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BOOKS ON MONGOLIA

ABOUT US

LIFE'S LIKE THAT!

OUTLAW or Hunting Wolves

By Jasper Becker, a British journalist

Dawn is still hours away and the stars glisten cold and distant as the hunter Purevdorj listens, shakes his hands free of his long fur-ringed sleeves, cups them to his mouth and lets out the long howl of a she-wolf in heat.

We are standing motionless at the thickly wooded entrance to a valley about twenty miles from Ulan Bator, capital of Mongolia, and where at this moment the last revelers are still partying on in its new discotheques.

The mercury has fallen past minus 20 and frost has whitened eyebrows and beards. It adds to the Father Christmas appearance of Purevdorje, a renowned wolf hunter, who is attired in a traditional del, a long blue gown belted at the waist with a sash and edged all around with fur. On his feet he wears upturned leather boots, a silk and fox tail hat on his head, and an old shot gun is strung across his back.

"Up them is what I call the capital of the wolves," he whispered pointing up the wooded hillsides. "Four maybe five packs of wolves retire there during the day to rest."



Purevdorje says he can try to summon the wolves so we watching them as they lope up the valley at the end of a night's hunting. Around about, we can hear and sometimes see small herds of grazing deer, horses and cows which the wolves prey on. In other countries, livestock spend the winter in barns eating hay but in Mongolia they survive outside foraging for the desiccated grasses beneath the snow cover.

As a result wolves numbering in their tens of thousands range across Mongolia's empty mountains and steppes attacking the country's 30 million livestock and its herds of wild antelopes, deer and sheep and the wild boar, marmots and other animals. Just how big the wolf population is now, no one knows but Purevdorje and many others agree the numbers have multiplied since 1990.

"Democracy has helped the wolves," he explained. "Under Communism, the wolves were hunted down every year."

So numerous and menacing have they become that in the Bogd Mountain nature reserve outside the capital, the deer and antelope have fled to seek refuge in the valley.

In 1917, it was Lenin himself who promised his followers that if the Communists win power they would hunt down the last wolf. So after 1921 when Mongolia become the Soviet Union's first satellite, the state organized annual wolf hunts. In 1990 the Mongolians abandoned Marx and the hunts ceased too. At the same time agricultural collectives were dismantled and herds were distributed as the private property of nomads.

Formerly, the state had mobilized the army, equipping hunting parties with helicopters, jeeps and machine guns, and could order out most able bodied men to help flush out the wolves. Now, the traditional skills of the dwindling numbers of old experienced hunters like Purevdorje are much in demand by herdsmen desperate to keep man's ancient foe at bay.



Purevdorje says he learned the trick of wolf howling from older hunters while working in the Gobi Desert as an environmental inspector. By imitating the howl of a she-wolf, it is possible to lure the rest of a pack to approach within range.

The sound is not the spine-chilling wail of a Hollywood were-wolf but more like a vacuum-cleaner being turned on and off. A male wolf, however, makes an altogether different, more menacing cry.

"No man can ever imitate such a long cry. It would need superhuman lungs," Purevdorje said and tries again. His 14-year old son, Davaanyam, pricks up his ears and, I too, think there is an answering call somewhere in the distance to our right. But it is not repeated, and after waiting and listening, we move on up mountain.

Along the trail, we soon find the skin and bones of a young deer that the hunter examines closely like a detective on a murder case "Wolf!" Purevdorje concludes, emphatically pointing out the teeth marks on the rib bones.

For the next hour or two, he shows us all kinds of other clues showing how close the wolves must be. At least one pack has passed our way only hours before. Purevdorje can read the imprints on the snow as much other analyse share price figures in their daily newspaper.

He explains that the tracks are made by a pack composed of four males and one female, pointing out where their claws skidded on the ice of a frozen stream, or where they gambolled in a snowdrift under a tree. He can guess their ages and even what they have eaten, after examining a frozen stool.

At this time of year, a she-wolf is on heat and the wolves gather in packs competing to father a litter. Later the wolves pair off and by the spring the she-wolf has given birth to a litter of 7-12 cubs.

Purevdorje said learning to communicate with the wolves takes a long time. "It is like practising a language, when you get a note wrong then the wolf won't understand or he will become suspicious."



