Contemporary Wolf Hunters in the Taiga of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia)

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Abstract: This article presents two ethnographic case studies illustrating the practices and perceptions of contemporary wolf hunters (*volchatniki*) in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). We aim to show how contemporary *volchatniki* rely on individual strategies such as self-crafted technologies and hunting magic. Hunting of wolves must be understood in terms of mutual intimate sensory interplay, an exchange that can be perceived as intersubjective communication between human and non-human persons. This personal interaction creates bonds between humans and certain wolves, allowing some wolves to survive. Despite the technocratic attitude of the Soviet era that wolves were a pest species to be exterminated, *volchatniki* of today perceive wolves as conscious subjects displaying personality and character. Animistic assumptions of non-human agency play an important role in wolf hunting, in combination with technological advances.

Keywords: hunting magic, hunting technologies, intersubjective communication, the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), wolf hunters (*volchatniki*)

This article provides a glimpse into the experience of contemporary wolf hunters—*volchatniki* (plural)—in their interaction with wolves in the Sakha Republic. The term "*volchatnik*" (singular) comes from the Russian word "*volk*" (wolf) and refers to a person who specializes in wolf hunting. The *volchatnik* profession was established by the Soviet government in response to the high levels of livestock predation by wolves. It was a measure to control wildlife to ensure more advanced livestock husbandry (see more in Jefanovas and Brandišauskas 2023). Soviet institutions responsible for agricultural development and game management-initiated brigades of professional wolf hunters all over Siberia. In Soviet times, wolf hunting became a well-paid and

prestigious job that was advertised via newspapers. It was seen as a great mission through which one could serve Soviet society. *Volchatniki* were depicted in the mass media as heroes and liberators in the fight against "enemies of the Soviet nation" and "the national problem number one" (see also Bibikov and Shtilmark [1993] 2011; Pavlov 1990: 11). Starting around the 1950s, intensive wolf extermination campaigns were implemented across the Soviet Union, including in Yakutia (see Sedalishchev and Odnokurtsev 2016: 255–260; Bibikov 1985: 374–377). *Volchatniki* were entitled to use all kinds of measures to exterminate wolves, including poisoning and shooting wolves from small airplanes and helicopters. Additionally, however, success in wolf hunting also depended on the skills of the *volchatniki*, such as trapping, as well as the extermination of wolf cubs in dens; therefore the state allocated resources to educate wolf exterminators. Stable salaries were provided by the state to *volchatniki*. Socialist competitions were also organized to raise interest in wolf hunting, including paying bounties for wolves and giving out awards, bonuses, and prizes for personal achievements (see also Gaidin and Burmakina 2017: 41–42; Koroleva 2016). After the collapse of the Soviet centralized system of resource redistribution, the once-systematic and planned endeavors for wolf population control became disorganized, and the formal position of professional wolf hunter was disbanded.

In post-Soviet times, wolf hunting has become more an activity of individual choice and personal motivation, framed as a mission to help local pastoral communities deal with the growing numbers of wolves rather than as a basic source of income. Virtually anyone can become a *volchatnik* in the Sakha Republic and be invited by any pastoral community to hunt wolves on a reciprocal basis, for instance by being paid with domestic reindeer meat or by being given a foal. However, as any hunters who are involved in wolf extermination and belong to reindeer herding communities know well, wolves can take revenge by devastating a person's livestock in exchange for being pursued. To evade wolf revenge, indigenous wolf hunters may even abstain from killing wolves directly on their pastoral areas, instead calling for assistance from a fellow *volchatnik* based in a distant area, so wolves cannot track them down and take revenge. In exchange, the wolf hunter would later travel to their fellow hunter's area to trap wolves the next time.

State institutions also call for prominent and skillful wolf hunters to be sent as volunteers to the most problematic locations within the Sakha Republic. In exchange, gasoline expenses can be partly repaid and extra hunting licenses for moose can be given by the state authorities to those

hunters serving as *volchatniki*. Therefore, contemporary *volchatniki* often see their services as a personal responsibility they should take up due to their unique skills, knowledge, and inner spiritual strengths, all of which can be framed as their personal calling. They think of their services as a mission that should be fulfilled by somebody aiming to protect people's livestock and keep the wolf population in balance. The traditional reindeer herding communities in the Sakha Republic are especially vulnerable to wolf attacks due to the grazing patterns of domestic reindeer and the mountainous taiga locations that serve well as shelter for large wolf populations.

Despite the technocratic attitude of the Soviet era that wolves were a pest species to be eliminated, contemporary *volchatniki* perceive wolves as conscious persons that display subjectivity and social skills. As such, an individual approach is required when hunting different wolf individuals (see also Brandišauskas forthcoming). Although locally based *volchatniki* can join together in groups for wolf hunting expeditions, this still can be seen as interpersonal interactions between humans and sentient, more-than-human beings. Successful trapping demands from the *volchatniki* not only a good knowledge of wolf behavior and skills while positioning traps to make them effective, but also extraordinary multisensory and empathic sensitivity in the interpretation of wolf signs (e.g., footprints, dropped fur, vocalization, ground scratching, and other territorial markings). Success in wolf hunting largely relies on the abilities of the *volchatniki* to sense the emotional condition and intentions of predators as conveyed through marks on the landscape. This can also be framed as the ability of *volchatniki* to read a wolf's perspective. Similarly, Boonman-Berson, Turnhout, and Carolan (2016) describe how human-wild animal interactions are a matter of "common sensing," where humans and animals leave their signs indicating behavior and co-responses, and interpret them through their senses (for further reading, see Oehler 2022; 2020: 142–160; Barrett et al. 2017 O'Mahony et al. 2018; Kohn 2013). This mutual exchange and effort to understand the meaning of each other's actions is based on interpersonal non-verbal communication. Such communicative practices in humans and wolves are mutually learnable through interconnected experiences that allow each to take the other's point of view and perceive the thoughts of the other. Alex Oehler (2022) aptly shows how wolves are able to empathically apprehend the human gaze and interpret human behavior, and even enact craftiness. A *volchatnik's* interactions with individual wolves often bring empathy and respect for them, which sometimes allows certain wolves a chance to survive.

This article is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted by Aivaras Jefanovas in 2018–19 among a group of Eveny hunters and reindeer herders in the Eveno-Bytantaiskii and Tomponskii districts in the northern Sakha Republic, and by Donatas Brandišauskas among the Evenki of East Siberia, including Evenki in the southern part of the Sakha Republic. The fieldwork by both authors also contains interviews with wolf hunters and game managers, based in rural areas as well as the city of Yakutsk, who have been involved in wolf hunting since Soviet times.

In this article, we provide ethnographic accounts of wolf hunting by two highly skilled *volchatniki*, namely Grigorii and Mikhail,[1] from the Sakha Republic. These accounts illustrate two ends of the spectrum of practices applied by the *volchatniki* in this region. They both treat wolves with respect, perceive them as sentient non-human persons, and rely on their interplay of senses and perspectives while hunting wolves. They also both believe in achieving their success in wolf hunting through a combination of different extraordinary measures and empowerments. However, one heavily relies on ritual practices and sentient cosmological knowledge, while the other relies more on advanced technological applications that help to outmatch wolves. Most contemporary *volchatniki* in the Sakha Republic, while engaging in interactions with wolves as non-human persons, use wolf-trapping technologies,often developed by themselves, but also relying on animistic assumptions to varying degrees.

