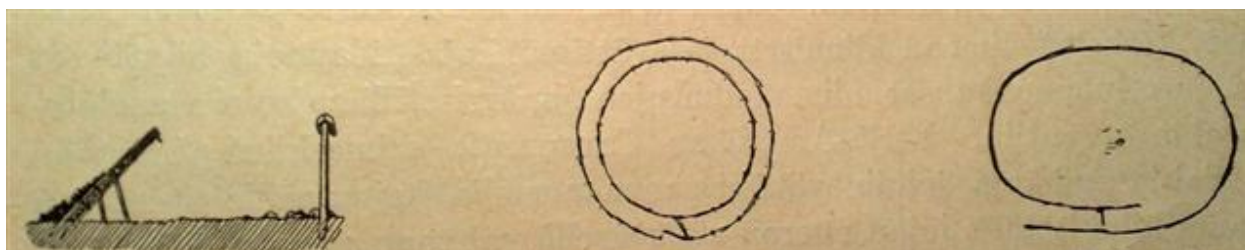
Sick and old wolves can attack at any time, as they are unable to get hold of prey in the forest. The hunters could hunt the sick and old wolves, these are also no longer needed for reproduction of the wolf pack. Hunters and farmers must be in contact with each other and report when they have seen predators so animal keepers can be on their guard.

Wolf winters with a lot of snow can lead to wolves moving closer to people and running on snow free roads. Make sure the forest along the children's school route is cleared, so the wolf can't hide so easily. In the past, people used for defending themselves sticks and poles of juniper, which is a hard wood. They were strong and you could quickly grab the stick or pull up a pole as a weapon if the wolf attacked the animals in the pasture. A wolf tried to attack a 6 year old girl in Estonia in the beginning of 2000ies. She was walking with her mother along a road. The wolf had followed them for less than 1 km and the mother was aware that the wolf was following them. She had both heard it rustling, seen its silhouette and heard it cross the road behind her. Suddenly, a young wolf was behind them, touching the 6-year-old's waist with its paw or snout. The mother had an umbrella and hit the wolf in the side so that the umbrella broke. They ran to a nearby farm and escaped with fear (Virumaa Teataja, 2004). In the Nordic countries, children usually have mobile phones with them and can call and ask for help. You can also put on music to play from your mobile phone and this can scare the wolves. Most of the time, you have time to act when you notice that someone is sneaking up behind you. It pays to make a little noise if you feel someone following you. A cheerful loud song helps to lift the mood when you feel scared!

The wolf has a habit of observing its prey for several days before it strikes. The wolf may choose to attack at the animals' watering place. When the sheep drink, it concentrates on it and is an easier prey. Make sure the feeding station on the pasture and the water station are predator-proof. Do not place it by the forest or near a watercourse. An open place is better suited and perhaps near a place where people or cars move more often, if one is available. Think like the wolf when choosing feeding places for your animals. In Estonia some farmers have good experience of having music in the pasture, it may help. Others tie colorful ribbons to the fences. However, wolves can get used to different sounds, so don't feel too safe just by turning on the radio. There has been discussions about keeping domestic animals in the forest. Some farmers believe that this confuses the wolf, the wolf may then think that the animals are "legal" prey, part of the forest.

In Estonia, there is no question of building expensive electric fences against predators, as they build in Sweden against wolf attacks. Here, people are also of the opinion that electric fences do not help. In Estonia, the above-mentioned methods are most often used. By combining different methods they provide fairly good protection.

However, there is older information that you could still use today when defending your pets. In forest ordinances from 1647 and 1664, it was required that all animal keepers in Sweden, Norway and Finland also use wolf traps. The traps were usually round enclosures with double walls. The outer wall was slanted, the wall tilted inwards. The purpose of these traps were to catch the wolf, not to keep it out of the pasture. The space between the fences was so narrow that the wolf could not jump out again, the slanted wall prevented this. You could therefore use the same method today but in reverse, build two fences but turn the outermost one so that it leaned outwards. This method should be tested in practice, to see if it keeps wolves out. Wolves can open doors that open inward by sliding the door open if it is not bolted.



Old wolf trap for catching wolves seen from the side and from above. Notice the slanted wall that slopes inward to allow the wolf to jump into the trap. If you want to use the same method to protect the animals today, you must do it in reverse so that the wolf cannot jump in. (Drawing: Sirelius, U. T. 1919).

On a Russian topographical map from the 1860s of Eastern Uusimaa in Finland (southeast Finland) I discovered that the most common fence in woodland was the twig fence - not the traditional wooden fence. Twig fences are easily built in forests when forest land is cleared for pasture. This type of fence is very dense and it is also quite wide (around one metre). I have built 100 meters of twig fence in my forest pasture, my sheep have never jumped over this fence. A man in Estonia told me that his father had built a similar fence against wolves but at the top he had put wooden poles pointing outwards, in the same style as the wolf trap but so that the "wall" points outwards. This he built outside the twig fence.

The old traditional narrow wooden fences with poles don't attract a predator to jump over it either. It looks sharp! You just have to make sure that the fence don't have too big gaps between poles, 1 meter is enough. It takes a lot of material to build these old wooden fences, but in the long run they pay for themselves, especially if you can protect your animals from predator attacks.



Traditional Finnish wooden farm fence Photo. Alastaron kotiseutumuseo

Good luck

Good luck in keeping pets was acquired in many different ways. Today this is usually called superstition or traditional culture. In Estonia, some of the old habits have been kept alive to this day. Here you know many old customs and tricks that bring luck with them. You start early, already during the last days of the year, during midwinter. Then you make "krässid", cross of straw / tree and wool. These are hung against evil both in windows and in stables. So begins the new solar year. You bake a symbolic bread in the shape of a Christmas boar, which you leave on the Christmas table and dry until Christmas is over. You don't eat this bread, but give it later in the spring to your animals to bring good luck during the grazing season. Before it was also made herding sticks out of rowan. This is said to protect the animals from harm. It was read prayers and verses against the forest, against the wolf, when you took your animals out to pasture in the spring. If the wolf in spite of this takes some of the sheep, you say the following words to the wolf or face the forest:

*"You have now received the part of my herd that belongs to you!
Don't come back until next year!"*

It has thus been acceptable that once a year the wolf is allowed to take his part of the pack, the part of the pack that belongs to him. This is still accepted by many small sheep owners. It is not "allowed" for the wolf to come twice to the same farm. Then the farmer gets mad, it's bad manners of the wolf! However, the larger sheep owners usually have zero tolerance for wolf attacks.

For a long time, we humans have been "all-powerful" in our animal husbandry. We have been used to owning the entire herd that we raise. We have been used to getting full financial profit from our animal breeding. Maybe it's time to accept that we can't always get full financial profit?

Not in animal husbandry and not in forestry either. There are also others who must be allowed to survive and live. The wolf must be afraid of humans, therefore wolf hunting must also be allowed when there are enough wolves. Wolves are hunted in Estonia. Wolf hunting is made difficult by the fact that a wolf can move 200 km in a day. In this way, it is easy to count the same wolf several times. However, wolf packs have their own territories and usually farmers know where wolves live. When you know where they are, it's easier to protect your animals and live with them.

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