

## The Last Wolf in Scotland – Some Historical Evidence

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Whilst Scottish Natural Heritage are firm that they have no plans for the re-introduction of the wolf to Scotland, others are willing to countenance the notion. There is ample archaeological and documentary evidence that wolves once roamed Scotland. However, proponents of re-introduction (including the influential John Muir Trust) often cite claims that ‘The Last Wolf in Scotland’ died only in 1743 (Wright & Daniels, 2014, 28-31; <https://www.scotsman.com/news/environment/bring-back-wolves-highlands-john-muir-trust-1536605>). The environmental historian Smout (2005, p. 122) whilst not endorsing the 1743 story, was willing to contemplate survival in the Lowlands beyond 1600 and extinction in the Highlands ‘certainly by 1750’ whilst noting the potential impact of the removal of this top predator on deer numbers and woodland regeneration.

The 1743 story flowed from the pen of two ‘historical fraudsters’, writing 87 years after the alleged event, without providing any supporting evidence. This ‘myth’ was later elaborated with circumstantial detail by even more dubious characters (Dixon, 2011, p. 46). Unfortunately, if predictably, the 1743 story continues to circulate, particularly online, sometimes with other tales which are even less probable. Such stories of wolves killed by heroic figures belong beside the rich culture of fabulous and folkloric wolves, wolves tamed by saints, metaphorical wolves in poetry and sermons, symbolic wolves in heraldry. They are not irrelevant to the story of the wild wolf – it is clearly significant that the ‘Wolf of Badenoch’ was an archetypal villain, that bandits and wolves were sometimes mentioned in the same legislation. But the myths are not a sound basis for policy decisions, whether about wolves, forestry or deer.

So, in an attempt to locate genuine historical evidence for when wolves *did* vanish from Scotland, to fill the long gap between 1600 and 1750, some years ago I highlighted some firm, primary records of wolves and wolf-hunting. The steady flow of records came to a sudden end about the 1630s, suggesting that, around that time, wolves became extinct. My hope was that others would follow up with further firm primary evidence – perhaps even some later records (Harrison, 2012, p. 48). Nobody has done so. However, further evidence has come to light and this short piece presents the old and the new with a short discussion. The conclusion remains, as it was in 2012, that the wild Scots wolf did not survive beyond the mid seventeenth century.

In the twelfth and thirteenth century wolf hunting was encouraged as a form of pest control, permitted even when other hunting was forbidden. There are records from Eskdale in

1165x1169 and at Pluscarden in 1230 (Gilbert, 1979, p. 232). In 1235 the monks of Melrose agreed not to hunt in Eskdale, unless to lay traps for wolves (RPS 1235/1) Wolf hunters were appointed in Stirling in 1288x1290 (Gilbert, 1979, p. 220).

In 1428 and again in 1458 the Scots parliament passed legislation encouraging barons to organise wolf hunting with bounties for wolves killed – though the fact that the hunts were to concentrate on whelps and that hunting wolves with guns was forbidden, might suggest that the aim was to control but not to extirpate (RPS 1428/3/6; RPS 1458/3/36). In 1458x1459 the bailie of the earldom of March paid Gilbert Home five shillings for killing ten wolves in Cockburnspath in accordance with these acts (Gilbert, 1979, 232),

In 1497, a ‘fellow’ who brought two wolves to the king at Linlithgow, was given five shillings as a reward (TA I, p. 182). Such gifts are usually of ‘special’ items (the new season’s strawberries, some venison) so perhaps Lowland wolves were already exotic.

In 1498 the Lords of Council at Inverness said if anyone brought a wolf’s head to the sheriff they were to receive one penny from every five houses in the parish; when a wolf was located, the ‘hue and cry’ was to be raised with fines for those who failed to attend – the procedure is similar to that involved in hunting thieves and outlaws (Gilbert, 1979, p. 232).

In November 1505 comes another royal gift of five shillings to a man who brought a wolf to the king, who was probably on a jaunt in the north, including visits to Tain and Darnaway; indeed, a man who brought a tame hart (red deer stag) from Inverness to Darnaway was also rewarded (TA III, p. 170) so presumably this was a northern wolf.