The Economic Aspects of Wolf Hunting in The Sakha Republic

The economic activity of the Evenki, Eveny, and rural Sakha people depends largely on reindeer herding, as well as horse and cattle breeding in remote areas. Along with mining, climate change, and forest fires, the growing numbers of wolves and intensified predation of livestock are perceived by locals as one of the main threats to their traditional subsistence (see also Brandišauskas 2020; Lavrillier and Gabyshev 2018). Since attacks on livestock by wolves have increased throughout the post-Soviet years (see Sedalishchev and Odnokurtsev 2016: 255–260), pastoral communities of the Sakha Republic have asked state authorities for financial and technological support in struggling with the inflow of wolves. State wildlife management institutions tend to focus on paying bounties for culled wolves, thus aiming at stimulat-

ing local hunters and herders to take personal initiative in the hunting of wolves.

The main governmental body in organizing the regulation of wolves in The Sakha Republic is the Ministry of Ecology, Nature Management, and Forestry (Ministry of Ecology). The Ministry of Ecology delegates the function of administering wolf bounties to the national agro-industrial concern "*Sakhabult*" (Sakha hunting), which produces and trades fur and tanned leather in the Sakha Republic. The company also accepts the skins of hunted wolves from any hunter, processes the necessary documents, and issues government bounty payments to hunters. The governmental bounty in 2020 was 20,000 rubles per wolf. In addition to these state rewards, local municipalities also establish bounties for culled wolves. For example, in the northern Eveno-Bytantaiskii district of the Sakha Republic, 700,000 rubles were allocated to pay additional bounties of 20,000 rubles per wolf in 2019. Thus, the municipality of Eveno-Bytantaiskii district could subsidize awards for up to 35 killed wolves per given year. Meanwhile in other districts, additional bounties were set from 10,000 to 15,000 rubles per wolf on average. However, no money at all was assigned to this purpose in some other districts. Thus, in total, depending on the district, anyone who specialized in wolf hunting could receive from 20,000 to 40,000 rubles per culled wolf. It is quite a stimulating reward for local people, amounting to equal or double the average monthly salary (19,160 rubles) of reindeer herders in rural areas of the Sakha Republic (for wages of reindeer herders in the Sakha Republic, see Neustroeva et al. 2020: 220–245).

To receive bounties, hunters are required to submit a set of documents to both "*Sakhabult*" as well as to the district's municipality. Hunters complain that this is a very laborious bureaucratic process. First, a wolf hunter must skin the wolf, clean the pelt of meat and fat, dry it, and then deliver it to a veterinarian to get a certificate that the wolf was not infected with rabies. Additionally, the hunter must present their license as well as a special certificate for taking the wolf from nature issued by the local hunting inspection. Having these documents, the wolf hunter must then deliver them together with the wolf pelt to "*Sakhabult*", which in return is obliged to issue two copies of a certificate. One of the certificates remains in the enterprise as the basis for the payment of the state bounty, while the other must be delivered by the hunter to the municipality to receive an additional award.

However, many *volchatniki* would also assert that money received for wolf bounties did not always cover the expense of organizing a wolf hunting trip. Trips through difficult taiga terrain, the length of which

can be 500 km or even 2000 km, require a lot of fuel. Furthermore, there is a need for spare parts for vehicles, especially in the transmission and engine, as many parts must be replaced after such trips. Moreover, the rewards for wolves were often delayed or sometimes only partly paid. It would be difficult for anyone involved in wolf hunting to live purely from those activities. The majority of *volchatniki* consider wolf hunting a hobby rather than a professional activity, and most of them are involved in other economic activities as a main source of income. The Eveny, Evenki, and Sakha people also hunt wolves on their nomadic clan community (*obshchina*)[2] areas as a part of their daily routine of reindeer herding, horse herding, and hunting. They usually trap wolves or pursue them with a snowmobile until the wolves collapse from exhaustion and can then be easily approached and shot with a rifle. There are also *volchatniki* who organize mobile units (two to four hunters), on the basis of signed volunteer agreements[3] with the Ministry of Ecology, to conduct free regulation of the wolf population in different districts of The Sakha Republic, including on hunting grounds. However, even when possessing official permits for hunting wolves on the hunting grounds, *volchatniki* sometimes become involved in various conflicts with regular hunters. The formal users of hunting grounds are concerned that wolf hunting could become a good cover for any person to engage in poaching, especially for moose. Some hunters argue that there are many false *volchatniki*, or as they put it, "only on paper." False *volchatniki* are accused of seeking different benefits issued by the Ministry of Ecology, such as special permits to hold rifles loaded while in vehicles, to open fire "in the vehicle's headlights," and also to shoot from any kind of vehicle.

All kinds of traps, snares, and lures that are illegal in most European countries can be used for killing wolves as well as for exterminating wolf cubs in dens in the Sakha Republic. However, due to the immense hazard to the environment, and under the pressure from international nature conservation organizations, barium fluoroacetate poisons, which were widely applied in exterminating wolves in Soviet times, are now outlawed in Russia as of 2015 (see also Brandišauskas 2020: 23; Boreiko 2011: 14). Wolf hunters consider those poisons the most effective means and say there are no decent alternatives to fight wolves in the harsh Arctic environment.

Meanwhile, by giving specialized wolf hunters various advantages in hunting, one of the goals of the Ministry of Ecology is to make them representatives of the state in wolf regulation. By cooperating with state authorities, those *volchatniki* also undertake the function of encouraging and instructing local inhabitants in how to battle wolves on their own

and receive bounties. Thus, while on the wolf hunt in various districts of the Sakha Republic, some *volchatniki* also organize workshops for local authorities and inhabitants, demonstrating their experience in using modern snowmobiles as well as various trapping devices in wolf culling, thereby widening the network of wolf hunters over the Sakha Republic.

Wolf Hunting Technologies and Sensory Interaction: *Volchatnik* Mikhail

It was November, the beginning of the winter in the Sakha Republic, and it was already cold. Snow had covered the landscape from the beginning of September and it would not melt until the end of May at least. The hunting season for wolves was open and the *volchatniki* had been making trips to the taiga to set the traps. It was a good time for hunting wolves as the predators would be saving energy by utilizing paths trod in deep snow. For this reason, hunters could more easily detect wolf marks after the snowfall, while at other times of the year this is difficult.

