

Wolves preying on reindeer herds threaten seasonal joy in remote Siberian villages

By Anna Liesowska

25 December 2013

As Western children salute Santa's Rudolph, here in the Sakha Republic the antlered animals are in peril from ravenous predators.



More drastic and controversial methods are to be imposed to counter the wolf plague in the next 12 months. Picture: Victor Everstov

Anna Afanasyeva is familiar with the fairytale about Little Red Riding Hood, but for this 12 year old girl the Big Bad Wolf is a menacing daily threat to her own safety and the traditional way of life of her entire reindeer-herding community.

She lives in the heart of the Siberian kingdom of cold, the diamond-rich Sakha Republic, also known as Yakutia, and her village, like many in this enormous region only slightly smaller than India, is under siege from hungry wolves.

A cull during the year has slaughtered around 720 wolves, say officials, but this is well short of the 3,000 official target for the year and more drastic and controversial methods are to be imposed to counter the wolf plague in the next 12 months.

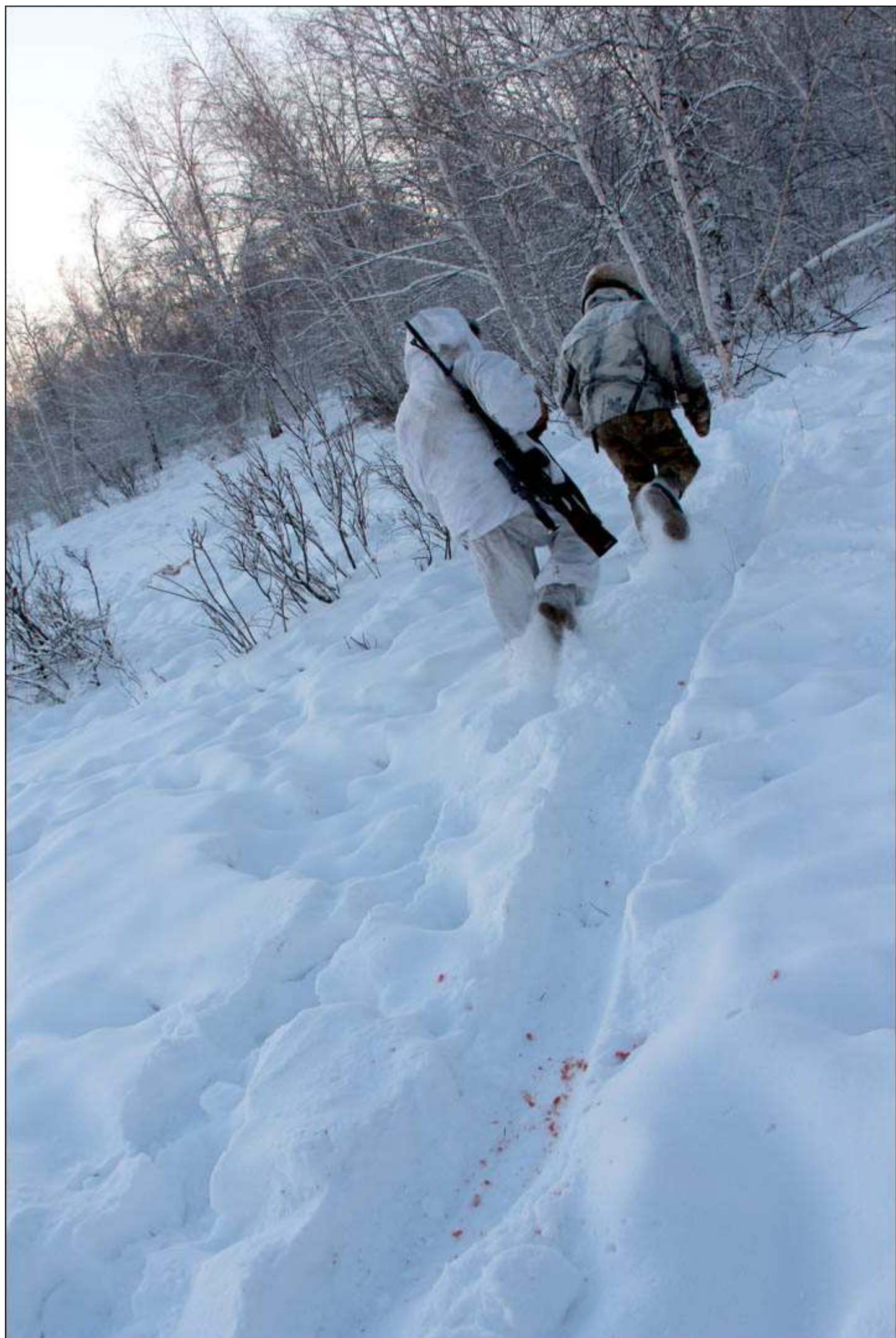
Here in the village of Uchugei - it's name means 'Good' - Anna says with a grimace: 'We hear the wolves howling at night. I hear them from different places around the village. Of course, it is scary.

