

Fear of wolf is short-lived

Can you use wolf sounds to chase deer away from tree nurseries? Ecologist Martijn Weterings (Wildlife Ecology and Conservation) put this to the test.

Tree nursery owners on the edge of the Veluwezoom National Park have a problem with fallow deer eating their trees. ‘So we came up with the idea of using sounds as an alternative to shooting the deer,’ says Weterings.

In one part of the Veluwezoom park, 36 cameras were hung up opposite sound boxes. In various sessions over the course

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of a couple of months, the sound boxes produced the noises of wolves or sheep, or

no sound at all as a control. The cameras recorded the effect of the sounds on the numbers of roe deer, red deer, fallow deer and wild boar passing by.

The results are rather unclear. At first, the wild boar and deer seemed to stay away when they heard wolves. But that effect

depended on how dense the woods were in that area. What is more, the effect was short-lived in all cases: the animals disregarded the wolf noises after three weeks. Does that mean the experiment failed?

Naive

Absolutely not, says Weterings. ‘The experiment was done in 2019 with what we call naive animals: animals that have no experience of wolves. But the wolf has since returned to the Netherlands. That sound habituation process could go differently now that animals are occasionally killed by a wolf. It means the animal could be “punished” for disregarding the sound, and that will break the habituation process.’

Weterings says the small number of deer in the park at the time of the experiment is the reason why no difference was found in the reaction to wolves and to sheep. ‘It meant the differences were not significant.’ The small numbers were also why it was not possible to distinguish between roe deer, fallow deer and red deer. So more research is needed to investigate the effect of wolf sounds on the behaviour of large wild animals. PK



Wolf in the Netherlands. ♦ Photo Shutterstock