Travellers’ tales should (as always) be treated with caution. Aeneas Silvius, who visited in the early fifteenth century was clearly wrong in saying there were no wolves in Scotland – though they might have been very sparse in the Lowlands by that time (Brown, 1891, p. 27). Nicander Nucius, who visited in 1545 thought that the carnivorous animals included bears as well as foxes and wolves (though bears were long extinct) (Brown, 1891, p. 60). The Scot, Hector Boece, in 1527, thought that wolves were found everywhere except in the most densely settled areas and were ‘richt noisum’ to livestock (Brown, 1893, p. 82-3). In the 1570s, similarly, Bishop Leslie (another native) thought that there were ‘verie monie’ wolves, but they were ‘chiefly in our North cuntrey’ where (he says) they not only killed livestock, but even people, particularly pregnant women (a surprisingly common misperception) (Brown, 1893, p. 130).

The sixteenth century provides a few records of elite hunts. Pitscottie had been told that, a generation earlier, James V had participated in a hunt in the bounds of Athol and Strathearn where wolves, foxes, wildcat and some 60 red deer were killed (Pitscottie I, p. 338). It was

probably in late July or early August 1564 that Mary, Queen of Scots attended a hunt in Atholl, a massive drive; the queen loosed one of her large hounds at a wolf but this provoked a stampede by the deer, resulting in the deaths of some of the attendants, though the nobles went on to kill 360 red deer, some roe deer and five wolves (Atholl, I, 1908 p. 36; Furgol, 1987, Appendix). At a less exalted social level, the laird Lindsay of Edzell hunted wolves for recreation on his Angus estate in the 1580s (Brown, 2000, p. 213). In 1604 an unknown gentleman wrote to the Earl of Atholl saying he intended, shortly, 'to hunt the wowlf' and asking to borrow 'ane leische of gud houndis' which he promised to return the same day (HMC, 12<sup>th</sup> Report, Appendix VIII, p. 24).

In 1546 the commendator of the abbey of Cupar Angus set out a system for protecting the abbey's tenants from thieves and wolves (NRS GD16/36/3). In the 1550s the abbey's lands in Glenisla were leased to a series of elite and noble tenants. In 1552 the tenants of Frewchy were to 'nurice ane leiche of gud houndis with ane cuppill of rachis for tod and wolf' and to be ready to assist with hunts when required. 'Rachis' were dogs which hunted by scent whilst 'houndis' hunted by sight and speed. Some tenants were to keep more dogs, some fewer. One of the units was called Elrig, a name signifying a deer trap whilst Dalwany was adjacent to 'forest' lands, again suggestive of deer hunting. So, despite the presence of substantial herds of cattle and flocks of sheep, the wolf hunting in this area was still a prestigious affair, sport for gentlemen with hounds, rather than efficient trapping aimed at extirpation (Rogers, II, 1880, p. 105-7; *ibid*, p. 141; *ibid*, p. 175-177; *ibid* p. 250-251; *ibid*, p. 261-262).

A black ox was 'slane be the woves' [killed by the wolves] at Inverness in 1570 (DSL, 'woves'). But in that same year, a letter in the Moray archives and probably referring to southern Perthshire, says that there were 'no wolf skins to be had in these parts at present' (NRAS217/15).

In 1584 Walter Aikman, factor in Dieppe, contracted to buy 600 wolf skins from Andro Scherar, merchant in Stirling which Scherar failed to deliver; the consequent dispute was still current when he died in 1589. Evidently, both men had misjudged Scotland's ability to fulfil such an order. Even if wolves had been more plentiful earlier, there is no sign that wolf skins had been an important article of trade (NRS CC88/21 p. 558-565).