'My father says there are from six to seven wolves within a kilometre of us right now, trying to attack our village. I have never seen one alive, thankfully, only those shot by my father who is a reindeer herder and a hunter.

'No child can now go out of the village - it's anyway a rule because it's so cold, and people should not walk alone. But it's like a double 'no' because of the wolves now. They are too close. The only way is on the snow mobile, or in the car, or with a group of people.'











'Wolves are getting more and more smart. Many of our men are away now, keeping the wolves away from the reindeer herds'. Pictures: Victor Everstov

Anna's ethnic Evenki village , just 84 km from Oymyakon, where the world's coldest temperature in a human settlement was recorded in 1933. Recently, it has been minus 35C here.

The schoolgirl - who wears a hood made from polar fox - believes the purge of the wolves is nothing short of an urgent necessity. Five hunters permanently guard the village from wolves 'but everyone has rifles in their houses', she said.

'I don't feel sorry for the wolves being killed. Why? It's scary when you hear them so close to the village. I think they need to be killed. I don't pity them.

'This is what everyone thinks here. With my father looking after the village I am not scared - my father would never let a single wolf in. But he says that it is getting more and more difficult to stop the wolves.'

Today wolves are more ready to stalk the livestock from these remote villages. If before there was a kind of tacit agreement between wolves and man not to encroach each other's territory, this is no longer true. Their traditional prey - white hares - are in desperately short supply, a fact blamed by some on climate change, not that it feels there is much warming here.

'They are not scared anymore to go where humans live', explained Anna, an intelligent girl who learns English at school. 'They are getting more and more smart. And we have seven herds of reindeers. The smallest is here, close to our village with only 30 reindeer in it. The rest - more than 12,000 - are from 100 to 200 miles away from us. Many of our men are away now, keeping the wolves away from these herds'.







'I'm a reindeer herder for more than 30 years, and nowadays we are are really bothered by these wolves, they don't let us live and work properly. At some point there was a pack of more than 30 wolves terrorising one of our reindeer herds'. Pictures: Alexander Tyryshkin

Uchugei village lies on the notorious Road of Bones, where thousands of Stalin's victims met their deaths.

From the nearest city, Yakutsk, the coldest on the planet, Uchugei can only be reached after a treacherous 20-hour drive in a doubled-glazed UAZ 452 four by four military van along snowbound roads and rivers frozen by ice several metres thick which in winter turn into makeshift motorways across the inhospitable tundra.

Earlier this year, the republican president Yegor Borisov warned that people 'are worried like never before', declaring: 'We must have a clear plan of how to fight the wolves'.

This is echoed by Anna's father Gennady, 49, 'I'm a reindeer herder for more than 30 years and nowadays we are are really bothered by these wolves. They don't let us live and work properly. At some point there was a pack of more than 30 wolves terrorising one of our reindeer herds. We suffer them winter and summer.

'We wish we could use poisons. In Soviet times, the number of wolves was far smaller. I remember in 1976 one reindeer herder killed nine wolves by poisoning a body of a single reindeer. You would never get so many by just using loops and traps.'