Even when the wolf responds, it can be dangerous. One hunter who summoned and first killed the she-wolf was almost killed.

"They went into frenzy, first tearing the corpse to pieces, then hurling themselves at the hunter, not caring if they lived or died. When he shot the last one, it was only six feet away," he said. Purevdorje himself one spent a

night encircled by wolves, which he kept away only by lighting a fire.

Around Ulaanbaatar, wolf hunting has now become the favorite past-time of the Mongolia's new capitalist rich. Winter is the favourite season, partly because there is little else to do and, partly because the wolves are in their rich grey winter pelts. "At weekends these bankers and businessmen tear around in their flashy new Japanese jeeps with fancy high-powered rifles but they never shoot anything. The wolf is too clever to be caught like that," he said.

Actually, under a new environmental protection law, shooting animals from

helicopters or jeeps is illegal, much as it is in Canada where recently wolf hunting was entirely outlawed. In Mongolia, no one pays any attention to all this, including the lawmakers themselves who count among the hunting enthusiasts. For Mongolians, hunting wolves is more than a rich man's hobby because it evokes deep feelings buried in the national mythology.

"Mongolians believe that Chinggis Khan was descended from a blue wolf and a deer. The wolf tail is a sacred totem of the Mongols," explains Erdenebaatar, a journalist and a friend of Purevdorje, who has researched a book on wolves.

In the years before the Mongolians embraced democracy, Erdenebaatar had caused a stir by challenging both the Communist Party's ideological condemnation of the wolf and its extermination policies.

Each year the state had organised two National Wolf Hunting Weeks, one in March and another in December. Anyone who killed one and could present a pair of the ears was rewarded by a sheep and a measure of felt used to make ghera. And each May, the government commanded the populace to turn out and scour the countryside for wolf lairs in an effort to kill the wolf cubs.

When a district believed it had destroyed its last wolf, the local government would proclaim a public holiday. In all up to 5,000 wolves might be killed a year and in the early 1930s, records show that some 10,000 wolves were destroyed annually.

However, now that Mongolians have abandoned wolf hunting as a public good, they have reverted to the traditional belief that to kill a wolf in January, or even to see one, brings good luck for the whole year.

Dornod province, where many wolf hunters try their luck, lies to the west of the capital. On its gently undulating steppes, large herds of wild antelopes still roam free and it is easier to spot and hunt wolves than in the mountains where it requires much patience and skill.

A regular flight takes an hour and half to cross the unfenced white wilderness to Choibalsan, the provincial capital named in honour of the Marshal who ruled the country as Stalin's murderous henchman. This district lies close to the Chinese border and here the Soviet Army had formerly established a large military base which held tank manoeuvres deploying thousands of tanks and armoured vehicles.

The former head of the National Hunter's Association, Lkhamsuren, accompanies us there where a couple of professional hunters from the Dornod hunting association were waiting with two jeeps.

Next day we left before dawn, driving across the barely inhabited emptiness to begin our hunt. Here on the open steppe it is far colder than in the mountains, close to minus 30 Centigrade.

In ancient times this steppes were the place where the great khans would hold epic hunts employing thousands of men to drive all the animals into a circle. It was done for sport and as a training for battle. As Chinggis Khan once commanded "When there is no war raging, there shall be hunting, the young shall be taught how to kill wild animals so that they become used to fighting."

Over eight hundred years later, the grasslands are still covered by herds of as many as 600,000 white tailed antelopes. Normally, the local hunter's association organises a cull in November when its members spend 20 days charging across the steppes in trucks killing up to 6,000 animals. This time of year is best because the animals are still fat after the summer but the weather is cold enough to freeze the carcasses and export them to Europe or China.

Namjil, the chief of the local hunting party, reckons that in twenty years he has killed about 1,000 wolves, sometimes shooting as many as 20 a day from a helicopter.

"It is more like a job than a sport really," agreed Lkhamsuren. In the past, Mongolians took great pride in a wolf hunt because to be successful it required men and horses at their peak of fitness to corner a wolf and then kill it.

"It took a lot of preparation and a hunting party needed days to track down a wolf," he said.

