

UK

Twite delight

RSPB recovery plan sows seeds to safeguard the bird's future.

The future of the twite, one of England's most endangered birds, is now more secure following the success of a rescue action plan.

In 2002, the RSPB launched Twite Aid following the discovery that, in the past 10 years, numbers of this upland bird had fallen by 50 per cent in the South Pennines, the only place in England where it still breeds.

RSPB researchers identified that the reason for the twite's decline lay in its specialised diet. "Along with the linnet, the twite is the only



Modern farming practices have reduced the twite's seed source.

British bird that feeds entirely on

SWITZERLAND

Farmers cry foul over wolves

Return to Swiss Alps after 100 years reawakens age-old hostility between man and predator.

Hunters in southern Switzerland have vowed to kill any wolves they encounter, in defiance of international laws protecting the animals following their return to the country a century after being hunted to extinction there.

Up to 10 wolves have re-entered the south-western Swiss Alps in recent years. They are thought to have come from the central Italian region of Abruzzo and followed a 500km 'green corridor' that passes along the Appennini mountain range.

Hunters say the re-emergence of wolves in the cantons of Valais, Ticino and Graubünden represents a grave new danger to domestic farm animals and wildlife.

Marco Mondada, president of the Hunter's Federation of Ticino, believes wolf numbers should be closely monitored and that farmers' interests should not be put at unnecessary risk by the animals which, he claims, hunt for fun and not only for food.

"There are lots of sheep which graze without shepherds, and wolves



make this more difficult," he said.

The Valais-based Committee Against the Wolf has gone further, issuing a statement warning that its prime objective was to inform livestock farmers of the consequences of wolf re-colonisation and to promote its elimination.

But environmentalists and WWF argue that alternatives need to be fully exhausted before any wolves – which are protected under the 1979 Bern Convention, which outlawed their killing except on grounds of

Electric fences (above) and more guard dogs may offer a solution to farmers' concerns that Alpine wolves hunt for fun and food.



extensive damage to livestock and public safety – are killed.

"We need to experiment with alternatives, such as fences, protective dogs and increased shepherding," said WWF forestry engineer Joanna Schoenberger. "Protective dogs are believed to stop wolf attacks," she said.

Last winter, a series of attacks near Faido in northern Ticino – believed to have been the actions of a solitary wolf –

left nine of farmer Otavio Cotti-Cottini's 110-strong dairy goat herd dead.

Schoenberger and other WWF volunteers helped Cotti-Cottini construct a protective electric fence to guard his herd of alpine goats, and an observation worker from the Centre for the Protection of Herds has monitored the training of two new Abruzzese 'protection' dogs. But Cotti-Cottini remains sceptical.

THE EURO WOLF

WWF estimates that there may be between 15,000 and 18,000 wolves in Europe, including Russia, west of the Ural Mountains. The US-based International Wolf Center has surveyed wolf populations in western and eastern Europe.

Czech Republic Population of between 20 and 30 animals.

France Up to 15 animals.

Germany Possibly only 10, with numbers decreasing.

Greece Up to 500, though numbers in decline.

Hungary Stable population of between 30 and 50.

Italy Increasing population of between 200 and 400.

Poland Population of up to 1,100.

Romania Up to 2,500 but hunting still permitted.

Slovenia Up to 100.

Switzerland Up to 10 wolves in borders.

IN BRIEF

DRC Illegal settlers have cleared 1,500 hectares of prime mountain gorilla habitat in Virunga National Park, according to the Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature. Virunga, home to more than half of the remaining 700 mountain gorillas, is a World Heritage Site located in the Democratic Republic of Congo. WWF says the forest was turned into timber and charcoal and crops planted, reducing the gorillas' breeding area and limiting their main sources of food. The gorillas bring in US\$2m a year through tourism to the region. More at www.panda.org

UK A colony of 83 water voles has been released in Bristol's Portbury Docks by wildlife officers from Bristol Zoo Gardens. The move is part of a project to increase numbers of this rare mammal and follows a successful earlier release of 70 voles in the same area. A range of threats, including habitat loss and poisoning, has seen vole populations drop by 90 per cent across the UK in the past seven years. More at www.bristolzoo.org.uk



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