Top to bottom, horses digging for food under the snow, and the Road of Bones, leading to the village of Uchugei. Pictures: Alexander Tyryshkin

One account said that in the first ten months of 2013, wolves killed almost 9,000 reindeer and 225 herd horses. Next year the republican government has earmarked 34 million roubles - around \$1 million - to eradicate wolves.

'Emphasis will be placed on improving the organisation of ground hunting,' said a spokesman. 'Planned implementation in the use of light aircraft - type 'Aerochute' - in Yakutian conditions can make shooting of wolves from the air in spring ten times cheaper.'

Cash incentives to hunters to kill wolves - of around 20,000 roubles each, or \$600 - will continue.

Reports also say that Russia has obtained international agreement to use traps in order to regulate their numbers. Across the country there are said to be 60,000 wolves, according to estimates, with ten times as many in Sakha compared with the 1980s. Other villages are also fearful.

In the settlement of Belaya Gora, in Abyisky district, wolves attack cattle and dogs. Nikolay Vinokurov, local resident, said that almost all stray dogs disappeared and in the nearby village Abyi wolves ripped apart two horses. They appear suddenly and hunters fail to hunt them down.

'Wolves have seen one kilometre from the village. At night, the animals entered the courtyard of my friend's grandfather and tore his dog. Only the skin remained. Several wolves stalk the village. Judging by the tracks, they're not small, about 8 years old. In the nearby village wolves tore apart two horses.

'Local residents do not feel safe at night, many hear howling. At nightfall the village streets are empty. In the morning, people go out to the suburbs and put traps but with no luck yet'.

Auteur : Anna Liesowska

Source : Siberian Times du 25 décembre 2013 <http://siberiantimes.com/ecology/casestudy/features/wolves-preying-on-reindeer-herds-threaten-seasonal-joy-in-remote-siberian-villages/>

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As we have seen from the US the damage done by wolves is often grossly exaggerated by vested interests. I also have concerns about the use of those horrific leg hold traps that have the potential to randomly kill/maim endangered species like Brown bears and wolverines. Its depressing the attitude of some of those locals - especially the man who advocated the use of poison - which in the past has killed countless numbers of non-target eagles and other protected wildlife. Its clear the young girls head has been filled with many of the tired old myths about wolves - I got the impression that she has never even seen a live wolf let alone been "terrorized"!!

Jimmy, Blessington/Ireland

01/01/2014 19:23

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They wouldn't lose their livestock if they used better practices to deter predators. In remote villages such as this, the answer is always that there are too many wolves and the solution is always just to kill them and it'll stop. Study after study shows that it will not work.

Cody, USA

29/12/2013 15:37

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If the wolves "traditional prey" is white hare, then we have a huge problem

This article might clear things up a little :

<http://askyakutia.com/2013/11/winter-travel-to-verkhoyansky-district-of-republic-sakha-yakutia-siberia-russia-photo-report-wolf-attack/>

H Kjellin, Falun, Sweden

26/12/2013 12:06

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I invite the people of Siberia to reject the fear mongering of politicians and the demands of special interests. They should embrace the protection of wolves and the utilization of non-lethal deterrence. They also should teach their children about the intrinsic and ecological value of wolves, rather than encouraging them to believe myths.

David Shellenberger, Danbury, CT USA

26/12/2013 07:57

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One of the few places left where competition for food is top priority. Man verses Wolf has always been a battle of wit and cunning that goes back to the dawn of time,----- secretly I very much admire both adversaries.

Winter in these districts are the harshest and longest anywhere in the world, there is just no place for the weak or losers.

Wolves have studied man and visa versa since their very existence .

Man during the day have the advantage with their high powered rifles fitted with telescopic sights, The wolf at night with its unbelievable night vision and very keen sense of smell and the ability to be immune to the very cold night temperatures .

It's a war over food rights where food is so scarce ,hence one needs to use both cunning and stealth to survive .

I know this does not solve the problem of who OWNS these rights, but I think sharing is not a bad policy.

If the wolves were ever driven into extinction ,mankind has lost too . Patrick .

Patrick Travers, Perth Australia

25/12/2013 18:46