Two hours later, our party of two jeeps arrived at the hunting ground and the chase began. It followed a pattern. We would drive to the crest of a hill and then study the plain ahead with binoculars looking for a flicker of movement which might betray the presence of wolf.

Armed with an acute sense of smell and hearing, and a deep hatred of man, a wolf will immediately run off when a jeep approaches. Then the hunt would be on, a reckless, bouncing, spine-snapping drive across the open steppe, with the jeep hurtling to the next ridge at 60 -- 70 - 80, even 90 kilometers an hour.

In the deepest winter, only a thin layer of snow blankets the straw-yellow grass but there are snowdrifts, ruts and rocks to avoid. Each time a wolf was glimpsed, the Mongolians would whoop with excitement until the wolf disappeared again, dodging and twisting as it headed for cover in the nearest broken ground.

The hunters spotted our first wolf early on and it streaked away raising a cloud of snow, disappearing for a while, only to be spotted later. In this terrain, there is often no place to hide. Soon the two jeeps had it pinned down and were chasing it from side to side.

It was covered by a rich grey and white hair with thick ruff around the throat and nearly six foot from tail to snout. The hunters poked their rifles out of the jeep windows as it ran alongside but held off firing. After half an hour the wolf, running at full speed was visibly tiring, unable to match the remorseless strength of the machine.



"Probably he has been hunting out all night already and was looking for a place to rest up when we caught him," Namjil explained.

Unexpectedly, the wolf finally collapsed in exhaustion unable to move. Namjil jumped out of his jeep and fell on top of it pinning it down so he could tie a rope around it. Sadly, all the fight seemed to have gone out of it. The wolf was too tired to be defiant, there was not even a snarl to expose its deadly white fangs.

Instead, it gazed silently at us through its sharp unwavering eyes, seemingly resigned to its imminent death.

The hunters even let it go before easily catching it again and shooting it, with several blasts from a shotgun.

Close up, this steppe wolf, a large male of about ten years, did not seem menacing but pitiful. It was slung without ceremony into the back of the jeep. Yet Lkhamsuren found its behavior unusual, saying this was only the second time that he had ever caught a wolf alive.

Over a lunch of boiled mutton and noodles in a local herdsman's gher, Namjil expounded on the cruel nature of the wolf. Some years ago, he said a pack had gone on the rampage slaughtering 900 sheep but only eating a few. And only two years ago, he discovered that wolves had killed 38 of his own flock, slashing at their throats with one bite, but only consuming two or three.

"A wolf often kills without purpose. We believe that when the world was created God gave grass to the cow, insects to the birds and to the wolf he said, you may eat one sheep out of 1,000. But the wolf misunderstood and thought God

said kill 1,000 sheep and eat one," Namjil recounted.



According to statistics gathered in the 1980s, wolves are blamed for killing around 15,000 head of livestock a year. The bloodiest year recorded was 1952 when wolves slaughtered 50,000 head of livestock and hunters claimed the pelts of 19,000 wolves.

Sometimes, though, the wolf's random attacks are not motiveless. Wolves mate for life and are intensely loyal to their kind. Another hunter, Baatarsogt, recalled how in 1993, a border guard spotted cubs playing outside a wolf lair and then killed them all. That same night, the she-wolf took revenge on the border post's flock of sheep, slaughtering all 200.

At this time of year steppe wolves are already roaming in pairs and in the afternoon, we surprised one couple. When we gave chase, they split up turning into different directions. We followed the male, gunning the engine as the wolf raced ahead, its powerful shoulders heaving as it desperately searched for cover.

The ground was too open to provide any sanctuary. After losing it a few times, we were soon running parallel to it. From time to time, it waved back and forth and once looked round directly at us. Baatarsogt thrust his gun out of the door, firing one blast of shot at it from ten feet away. The wolf slowed but carried on until another blast knocked him over. It was like taking part in a drive-by execution. To make sure the wolf was dead, the driver drove over its body.

We set off in pursuit of his mate which the others had chased. By the end of the hunt, Namjil had hunted and killed another pair but this wolf escaped.

"We sighted her seven times but she was too cunning and escaped. Often they get away," Namjil said adding that he did not mind. "We don't want to get rid of the wolves. They will be here for future generations to hunt."

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