Mikhail, a *volchatnik* of Russian origin, was born in Yakutia and had lived there since childhood. At the time of this research in 2019, Mikhail was over 70 years old and he still led a taiga lifestyle by hunting wolves. As a hunter, Mikhail began his activity in Soviet times. Back then, he was involved in moose hunting to provide meat according to governmental orders.[4] During moose hunting, Mikhail often saw the footprints of wolves, but he did not hunt them until 2009 when he became a *volchatnik*. During that year, the government of the Sakha Republic announced a state of emergency due to a dramatic increase in both wolf numbers and livestock predation. State game managers suggested that Mikhail should establish a mobile unit of *volchatniki* who could be sent to the districts of the Sakha Republic to regulate wolves. In return, the Ministry of Ecology promised to cover some of his gasoline expenses, and said Mikhail would also receive hunting licenses for moose, for his personal use.

Once, Mikhail was directed by the Ministry of Ecology to visit Sebian-Kiuel in January, a northern locality in the Sakha Republic with extreme winter temperatures below minus 50°C, which makes wolf hunting hard to do. Soon after arriving in the pastoral area, Mikhail not only set traps and snares, but also ringed the reindeer pastures with strips of old videotape in the expectation that wolves would be

scared by the sound made by the tapes fluttering in the wind. However, Mikhail thought that the wolves were inspecting him by following his footprints, sniffing around, and watching from the side, so nothing worked that time and the wolves were not trapped.

Mikhail saw the extermination of wolves as his commitment to the protection of the livestock of local inhabitants. However, wolf hunting was also an attractive lifestyle for him that could bring some importance and respect in the society of hunters as well as an extra source of income. Mikhail had established his own business in post-Soviet times, becoming a successful car service entrepreneur, which allowed him to sustain himself as a *volchatnik*. He saw wolf hunting as an extraordinary enterprise in which the hunter should be well equipped with all kinds of technological means to overcome powerful, vital, and crafty predators.

The truck, which Mikhail had modified himself, was a second home to him, a trusted all-terrain vehicle to drive in the remote terrain of the taiga and a shelter for spending cold winter nights while on hunting trips (see Figure 1). As the owner of a car service and a good mechanic himself, Mikhail transformed the Russian-made truck, changing it completely by widening the cabin and welding new constructions that strengthened the vehicle's transmission. He also replaced the original Russian engine with a more powerful and fuel-efficient Japanese motor. The outside equipment of the truck was well adapted to wolf hunting; he installed additional front and side lights that made it possible to move through the taiga and hunt wolves overnight. A rifle could be used at any time from the cabin by opening a hatch from above, while a specially equipped, easy-to-operate searchlight could be directed to any side to illuminate the target. Additionally, during a trip to the taiga, a rifle was mounted on a stand on the driver's side, ready to be immediately fired if a wolf appeared. This exceptional advantage was given by the Ministry of Ecology specially to *volchatniki*.

The hatch above the vehicle's cabin also provided an entrance to the roof with many containers and compartments, where wolf hunting equipment was stored as well as spare parts for the vehicle and various tools. The roof also served as a natural freezer for the storage of hunted game, as well as various parts of small animals and birds used for luring wolves. Inside the vehicle were folding beds for three persons, an assembly table, and an iron stove with a removable chimney on the outside to create acceptable living conditions during the cold Arctic winters. The iron stove was made ingeniously to supply a reservoir with antifreeze that circulated through tubes to keep the vehicle's engine

Figure 1. A *volchatnik's* truck, Sakha Republic, 2019. Photo by Aivaras Jefanovas.

warm all night. Keeping the vehicle's engine warm was vitally important for him, as during winter nights the outside temperature could drop to minus 50°C.

Mikhail's hunting activity would start early, at dawn. The truck moved slowly along taiga roads, not being driven so much as merely swaying from one side to the other across frozen hillocks of bogs or windfalls in the forest. The taiga there seemed ghostly, since huge areas were covered with deadwood and, in some places, there were black burned trunks. Furthermore, many open areas with thick scrub, frozen bogs, wetlands, streams, and rivers interrupted the taiga, making driving challenging. Mikhail's truck got stuck many times in swampy places or crossing rivers, and it would often take a whole day to pull the vehicle out. Usually, Mikhail succeeded in such situations thanks to how well he had equipped the vehicle. Such movements continued throughout the day, unless the *volchatnik* noticed fresh tracks of wolves or reached places where his trapping devices had been set. Red rags tied on trees were signs for him to stop, as his snares or traps were set nearby. Knots on the rags showed how many trapping devices were set in a certain place. Asked whether red rags on trees might scare the wolves by signaling about the presence of humans, Mikhail said he did not think this was the case; rather, he thought it diverted the predator's

attention from the trapping devices. According to Mikhail, wolves routinely moved through the scrub and tree branches, which tugged on the fur and muzzle of the wolf. The slight luster of an iron trap or snare in the thickness would attract a wolf's attention. The wolf would stop, step back suspiciously while sniffing around, and then, recognizing the concealed threat, would sharply turn to the side and flee. He saw wolves as very sensitive beings capable of noticing the smallest details even in the dim night light. However, by seeing and being distracted by rags flickering on tree branches, wolves would be less attentive to the trapping devices he had set.

Mikhail preferred to set snares where wolves had killed game earlier, leaving bones that were still rotting. According to the *volchatnik's* observations, wolves returned to the remnants of old prey to gnaw the bones even after a few years. When setting snares, Mikhail rolled tracks in the snow by driving the truck backward and forward. Mikhail walked only on the newly created tracks, and avoided urinating anywhere in the area. He was not concerned that the wolves would recognize human scent and be alert, but that the scent could distract the wolves from the path. The idea was to set the snares at the end of the rolled path so that the wolves would move along it and be caught in the snares. One could think that wolves were not fools in comprehending the signs of human activity and, furthermore, would connect it with the intentions of humans to kill them. However, Mikhail thought that wolves had long been accustomed to moving along human paths. Seemingly, it is much easier for wolves to move over the solid human-made paths than to get bogged down in the snow and, from this perspective, predators are not fools. Mikhail's logic in trapping wolves was rather unusual. For instance, when hunting for wolves in the northern part of the Sakha Republic, the other *volchatnik*, Grigorii (described below), sought to always hide his tracks from the predators, thus concealing his intentions. By contrast, Mikhail did not worry so much about human smell and traces, since the cold, snow, wind, and sun would soon naturally wipe all traces from the surface. Instead, what Mikhail considered most important was to camouflage the trapping devices, as wolves could easily see and smell the iron and figure out the threat. To hide the smell of the iron, Mikhail boiled snares and traps with larch branches for about two hours. Additionally, the trapping devices were placed on the roof of the truck, as larch branches hitting the trapping devices would make them smell more natural.

The snares were made simply from a self-tightening wire cable, but this sometimes could come loose and allow a wolf to escape. Mikhail

designed snares with a sliding lock designed to prevent the snare loop from loosening again after it had tightened on the neck of a wolf. Additionally, he would fasten the trapping device to a weight—a heavy log, iron plate, or ground anchor (see Figure 2)—which allowed the captured predator to move away from the capture site. Being trapped and trying to escape, wolves usually run to hide in the forest, but as a consequence the anchor catches on trees and bushes and the wolf tangles himself. Eventually a wolf entangled becomes exhausted and lies motionless, curled up, allowing the hunter to approach and finish him off. However, sometimes very powerful wolves do not give up until the end. Mikhail recollected how a wolf with a trap on his leg managed to escape. Here is Mikhail's account:

> I arrived to check the traps. I saw bloody footprints on the snow and followed. A wolf had been trapped and was pulling the iron trident anchor behind, which was attached to the trap. He had been running backward and forward, jumping huge leaps, spinning on his back and shaking his trapped leg, but eventually he ran into the forest and freed himself. To my amazement, I found the traps thrown upon bushes and severely deformed by the bites of the wolf.

