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A new predator in Switzerland

Switzerland first picked up the trail of the golden jackal ten years ago. We now know that this fox-like predator has taken a particular liking to protected Swiss wetlands. But as jackals start to arrive, other mammal species are being driven out of the country.

MIREILLE GUGGENBÜHLER

A hunter in the Surselva district of the canton of Grisons pointed his rifle, then pulled the trigger. He thought he had killed a fox, but the dead animal was a male golden jackal.

This incident happened five years ago. The hunter contacted the authorities once he realised his error, said the canton of Grisons when it went public with the news. Golden jackals are a protected species. Technically, it is illegal to kill them. Nevertheless, the accident provided the first-ever concrete, physical evidence of the animal in Switzerland.

From the Balkans to Switzerland

That the Grisons hunter failed to recognise the animal's identity immediately is frankly unsurprising, given that golden jackals have more than a passing resemblance to foxes. They are about the same size as foxes but have shorter tails and longer legs. The colour of their fur ranges from gold to grey.

The long-legged golden jackal is the only jackal subspecies native to Europe. It originally inhabited Asia and the Middle East before moving to the Balkan region during the last century. The extirpation of wolves from the Balkans meant that golden jackals eventually had no natural enemies left and could breed unhindered (wolves dominate jackals).

Hence, jackal numbers are very high in the Balkans. Golden jackals live in family packs. However, young jackals are eventually driven away

and must stake out their own territory in order to start a family. Due to dense jackal populations, it has become hard for these younger members of the species to find fresh hunting grounds. Young males, in particular, are consequently venturing into new areas and covering great distances doing so.

This is why the golden jackal has continued to expand westwards from the Balkans as far as Switzerland. A camera trap took a picture of a golden jackal in Switzerland back in 2011, while a second piece of photographic evidence was captured just before the incident in Grisons.

Switzerland mainly a destination for young males

The images, along with genetic data and reports of jackal sightings, are kept on the computers of the carnivore ecology and wildlife management foundation KORA in Muri (canton of Berne). Based on this documentation, KORA managing director Christian Stauffer says: "Only young, very mobile males have found their way to Switzerland to date." KORA collected seven pieces of photographic or genetic evidence in 2020. There were also some 16 sightings or other traces found.

It is actually astonishing that golden jackals have settled in Switzerland at all, given that their potential habitat in the country is less than ideal. "After all, golden jackals have come from warmer regions and are ill adapted to areas that are covered in snow for long periods," says Stauffer.

Jackal paws are not made for walking in snow either. Their size in proportion to body mass is smaller than that of fox paws, hence they tend to sink into the snow.

Switzerland's high human population density could make it difficult for the golden jackal to find an ideal habitat, says Reinhard Schnidrig, who heads the wildlife conservation section at the Federal Office for the Environment. Nevertheless, even the mountainous and densely populated areas of the country offer spaces in which the animal could well feel at home. Stauffer believes that reed-bed areas are perfect – such as those on the edge of Lake Neuchâtel, where evidence of golden jackals has already been found. Other protected wetland areas such as Kaltbrunner Riet (canton of St. Gallen) have also seen jackal activity. "Switzerland actually has several such areas where I could very well imagine the golden jackal raising offspring one day," says Schnidrig. But the males would have to find a mate first. And this could still take a while, because female golden jackals are yet to arrive. According to Schnidrig, the expansion of mammal populations tends to be male-driven. "The males normally set off first. The females eventually follow."

Is climate change a factor?

Exploding jackal populations in the Balkans are one of the reasons why the species has expanded to Switzerland. Another factor could be climate change and rising temperatures in the



otherwise colder, snowy regions of countries like Switzerland. However, Christian Stauffer believes that the role of climate change in the spread of the golden jackal is unproven. There are no studies to back the theory up either.

Twelve new mammal species in Switzerland

The golden jackal is not the only new mammal in Switzerland. Last spring

Golden jackal sightings are on the rise in Switzerland.

Photo: Keystone

saw the biggest-ever survey of mammals in the country. According to the Swiss Society of Wildlife Biology, which conducted the survey, there are now 12 more recorded species in Switzerland than there were 25 years ago. Other than the golden jackal, these include the Valais shrew (*Sorex antinorii*) and a type of bat called the cryptic myotis (*Myotis crypticus*). Previously eradicated species like the wolf and the otter have also returned to Switzerland.

Taller, longer legs, smaller tail: the golden jackal compared to the fox.

Photo: Keystone

Commenting on its survey, the Swiss Society of Wildlife Biology says that while large species like the golden jackal, the wolf and the ibex attract a great deal of attention, smaller mammals tend to get minimal coverage. Some of these species are coming under increasing pressure. For example, polecat and weasel numbers are falling. And hare habitats are shrinking too. “Hares now have barely any chance of raising their young properly in many places around the country,” says Schnidrig. Species with specific habitat requirements are generally having a hard time in Switzerland, but animals that can handle various conditions are faring well, he concludes. Time will tell how the golden jackal copes in Swiss climes.