Between the 1590s and early 1620s there are several records from the Breadalbane papers, covering a wide area, from Loch Tay to Loch Awe. In 1593, it was claimed, a flock of sheep, stolen in Lowland Perthshire, were brought to Killin, but 'the wolf slew six of the same' (NRS GD112/17/2 f. 96r.). In 1594, a two-year old quey and four horses were killed by

wolves in two separate incidents around Killin (Innes, 1855, p.289; *ibid* p. 298). In April 1595, some 60 sheep were stolen on Lochtayside, ‘and the wolf slew maist part yrof’ (NRS GD112/17/2 f. 78r). In 1597, two men were given a silver merk each by the Breadalbane estate for their part in the ‘slaying of ane wolf’ probably about Glenorchy (GD112/17/2 f. 149r- 151r). In 1604 the laird of Breadalbane had 4 ‘wolff skynniss’ in the wardrobe at Balloch (modern Taymouth) (Innes, 1855, p. 339). And in 1621 the Breadalbane estate required tenants to have equipment for hunting wolves (NRS GD112/17/4 f 1r-3r; Innes, 1855, p. 356). In 1623 three cows were killed by the wolf on Lochtayside, when their keeper was absent (Innes, 1855, p. 374).

Meanwhile, in 1597-8 Thomas Fenton, keeper of the royal menagerie at Holyrood, already in charge of the lion, the tiger and other exotic animals, was given custody of ‘two Wolfis’ though, rather ominously for them, he was paid for only about 40 days keep (NRS E31/15 1597-1598; Juhala, 2000, p. 327). In 1621, Bentinck cites a payment of £6 13s 4d (10 merks Scots) to Thomas Gordoune ‘for killing of ane wolff and that according to the Acts of the countrey’; this incident was in the Dornoch area, the payment a bounty, of the sort encouraged by the old Acts of Parliament (DSL, ‘wolff’). A group of men were accused of hunting wildfowl with guns in the period 1617-1632; all denied it, one saying he had only used guns ‘to hunt the wolf’. Unfortunately, the location of this hunting cannot be identified though one of the men was from Dornoch and perhaps the others were also from the north (RPC XIII p. 308). By this time, clearly, the fifteenth century ban on hunting wolves with guns (above), was in abeyance, perhaps as extermination was now seen as a realistic aim.

John Taylor, who visited the Braes of Mar in 1618, spent 12 days without seeing a substantial house ‘but deere, wilde horses, wolves and suche like creatures’. He describes a deer hunt but does not mention wolves amongst the quarry (Brown, 1891, p. 121-3). This experience underlines the perception that wolves were now marginal, to be found only in the most remote areas, the wilderness. True, Timothy Pont seems to imply that, by the later sixteenth or early seventeenth century, wolves were not necessarily seen as just a pest, stating that Strath Navern had abundance ‘of deer, roe, and dyvers kynds of wild beasts, specially heir never lack wolves more than ar expedient’ (Pont Texts, f. 129v-130r). What he hints at here, surely, is that a minimal population of wolves was desirable, whether for elite hunting or to supply wolf skins which, as noted above, were of some value. Hunting may have become more prestigious as wolves were driven to the extremes, a point made graphically on Pont’s map of the far north-west of Sutherland; under the words *Extreem wilderness* appear the words ‘*many wolfis*’ (<https://maps.nls.uk/counties/rec/258>).

About 1630 a Description of the Highlands (Mitchell (ed.) 1907, volume II, p. 173) contrasts Kerrera with the mainland, where wolves destroyed livestock. And Sir Robert Gordon of Gordonstoun, also about 1630, says that there was good hunting in Sutherland, the forests and chases being ‘full’ of deer, wolves and other fauna (Mitchell (ed.) 1908, volume III, p. 99; *ibid*, p. 105; Oxford DNB, Sir Robert Gordon). But around the same time, Gordon of Straloch (another man who knew the north well) doubted if any wolves survived in Aberdeenshire and Banff, unless perhaps, in remote areas, far from cultivation (Blau p. 104). In 1632 a charter of the Braes of Mar reserves the rights of hunting and damages if roe deer were killed whilst hunting foxes or wolves (HMC 4<sup>th</sup> Report, Farquharson of Invercauld, p. 533). That certainly indicates that wolves had been hunted there in the past but such clauses could continue in use long after their practical significance was past; it is not firm evidence of a current population.