Figure 2. Wolf traps with a ground anchor, the Sakha Republic, 2018. Photo by Aivaras Jefanovas.

Mikhail added that snares and traps should not be tightly mounted to a tree, because a wolf chained to a single spot could gnaw off its trapped leg and free itself. Especially when a trapped leg freezes, a wolf may bite it off as a dead part of the body. Wolves can survive with missing parts of their limbs, and such predators can be recognized from their footprints. Mikhail, by constantly observing his hunting areas, could individually recognize the signs of lame wolves, some of which had lost their legs, toes, or paws. These signs showed that the wolves had been once trapped, but had freed themselves. This signals the presence of experienced individuals who are very cautious, this making them difficult to trap.

Reading and assessing elements he noticed in wolf behavioral responses, as well as distinguishing wolves as individuals with specific biographies, Mikhail established interpersonal relations with wolves, based largely on communication. This communication depended on their embodied experience: auditory, tactile, olfactory, visual, and vocal sensory perceptions, as well as cognitive abilities for observation and learning.

Many old and fresh paths of wolves deep in the snow stretched across the river ice, indicating that the place was frequently visited by predators. It seemed that the wooded river valley with intrusions of bogs provided suitable habitat for wolves to stay for a day's rest during a long journey across the taiga. Having observed the movements of wolves in this area for many years, Mikhail knew the paths of wolves and how they moved; therefore, it is not surprising that he chose the locations of the trapping devices based on wolf routes. While following the tracks of wolves on the riverside, Mikhail approached two traps that he had set. There were no signs in the snow indicating the traps, only the red rags on the trees that signaled their presence. However, the wolves seemed to have somehow become aware of the traps concealed under the thick snow. The wolves approached the traps and stopped near them, then turned abruptly to the side and bypassed the traps. Mikhail thought that the wolves could have detected an ultrasonic frequency being emitted from under the snow from the stretched iron springs of the charged traps. Thus, sounds perceivable to a wolf's range of hearing, plus the wolf's sense of smell and perhaps other senses that are weak or absent in humans, evoked caution and avoidance in the wolves. From this point of view, the traps could be perceived as a perceptual and communicative device intermediating in human-animal relations (see also Anderson et al. 2017: 398–418).

Traps, as man-made catching mechanisms, communicate intentionality between the *volchatnik* and wolf, with the latter striving to identify the danger inherent in these objects and the former trying to disguise his intentions from wolves by adjusting the traps according to the wolves' behavioral responses. In this kind of mutual reading, both human and wolf learn from each other's behavior while simultaneously trying to defeat each other. Mikhail described such interspecific communication as "playing chess with the wolves." Similarly, Oehler (2022) discusses human-wolf interactions among Soiot herders and hunters of Oka in the Russian Republic of Buryatia, showing how wolves predict human action sequences learned through repeated observation. Oehler (2015) explains that wolves are able to do that by applying the schema of action adapted from one experience to another. He also suggests that wolves can socially juggle information gleaned not only from their interactions with humans and other species, but also from conspecific socializing, and from contact with (and observation of peers in contact with) inanimate objects such as traps. Elsewhere, Oehler (2022: 151–155) shows how wolves had come to understand the danger associated with the traps made by Soiot and Tofa hunters by identifying the danger of its concealed scheme, and this understanding had outweighed the lure of its unreachable bait (Oehler 2015). The traps known as "wolf cages" are structures of wooden stakes arranged in two circles to form a narrow corridor with the lure inside (ibid.).

To guide the wolves in the direction where traps were set, Mikhail used various parts of game, which he had hunted during his taiga trips, as lures. These could be parts of birds (feathers, legs, wings, and heads), or a fox carcass, or the head of a moose. For instance, to attract wolves with the smell of moose blood, Mikhail walked along a wolf path and dragged a piece of moose meat tied to a rope behind his back. To make a lure on the river ice, he made a hole in the ice and half-submerged a sack filled with the remnants of birds and game animals. The idea was that two-thirds of the sack would freeze under the ice, while the other part would remain on the surface. It would take time for the wolves to dig up the remains from under the ice, so the predators would return many times until some of them, losing their vigilance, were caught in traps set nearby. This idea came to Mikhail while observing wolves that preyed on muskrats by destroying the rodents' lodges built from branches on the ice. He noticed that wolves patiently returned to check if the muskrats had appeared at the site of the destroyed lodge. Thus, watching and learning the habits of wolves, Mikhail used this knowledge to

mislead predators. In response, wolves seemed also to watch humans and learn to recognize human deeds. According to a game manager from the Sakha Republic, some experienced wolves adapted to living near humans by comprehending the pattern of people's behavior and so distinguishing between threatening and non-threatening human actions. Mikhail also noticed that wolves were very suspicious of any new or unusual order of things. For instance, wolves actively visited a place with a lure many times before eventually eating the bait. Even then, however, the bait closest to a trap seemed suspicious to the wolves and they did not touch it at all. Perhaps the wolves, through their lived experience, had become attuned to human signs on the landscape and this made them sensitive to the intentions of hunters.

To conceal the traps from wolves more effectively, Mikhail dug a pit right on top of wolf footprints and put traps over the pit so that the wolf would step deeply into it and be caught securely. Mikhail also put a paper doily on a trap so that the trigger of the catching device would be very sensitive, because the doily allowed a thin layer of snow to be sprinkled to mask the trap. To disguise the traps, Mikhail used a special tool, a carved wooden shovel with a wolverine tail (called *rassomakhin khvost*) attached to the opposite end (see Figure 3). The tool had a double use: to dig a pit in the snow for setting a trap and to wipe out signs of the trap. Mikhail used another tool—a wolf's paw mounted on a long stick—to stamp false wolf footprints, thereby restoring the disturbed wolf tracks so that they were now leading over the traps concealed under the snow. Moreover, to distract the wolves' attention from the traps, he additionally sprinkled wolf urine around, which he had collected in a bottle from the snow in territorial marking points of the wolves. According to the logic of Mikhail, by smelling the urine of a strange wolf, wolves would respond by nervously marking the trees and scratching the ground, instead of carefully examining traps. His skills in perceiving wolf habits were the result of his prolonged engagement in sensitive interactions with wolves. These skills were acquired by means of sensory lived experience, through observing and learning wolf behavior, listening to wolf howls and grunts, touching the imprints of wolves, and connecting with wolves through the traps, knowing their individual characters and being able grasp their intentions.

