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It says so right there in their name, Irish **wolf**hounds. Our lovable giants once hunted wolves. But what does it actually mean to hunt tenacious, wily apex predators? Why was the Irish wolfhound so keenly in demand throughout Europe in the Middle Ages? And why was Ireland once known as "Wolf Land"? Let's dig deeper....

I met a wolf once. It was behind an iron fence at an Appalachian festival. It was a big grey wolf and it locked eyes with me. I was staggered by the ferocious intelligence beaming back at me. The second time I saw eyes like that was in Oona, my wolfhound diva. But in her case, the intelligence and wild independence were mingled with sparkles of affection. Between those two sets of eyes, there's a story.

Man and wolf's histories are intertwined.

Wolf remains in County Cork, Ireland, have been dated to [34,000 b.c.](#) Humans first came to Ireland around 8,000 b.c. and wherever man went on the island afterward — and throughout Europe —there was the wolf, lurking on the fringes, stalking him, culling his livestock, and now and then attacking and killing man himself. They haunt our memories and our myths. When a fairy tale introduces a wolf, it's usually preceded by the words "big" and "bad." To many, the wolf was a symbol of evil and ill intent.

Things were different in Ireland, where the Gaels lived a mostly rural lifestyle later than their European neighbors. They remained more in harmony with the land. The Celts associated wolves with Belenus, the god of light. One of the Gaelic words for wolf means "son of the earth."

While Charlemagne was organizing the first big wolf hunts in France in 800 A.D., Irish Brehon law listed wolves as one of the kinds of pets whose owner was due compensation if someone harmed it.

The Irish respected the wolf and in many cases, befriended it. But they couldn't control wild wolves, so they built ring forts to protect their livestock after dark. And, when necessary, they brought out their secret weapon, the Irish wolfhound, who was not territorial but would protect his humans and loved a good fight.

Brehon law required those who rented farmland to keep wolfhounds and be available for wolf hunts organized by the land owner. But the Irish hunts weren't as extensive and destructive as their counterparts on the continent, where kings were clearing entire forests to eradicate wolves and create royal game reserves.

On A Collision Course.

Forest clearings, urbanization and population growth in Europe created an ecological catastrophe in the 1400s, when wolf attacks on humans leapt. Between 1362 and 1918, 4,600 humans were killed by wolves in Europe, according to records compiled by French historian Jean-Marc Moriceau.

In the winter of 1450, Paris itself was [invaded by wolves](#).

France was in the midst of the brutal Hundred Years War, the countryside was ravaged, deer and wild boar were scarce and wolves were starving. The walls of Paris had fallen into disrepair and in slipped an entire pack of hungry wolves. Forty Parisians were eventually slain and eaten before mobs drove the wolves to the steps of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, where they speared and stoned them to death.

The Reign of the Lord Protector.

The Irish continued to coexist with wolves and the land until Oliver Cromwell invaded Ireland in 1649 and began to lay waste. His troops and the destruction of crops led to the deaths of 600,000 native Irish. Then he turned his attention to the land itself, destroying thousands of acres of forest for crops to maximize profits for the English. When Irish wolves fought back, Cromwell organized massive wolf drives, brought in scores of professional wolf hunters and placed a sizable bounty on wolf pelts.

And he banned the exportation of the Irish wolfhound.

Once renowned war dogs, wolfhounds begun a second career in the Middle Ages — wolf hunter extraordinaire. The hounds were bigger, smarter and stronger than wolves. Kings and their courts throughout the continent clamored for them. As early as 400 A.D., wolfhounds were being shipped to buyers in Europe. As a teenage slave escaping from Ireland, St. Patrick fled aboard a ship packed

with wolfhounds.

Cromwell banned their sale overseas and passed laws requiring every village and hamlet to keep wolfhounds to kill wolves.

Adventures in Wolf Land.

Wolves in England and Scotland had been completely wiped out when the English colonized Northern Ireland with thousands of lowland Scots, who along with English settlers, were alarmed to find the Emerald Isle swarming with wolves, which they hadn't seen for more than 100 years back home. They quickly dubbed Ireland "Wolf Land." Slaughter commenced. In 1786 in County Carlow, the last known wolf in Ireland was killed as it attacked a herd of sheep.

A Very Dangerous Game.

Old World grey wolves weighed about 85 pounds on the average and stood as tall as 33 inches at the withers. But some ranged up to 175 pounds or more.

Today's grey wolves remain terrible foes, as the owners of hunting hounds found out during bear season last year in Wisconsin, where wolves have been reestablished. Bear season coincides with wolves mating season, when they are the most ferociously protective of their turf. More than 40 hounds were killed by Wisconsin wolves last year.

Wolves are highly-skilled stalkers and the pack acts as a unit to track and draw the noose around its prey, most often herd animals like deer and elk. But in mating season, when pups are in the den, they saw the bear dogs as a threat, masterfully stalked them, waited until they were isolated and caught them by surprise.

Wolf advocate Shaun Ellis, who has lived among wolves, says that from several meters away, wolves use their uncannily powerful

hearing to monitor their prey's heartbeat, know when it is petrified with fear and then go in for the kill.

The biting capacity of a wolf is 398 pounds of pressure per square inch, enough to crush the femur of an adult moose.

It's no wonder that most dogs will instinctively flee at the first whiff of wolf scent. But not the Irish wolfhound.

Many of today's wolfhound owners see their dogs as lovable couch potatoes, but genetically, they are still sighthounds with high prey drives, the largest of the galloping hounds. And the wolfhounds of yesteryear used those traits regularly to terrible effect.

While wolves hunt and fight in packs, wolfhounds are solitary fighters, even when accompanied by others of their kind on a hunt. Like the Celts themselves, they prefer one-on-one challenges to coordinated warfare.

What was a wolfhound-wolf fight like? Watch two wolfhounds at "play." One runs, the other courses alongside it and then pounces on the neck of the other with its huge jaws. Today's wolfhound owners are familiar with the "thunder paw," a terrific slap from a hound's front paws. They likely used those in battle to stagger and addle a wolf before closing in with their jaws.

A wolfhound could outrun a wolf and, despite the wolves' formidable strength and bite, overpower it and kill it. Some wolfhounds were likely hurt, crippled or killed during the ferocity of wolf hunts, but they prevailed more often than not, making them the most coveted hunting hound in all of Europe.

Until the day when there were no more wolves to fight.