By 1684, in a final contemporary comment, Sir Robert Sibbald, rejected claims that wolves survived even in the far north, pronouncing them extinct in Scotland (Raye, 2018). Sibbald was a well-informed man, drawing on many sources of information and his firm statement must cast the profoundest doubt on Pennant’s claim that the last wolf in Scotland was killed by Sir Ewan Cameron in 1680. Pennant’s visit was in 1769, long after the claimed event and he gives no hint of a source for his information. And when, elsewhere, he says that wolves were extinct even in the far north, he does not record this as a recent event (Pennant, 1772, p. 81 & p. 100n.). Pennant was a serious naturalist with no intention of telling tales – but, in this case, his claim is of greatest interest as showing that the demise of the wolf in Scotland was already a matter of some interest; it is also, of course, incompatible with the 1743 myth.

## Discussion

This note is published, like the earlier one, to record the finds to date and to invite further contributions. It is also intended as a warning against confusing myths with historical evidence when practical consequences (re-introduction) might follow.

Search amongst scattered and diverse published and archival records will never be ‘complete’. The present search methods have introduced an obvious bias towards the estates of Breadalbane, Athol and Cupar Angus which all provide multiple records – but they are well-documented, some in easily-searchable format, so it would be a mistake to assume that they had greater wolf populations than surrounding areas.

In England, too, wolves were once widespread, gradually driven towards the ‘margins’, vanishing from the north west about the early fourteenth century, surviving in the north east till at least the later fourteenth century (Higham, 2004, 112-3; Coult, 2015).

The last firm record for Lowland wolves in Scotland is for ten, killed at Cockburnspath in 1458x9; so close to the Border, this might suggest later survival in adjacent areas of England, too. In the following decades wolves were given to monarchs or confined in the menagerie precisely because they were exotic trophies; these animals could have come from anywhere (like the lions, tiger and lynx also in the royal ‘zoo’). If wolves had survived in the sixteenth century Lowlands, the fact would surely have been mentioned by more general commentators such as Leslie or have appeared in estate papers. Instead, we find records of large sixteenth and early seventeenth century sheep flocks in Ettrick Forest (later in the Borders more generally), at Holyrood Park, in the Ochils and the Lomond Hills in Fife; if wolves had been an issue, there would surely have been some records (RCAHMS, 2001, p. 16-7; Harrison, 2016, *passim*; Robson, 1988, p. 24; Murray, 1965, p. 24-5). In contrast with the ten killed in the Borders in the mid fifteenth century, many of the Highland records, even in the later sixteenth century, seem to refer to individuals (‘the wolf’) and few suggest substantial packs, unless in the far north (‘many wolves’).

The extirpation of wolves must have had a significant impact on herding, particularly of sheep in the uplands. There are hundreds of pages of statements by witnesses whose experience of the uplands of the Stirling area ranged from the 1640s to the 1770s; none mentions wolves, even as a folk memory, again suggesting that extinction was a remote event (NRS, CS25/1772/12/2; RPC, vol XII, 266-7, 327; 385-7; NRS CS29/12//7/1786; NRS CS98/2871, 1694; NRS CS229/M/3/1). Spasmodic ‘wolf’ place-names (such as Wolf’s Hole Quarry and Wolf’s Cleuch) recorded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are of little or no evidential value. The sixteenth century Wolfhill on lands pertaining to Coupar Angus Abbey is on the Tay, not in Glenisla and is probably a red herring (Kirk, 1995, p. 353, 356, 370).

Curiously, whilst the potential is clear, there seems to be little direct evidence that wolf extermination impacted directly on deer numbers or on woodland regeneration (Smout, et al., 2005, p 122). Today, the major impact on deer numbers is regulation of human hunting.

Records of wolves and wolf hunting are quite frequent in the Highlands in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and several authors note their presence, sometimes emphasising their being confined to the more remote, unsettled parts. But whilst there are plenty of estate records for the later seventeenth century and beyond and these have been

searched in much the same way as the earlier ones, no positive records for wolves has been found after the 1630s. The evidence is, surely, overwhelming that wild wolves vanished from the Lowlands by about the late fifteenth century and from the Highlands before about 1650. They would fade away as their population became too fragmented to be viable, the packs too small to hunt effectively. The last ones were not killed by some heroic figure but vanished, unnoticed and unmourned.

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