On the riverside, the wolf tracks continued. Now the wolves had moved toward two snares that Mikhail had set on the wolf path, but it appeared that the wolves had passed the point with the snares by making a loop and suddenly turning toward a huge marsh nearby. The

Figure 3. Wooden shovel with a wolverine tail ("*rassomakhin khvost*"), the Sakha Republic, 2019. Photo by Aivaras Jefanovas.

wolves had spread across the marsh by strangely looping, running back and forth, digging the snow around, and urinating on trees. Mikhail decided to look around carefully, as such behavior from wolves often signaled that something had happened there to make them anxious. Usually, he could recognize from the signs if a wolf had been already caught by a trapping device. Shrubs and small trees would be gnawed and broken by a wolf in the trapping device area, indicating the wolf's struggle. Mikhail noticed that one of two snares had disappeared. It was strange, as there were no gnawed or broken trees nor other obvious signs of a trapped wolf struggle. Mikhail brought a stick with a mounted magnet, a special device he had made to retrieve trapping devices from under the snow, but he found nothing. Furthermore, there were no footprints of humans, moose, or any other big animal that could be blamed for the disappearance of the snare. However, after careful re-examination of the snare place, he noticed one thin stem that had been sharply cut off. Although the stem was barely noticeable, it was a sufficient sign for Mikhail to conclude that the stem had been gnawed by a wolf. The stalk was still fresh and green, indicating a recent event. Further examination of wolf signs—passing through windfalls, squeezing under thick tree branches, and looping through bogs—did not reveal further information. Finally, the footprints led to a cliff, where a few wolves had jumped down and run far away up the river, abandoning the area.

This conundrum with the wolves triggered Mikhail's memory of an old event about a trapped wolf female and her "faithful" male, this narrative revealing his perception of wolves as highly social beings endowed with agency, individuality, and emotions: "A female wolf had gotten caught in one of the traps a year ago. She spent a week trapped alive until she froze to death, but her partner, a wolf male, spent the whole time howling and repeatedly visiting the trapped female until her death." Back then, Mikhail had examined the footprints of the wolf male and had judged his emotional condition, suggesting that the wolf male was very nervous and was scraping the ground everywhere, as well as biting bushes and marking trees and stumps with urine. It seemed to him that the wolf male felt very upset about his female suffering in the trap. As Mikhail put it, such high excitement in wolves shows that they "missed" one of their own. The expression "one of their one" could be paraphrased as "one of ours", which is a phrase often used by local hunters and herders to distinguish others (outsiders) from their fellows or family members. Thus, "one of ours" means someone who is less strange or alien, belonging to a certain group of people.

By adopting a similar notion for the wolves, Mikhail demonstrated his attitude toward the wolf pack as a family unit with close relationships comparable to humans. Many indigenous hunters would explain the behaviors of wolves in anthropomorphic terms, also describing the wolf character as human-like and even calling a wolf male a father, a wolf female a mother, and the cubs children or adolescents.

The story above demonstrates Mikhail's empathy for wolves, which had arisen in response to the impression of the wolf's faithful character, suffering, and strong will to survive. Perhaps by reading the signs of wolves, Mikhail adopted their perspective in order to determine the movement, mood, and behavioral habits of the predators. Therefore, by reading the signs of the wolves and looking from their perspective, the *volchatnik* gains an advantage in comprehending the very next move of the wolves as well as their response to human actions. Thinking-like-a-wolf requires from a *volchatnik* not only emplaced knowledge about animal behavior, but also sensitivity in perceiving the minds of wolves. It seems that while reading the signs of wolves in the snow, Mikhail also saw a human-like drama (wolves suffering in traps), which disturbed him sufficiently to evoke an emotional state similar to that of another non-human person. In fact, much research in psychology has focused on human-animal empathy, arguing that it can apply equivalently to human and animal subjects (see also Angantyr et al. 2011; Signal and Taylor 2007; Eisenberg 1988). However, in these *volchatnik*-wolf relations, the self/other distinction is certainly maintained. Empathy differs from sympathy, which is more about communion and feeling with the other person, whereas empathy is about understanding the other vicariously without losing one's own identity (Bubandt and Willerslev 2015: 5–34). Thus, a *volchatnik* is not necessarily concerned for the wolves, because empathizing with other beings does not mean compassion for them, affection, or a desire to help, but rather a perception of the feelings of the other person through perspective taking (see Brandišauskas 2017: 88; Cuff et al. 2016; Willerslev 2004: 629–652; Chismar 1988). As Nils Bubandt and Rane Willerslev (2015: 5–34) put it, such empathy involves a double movement of the imagination: a stepping into and a stepping back from the perspective of the other, at once an identification with the other and a determined insistence on the other's alterity. In other words, taking the perspective of the other can be a neutral capacity (ibid).

On the other hand, empathy and attitude toward wolves are linked and provide a bridge between the self and other beings. The feeling of connectedness to certain behaviors of wolves that resemble

bravery, stamina, fidelity, or strong will also evokes a sense of respect for wolves. Therefore, Mikhail always spoke of wolves with deep respect for their great power, craftiness, and intellect. Furthermore, in the Sakha Republic, most of the *volchatniki* of Eveny and Sakha origin consider that the right way to bury the corpses of hunted wolves is to place them above the ground on wooden poles stretched between trees, but never to discard killed wolves as garbage. Overall, elevated burials for animals demonstrate deep respect equal to that shown to the human dead. Up until recent years, some indigenous people of Eastern Siberia traditionally placed their deceased on a wooden platform with the head toward the east (see Brandišauskas 2017: 219; Alekseev 1993: 19–23). Moreover, disrespectful treatment of hunted wolves would be considered by the *volchatniki* as a violation of taiga ethics, which could lead to general misfortunes and the withdrawal of luck in future hunts.

For Mikhail, respect and empathy for wolves did not prevent him from killing them. The killing of a wolf was understood as part of the life-death cycle in which eventually everyone takes part. Often, the wolves' desperate attempts to survive could be also treated by *volchatniki* as a sign to leave that wolf alive. For instance, a wolf once managed to free himself repeatedly from traps that Mikhail had set, but the wolf did not leave the area; his tracks were still seen around. Although Mikhail could have set traps again to try to kill the wolf, he did not; rather, he just waved his hands and said: "He is not ours, let's leave him free." Seemingly, Mikhail was not so ambitious that he would eliminate the wolf at any cost, because he did not perceive this as being about his personal ambition, but rather about the wolf's right and success to survive.

Wolf hunting and rituals: *volchatnik* Grigorii

Many *volchatniki* see wolf hunting as an extraordinary mission that, if necessary, can be accomplished by those who possess a specific power alongside the technical skills and knowledge necessary to hunt wolves. One of them is a Grigorii, a 50-year-old *volchatnik* who has a strong scientific background in biology as well as experience as a former game manager during the post-Soviet years in the Sakha Republic. When working at the Institute of Biology of the Sakha Republic, he applied animal biotelemetry to investigate the behaviors and migrations of wolves and bears. Grigorii applied his professional knowledge in the field of animal behavior to the hunting of wolves. This made

him a successful *volchatnik* quite well known in the Sakha Republic. Apart from his biological perspective, Grigorii also adhered firmly to a notion which is common among the Eveny, Evenki, and Sakha: that a *volchatnik* is predetermined by the spirit-master of animals and landscape, called the *Baianai*[5] in the Sakha Republic. From this perspective, a hunter—somewhat like a shaman[6] —is chosen by the spirits to become a *volchatnik*, inheriting such power from his kin. Grigorii claimed that his ancestors, the Sakha people from the central parts of the Sakha Republic, were prominent predator hunters. He, like his ancestors, used to help local people to solve problems with wolves, especially when livestock predation was becoming a critical issue to peoples' subsistence. Grigorii believed that he inherited from his father and grandfather a high sensibility and intuition that enabled him to better perceive predators. Grigorii was confident that he, like his kin, had magic power to fight wolves and also bears. He characterized this power as follows:

> Wolves recognize the predator killer in me, they understand it. On my arrival on the taiga, wolves are terrified, trying not to show themselves, refraining from attacks on livestock, hiding or fleeing out. While hunting wolves, I strive to keep hidden, to avoid leaving my prints and scent and to not even urinate wherever possible. When in the taiga, I even change my boots to mislead wolves, otherwise they would flee.

Underlining the importance of the given power to kill predators, Grigorii explained that it is dangerous for ordinary people to embark on wolf hunting, as the wolves may harm humans by taking revenge on them with misfortune, disease, or the loss of livestock. Similar to Grigorii, many indigenous Eveny and Evenki hunters and reindeer herders believe that wolves can trace a certain wolf hunter and attack his livestock, killing the animals in excess and discarding the carcasses. Eveny locals also claimed that some wolf hunters had almost gone bankrupt because wolves had destroyed almost all their livestock out of revenge. Moreover, Eveny hunters argued that if one was going for wolves, he had to be able to destroy the whole pack, so that no predator could take revenge. If the hunter did not kill the wolf female, it was better not to touch the den with her cubs, because the mother wolf definitely would devastate livestock in exchange. Therefore, the Eveny and Evenki locals preferred to entrust the killing of wolves to the *volchatniki*, who did not keep livestock or at least came from another district so that the wolves could not track them down and take revenge. Grigorii believed that killing wolves was not as risky for him as it would be

for others, because the spirits, along with his special abilities to deal with predators, had given him protection against the vengeful actions of wolves.

Grigorii participated in one pursuit of wolves in the vicinity of a village located on the bank of the Bytantai river in the Verkhoianskii Range of the northern Sakha Republic, where massive livestock predation by wolves had taken place, and that event resonated prominently among local inhabitants (predominantly Eveny) during the time of our research. We find this case noteworthy to consider in the context of *volchatnik*-wolf inter-subjective relations based on intimacy, sensitivity, and mutual reading of signs.

As a background to this event, wolves had attacked the livestock of indigenous inhabitants, destroying about twenty horses and over forty cattle. As owners usually take their horses from the taiga to the outskirts of the village in early summer, nobody knew exactly how many horses were predated by the wolves, because during the cold period of the year, horses are let free to graze on their own on the taiga. In this case, some villagers thought that their horses were still grazing on the taiga until wolf hunters later found horse carcasses killed by wolves. Able to withstand extremely low Arctic temperatures, the endemic breed of cattle, *Sakha Ynaga*, are also grazed semi-freely in the village surroundings, and the specific habit of these cattle of grazing in forested areas seems to make them vulnerable to frequent and destructive wolf attacks. According to contacts from the village, some of the cattle were torn to pieces with flesh removed and bones visible, while others were gutted with their intestines protruding from their bellies. People were concerned not only about the economic damage caused by the predation of livestock, but also because of the emotional impact the wolves had on people. Villagers could not believe that wolves had been so fearless as to approach the village so close and, in some cases, kill cows almost "under the windows" of the houses. At first, people even mistakenly thought that dogs had attacked the cattle, as dogs were found feeding on the remnants during the day, while the wolves had attacked unseen during the night. Only later did cattle owners understand that the livestock had been destroyed by wolves. This situation disturbed residents of the village so much that they demanded that the village authorities take measures against the wolves.

On many occasions, various local and city hunters invited by the village authorities tried to fight the wolves. However, even after spending months there, the hunters did not succeed in trapping the predators; instead, livestock predation intensified. The wolves figured out that

they were being pursued and, according to the villagers, that made the wolves eager for revenge. Trusting Grigorii's reputation as a prominent hunter of predators, the village authorities asked him to solve the problem with the wolves. Grigorii himself tended to believe that the master-spirit of the locality dwelling in the mountains, forest, or river might have sent the wolves to prey upon the livestock of villagers to punish the people for their wrongdoing, that is, for disregarding rituals dedicated to honoring the spirits for their generosity in giving game or securing the livestock. Grigorii considered that wolves usually had enough natural prey to subsist on the taiga. He saw it as a strange fact that, after many years of coexisting peacefully, wolves suddenly started to kill so much livestock. Such observations made Grigorii cautious and scrupulous in his every step; thus, upon his arrival at the village, the *volchatnik* performed a ritual to honor the master-spirits. If someone arrives in an unfamiliar place where he was not born, he is a stranger in that area and must make offerings to enter into a relationship with the master-spirit of that locality. Otherwise, the spirit could become furious and the hunter would not succeed in anything there, especially when hunting such crafty predators as wolves.

It was April already in the Verkhoianskii Range, but the snow was still deep and nights were cold, making it convenient to track the wolves with a snowmobile. Grigorii asked for the help of two local hunters from the village to guide him toward the paths of the wolves, as the locals knew it well. However, unexpected events took place—one man died in the village, and all his fellow hunters attended the funeral and drank vodka to toast the deceased. For Grigorii, the hunting of wolves is a highly sensitive act full of risks connected with the revenge of wolves as well as the master-spirits. Thus, the event in the village was a bad omen auguring bad luck for hunting predators. Furthermore, following customs in the Sakha Republic, one needed to refrain from hunting for forty days after a funeral. To avoid bad fortune, Grigorii decided to go to the taiga without assistants, taking a sketch of a map with the wolf paths marked by the local hunters. Grigorii also asked locals not to follow him. In the evening, reaching day-old wolf footprints, the *volchatnik* decided to settle into a log cabin in the taiga. The wolves settled for a night in a valley near where Grigorii was staying, so it was a good chance to inspect their movements and then obtain the wolves on the next day. Usually, Grigorii carefully examined the network of wolf paths to identify the core area most frequently visited by wolves, and other paths branching from it. From reading the wolves' marks, their behavioral activity, and their habits of moving, resting, hunting,

and playing, he identified the individuals and the hierarchical order among them. The mature experienced wolves leading the pack were Grigorii's priority targets, as the younger wolves without the guidance of the adults would usually scatter in panic and easily fall into traps.

The visual information he gleaned from the landscape, showing the wolves' preferences for movement, were built into a mental map in Grigorii's mind, enabling him to see the area from a bird's eye perspective, like a chessboard with possible actions. Grigorii trusted his ability to sense which point in the landscape, both temporally and spatially, to choose for setting traps. Doing so, sometimes it was enough for him to set just one trap to catch a wolf. Wolf hunting depends largely on the *volchatnik's* ability to anticipate the wolves' responses, which become dynamic as the hunter interacts with the wolves. The sooner the wolves were able to recognize Grigorii as a *volchatnik*, the harder it would be for him to obtain the fleeing wolves, so the *volchatnik* would hide his intentions from wolves as much as possible. While on the move during the wolf hunt, Grigorii remained on the snowmobile most of the time, avoiding walking so as to not leave any marks on the snow. When stepping into the snow was unavoidable, especially when setting traps, Grigorii used various practices to hide his footprints from wolves, for instance by pouring snow from a sack onto his tracks while walking backward toward his snowmobile.

In the evening, unexpectedly for Grigorii, a group of local hunters from the village approached the cabin to participate in the wolf hunting and to observe the practice that Grigorii applied. Grigorii got furious, scolding the hunters for doing everything wrong, as the people had sinned by violating funeral customs and, thus, had not only disturbed the intimacy of the wolf hunt, but were also attracting misfortune. Grigorii asked them not to walk from the log cabin, not to cough or make noise, and not to shoot at all. However, the wolves, interpreting the signs of the hunters' presence, had figured out that they were being persecuted and fled. In the daylight, Grigorii noticed that the wolves had moved up to the cliff to observe the hunters' movements. Hunting wolves in mountainous areas is challenging, as the predators keep an eye on people who set traps; therefore Grigorii had to mislead the wolves. Taking a glance through the wolves' eyes, Grigorii supposed that if he and the other hunters stayed, the wolves would move forward, but if they went further, then the wolves would remain, feeling safe. Thus, the *volchatnik* moved with everyone to the nearest settlement a further 40 km away, so that the wolves would think that the people had all left. Grigorii returned alone the next morning, expecting that

the wolves would have stayed at the same place and he could go on with the intimate hunt. However, the predators seemed to have sensed the disguised intention of the man hunting them and had fled via the frozen Bytantai river toward the Verkhoianskii mountain range, where it was impossible to obtain the wolves.

From the moment that the *volchatnik's* attempt to obtain the wolves had intersected with the response of the predators to flee, both parties sought to figure out the next move of the other. Wolves were inspecting the actions of humans by reading prints, sniffing around, and watching from above, while in the meantime the *volchatnik* tried to imagine how the wolves might perceive the pursuit. Grigorii explained that looking from the position of a wolf and thinking ahead of the wolf is an important feature of the *volchatnik* that determines the outcome of the hunt. Both parties were involved in an intimate connection, even as they remained at a physical distance. The actual bodies did not meet at a given time and place, but nevertheless the subjects engaged in connection via mutual interpretation of non-verbal signs, which intermediated the communication. For instance, Juna Salazar Parreñas (2016: 120), in discussing forms of intimacy with non-human animals, noted that the effects of bodies can stand in for actual bodies, creating intimacies that can be as powerful as those that emerge through physical contact between bodies. Severine Van Bommel and Susan Boonman-Berson (2022) also discussed the distant interaction with wolves as being with "partial wolf elements" (footprints, wolf droppings, howls), while the body of the tracker becomes the tool enabling them to attune to the wolves by means of senses. Pieces of information gleaned through the mutual reading of signs became a "living narrative" that embraced the corresponding movements of the *volchatnik* and wolves on the landscape, rather than being a static projection of the presence of the body. However, the intimacy in the wolf hunt was disturbed by the arriving hunters, who left too many signs of their activity that the wolves could easily read. Moreover, distracted from the sensory reading of the wolves, Grigorii could not retain his connection with them, and this also hindered his ability to hide his intention from the predators.

As the ordinary practice of wolf hunting did not work, Grigorii decided to change his tactic by performing a ritual to make sure the wolves never returned to the village and did not attack livestock. The point of such a magic technique was to establish a boundary in a narrow crevice in the river valley so that no wolf would ever cross it and reach the village. Grigorii ritually established a line between the ridges on both sides of the river Bytantai and additionally set two snares on each

side of the river. If the wolves still tried to cross the line, they would be driven by magic power directly into the snares.

The hunting ritual itself was not simply inherited by Grigorii. Although his ancestors had been doing rituals against predators for generations, Grigorii also had an intuition for how it should be performed. Each ritual against wolves was unique depending on the particular place and the circumstances. Grigorii explained that a magic technique worked similarly to an individual amulet (*obereg*), protecting a person from the bad intentions of others. To illustrate how an amulet protects a person, Grigorii gave an example of a thief: "If a thief sees a wealthy-looking man he will consider robbing this rich man. However, if that person wears an amulet charged with a protective spirit, the thief's consciousness will be affected by the dispersal of his bad intentions." Thus, a thief, though eager to rob that rich man, would not be able to do so, because the amulet would not allow the thief to focus his thoughts on the action, causing him to feel confused. Similarly, shamans perform powerful rituals against certain illnesses and, likewise, there are also shamanistic rituals to protect cattle from diseases as well as from predator attacks (see also Alekseev 2008: 149–172; Popov 2006: 164–188). By the same logic, if a wolf's attention is diverted by a protective ritual when approaching to attack cattle, the wolf will be driven away from the livestock. In this sense, the ritual against wolves distracts the minds of the predators. The magic power guards the borders on the river in order to not let wolves pass through, and at the same time deflects the minds of the predators from attacking the cattle in the village. Based on the *volchatnik's* logic, if the wolves tried to cross the line, then the magic power would lure the predators right into the traps. Grigorii thought that this was exactly what happened—according to the locals from the village, the intense predation of livestock by wolves did not occur again following Grigorii's hunting ritual. However, nobody from the village knew the exact fate of those wolves, as people did not check the snares since they were set in a place known only to Grigorii. Moreover, Grigorii did not return to the village to check on his snares since the wolves' predation in the village decreased significantly.

From the perspective of the *volchatnik*, the unusually intense predation of livestock by the wolves, as well as the elusiveness of the predators, were perceived as a sign of the power of spirits directed to punishing people in the village for their wrongdoings. Thus, the wolves were viewed from the dual perspective of being agents acting on behalf of the *Baianai* master-spirit, and also as subjective and intentional actors by themselves. Similarly, Bernard Charlier (2015: 105–166) depicted the

perception of the wolf by Mongolian hunters as a complex of signs, the wolf as the authoritative supernatural messenger, the omen indicating a period of either good fortune and generosity or malevolence and also punishment. He showed Mongolian hunters' attitudes toward the wolf as the dog of the spirit-master, the owner of the game (ibid.: 29–55). The master-spirit can send his wolves to eat livestock and punish people for defying various prohibitions, while only meritorious hunters can be granted permission by the spirit to obtain game (ibid). Meanwhile, the extraordinary situation with the wolves in the surroundings of the village in the Verkhoianskii Range of the northern part of the Sakha Republic required a specific way to deal with it. The wolves, driven by the spirits, could be fought by a special person, a predator hunter who had the ability to apply extraordinary methods such as hunting magic. Other wolf hunters who applied the usual methods in wolf trapping did not succeed. In a given situation, the pursuit of wolves was more than an ordinary hunt; it demanded from the *volchatnik* not only intimate involvement in relations with wolves, but also with the landscape and the spirits. From the given perspective, the magic technique applied against the wolves can be seen as an even deeper involvement and connectedness of the *volchatnik* with the landscape, and perhaps this intuitively hinted at the possible path of wolf movement on the taiga. Foreseeing wolf behavior, habits, and intentions, as well as perceiving the features of the landscape at the sensory level, eventually enabled Grigorii to properly set trapping devices and catch the wolves.

Conclusion

In this article, we presented two ethnographic illustrations that reflect, as far as our ethnographic research scope allows, the spectrum of approaches that contemporary wolf hunters, the *volchatniki*, engage in during wolf extermination in the post-Soviet environment. The profession of the *volchatnik* that existed in Soviet times as a prestigious and financially supported state position was disbanded due to the collapse of the centralized economic system. During Soviet times, wolf hunters could use any means for wolf extermination, with poisons and helicopter flights for wolf shooting being particularly effective. Furthermore, wolf hunters were organized by game management authorities into brigades and conducted constant seasonal extermination of predators across the republic. Along with the dissolution of the Soviet state, systematic wolf population control endeavors ceased to exist. At present,

any wolf management endeavors in the Sakha Republic rely mostly on the efforts of local communities and individual hunters and livestock herders, as well as to some degree on state support. Knowledgeable and well-known wolf hunters, as well as taiga-based skillful reindeer herders and hunters, have become the main players involved in wolf management in different parts of the vast Sakha Republic. While the state and local municipal administrations provide bounties for wolf extermination endeavors, nevertheless wolf management lacks a systematic and well-organized approach. Contemporary *volchatniki* aim to eliminate wolves locally and rely mostly on their self-crafted technologies and deep knowledge of wolves as persons with extraordinary sensitivities and abilities to respond to human endeavors and intentions, as well as extraordinary survival abilities. Wolves as self-conscious and intentional beings also observe the *volchatnik's* actions and learn how to read the signs of human activity. The hunting of wolves can hardly be understood without intimate sensory interplay, which can be perceived as intersubjective communication enacted between humans and wolves. The effectiveness in trap-setting depends largely on the abilities of the *volchatniki* to read the activity signs of wolves, enabling them to perceive their intentions and predict their very next move, while also observing and learning of individual wolf habits over extended periods of time and constantly rethinking strategies of hunting wolves. In this context, the traps can be considered the intermediators of inter-subjective communication based on multiple senses between wolves and *volchatniki*.

In the article, we showed that wolf hunting relies on the *volchatnik's* aim to perceive wolf mood, emotions, character, behavior, and intentions and thereby gain an advantage when hunting the animal. If in the Soviet past the wolves were mainly exterminated via less personal means, using helicopters and poisons, today such hunting involves deep interpersonal interactions, embracing empathy and sometimes facing the risk that the *volchatnik* will get a response from revenging wolves or their master-spirit. Prolonged inter-subjective human-wolf interaction also affects how *volchatniki* start to recognize wolves personally, also respecting their strong will to survive and restraining from persecution of some individual wolves. In this context, animistic assumptions of non-human agencies play an important role in wolf hunting and is combined with technological advances. Therefore, a clear-cut division can be hardly made between indigenous and non-indigenous methods and approaches in wolf hunting in the Sakha Republic context. The employment of technological advantages can be seen as a *volchatnik*

response to "modern wolves" who have developed their own extraordinary survival abilities; in such interactions, good luck is still needed. These interpersonal interactions based on reading and interpreting each other's intentions and subsequently attuning their responses also shapes the *volchatniki's* understanding of wolves as being part of the shared landscapes, in which their personal duty is to bring balance to it and punish greedy wolves, rather than seeking the full eradication of wolves.

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Notes

1. In order to guarantee their privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity, the true names of both *volchatniki* were replaced by Russian names that are common in the Sakha Republic. Other than those mentioned, contacts in this article are simply referred to as hunters, reindeer herders, and villagers. This generalization is used in order to preserve anonymity.

2. The collapse of the Soviet state gave rise to the indigenous clan community-based enterprises called *obshchiny*, which are usually understood in the Sakha Republic as an alternative to the former state agricultural collective enterprises (*sovkhozy*) based on livestock breeding as well as hunting. *Obshchiny* organize the distribution of reindeer products and provide a salary for the members working as herders and hunters. Economically, *obshchiny* mostly depend on government subsidies that are based on the number of reindeer heads within each herd, and the government grants rights to long-term leasing of livestock pastures.

3. *Volchatniki* who signed a volunteer agreement with the Ministry of Ecology, Nature Management and Forestry of the Sakha Republic for wolf regulation did not receive an official salary from the government.

4. Officially, moose hunting in Soviet Yakutia was strictly controlled by the state game management authority, because most of the moose meat was supplied by hunters to meet government demands. According to a Sakha hunter, there was an unspoken practice in Soviet times for a hunter to deliver to the game management authority more moose than was officially demanded. Although the pay for such a job was miserly, hunters were unofficially allowed (by the game management authority) to take some meat of the moose. Furthermore, in return for good hunting results, moose hunters were given moose licenses for personal disposal—this was a privilege in Soviet times as moose licenses were always in short supply. As meat was in high demand in Soviet times, hunters in Yakutia used it as a kind of currency for bartering, for example to exchange for fuel or to offer to officials in exchange for a favorable decision in personal deals.

5. Eveny, Evenki, and Sakha perceive *Baianai* (also called the *khoziain mestnosti*) as the spirit-master, an entity dwelling in the landscape, who owns the wild animals and shares game with hunters (see also Alekseev 2008: 49–71). Hunters and herders in the north of the Sakha Republic believe that *Baianai* can be benevolent or malevolent to people, by bringing luck or misfortune, illness or even death, depending on the established relations between a human and *Baianai*. When going hunting, people usually feed the fire with a piece of meat, tobacco, or tea, asking *Baianai* for success. After successful hunting, a hunter also must say thanks to *Baianai* by throwing a piece of the meat of the prey into the fire or sprinkling a capful of vodka. According to Vitebsky (2005: 261–263), who conducted research with Eveny reindeer herders/hunters living in the northern part of the Sakha Republic, the Eveny hunter's success in killing a wild animal depended on whether *Baianai* decided to give an animal or withhold it, to place it in the hunter's path or send it off in another direction.

6. Many Sakha people believe that only persons chosen by spirits can become true shamans (see Alekseev 2008: 126–128). It is also believed in the Sakha Republic that shamanic power is transmitted through the kin line from generation to generation; thus a person cannot become a shaman if he has no ancestor shaman (see also Ksenofontov 1992: 86–87).

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