

Wolves in the French Alps

Lessons in acceptance • Troy Bennett

Troy Bennett has worked in the French Alps for 18 years. He has studied wolves in France, Romania, Poland and Portugal. His studies include tracking, radio telemetry, prey and scat analysis, kill-site analysis, territory mapping and howl surveys.

The Massif du Monge

is situated where the Alps become the high Alps, not far from the border of France and Italy. It rises to 2115 metres above sea level. It is remote and due to limited access

has not suffered from too much interference by man. There is a mixture of oak, beech and various pines, interspersed with open grasslands and scrublands, many rivers and a lake. Hunting has been restricted for over a hundred years. Large populations of wild boar and roe deer inhabit here and we have around a thousand Mouflon, a type of long horn sheep reintroduced around 20 years ago. There is a high diversity of wildlife including wolves and lynx. Some of the land is grazed by cattle and sheep, but most is being slowly reclaimed by the forest. Baudinard, the village where my story comes from, is situated on a western arm of the mountain, it stands at 1100 metres and is also only partially inhabited. Two people live here all year round and four of the houses are holiday homes. The rest are ruins, inhabited by foxes, feral cats, rats, bats and dormice.

It was in the autumn of 1992 that I first came across signs of wolves on the Massif du Monge, where at the time I was working as a goat herder. A few years later the goats began acting strangely whilst out grazing. Our guarding dog also began acting strangely, circling the flock constantly, hackles raised and grumbling. Our collie took to hiding between my legs. I knew there was something out there but couldn't find what. Previously we had a few attacks from feral dogs, but with 70 large feisty goats and our killer guard dog, they hadn't proved to be too much of a problem. But this was entirely different. Whatever was hiding out there never showed itself and our guarding dog didn't want to go off and intercept it with the passion he had developed for feral dogs. It was in short a mystery.



Herd protection dogs

It was only after the EU directive ruling that homemade cheeses were dangerous, due to salmonella, listeria or perhaps cheese flu, that we were forced to sell our goats, give up our ideal lifestyle, and switch over to keeping sheep for meat. It was then that we began to have real problems. We were lucky really we only lost about ten sheep in that first year, but as we were just starting out and only had 200 it was worrying.

280 SHEEP WENT OVER A CLIFF

Then, in the summer of 1998, something terrible happened. The shepherd who guarded for our cooperative lost almost half the flock in one night. 280 sheep were herded over a cliff by no one knew what. It was horrific. In farming you lose stock; it's par for the course: disease and hard winters, predators and occasionally thieves take your animals, but this seemed unnatural and was disturbing in the deepest sense. When sheep are stressed they tend to abort, and a lot of our sheep were pregnant at this time.

280 sheep went over the cliff, but many more hit the ground. Some didn't, they hung on the cliffs and in trees, some were still alive, wounded, bleeding and bleating pitifully. We dispatched them, and we cried, us grown men hardened by mountain life. En route to the cliff top was more carnage, sheep dead and half-eaten, wandering wounded.

We were asked to help find and gather the lost sheep that were still wandering the mountain in small bewildered groups, and between eight of us working in shifts this took around two weeks. Every day we found fresh kills and sheep with their

stomachs open, half-eaten, some wounded and bleeding.

On the Thursday morning of that second week, my younger brother and I took our turn walking the mountain. We found two lambs, one paralyzed by a bite to the spine and one who would not leave its side. We carried them on our shoulders in proper shepherd style for around three hours until we found a few sheep for the active one to run with. We continued to carry the paralyzed one. I was sick of killing and thought that she could be saved.

We carried her between us for about 14 hours, till at around 8.30pm after finding 18 sheep and two more fresh kills, we decided to head back down the mountain to where the other sheep were penned before darkness fell. As we were passing into the wooded terrain on the lower slopes we stopped, turned and looked into the trees. There, about five metres away, was a wolf.

Our eyes met and were locked, I was drawn into them. People talk about the wolves stare and how it holds you, how it holds its prey. When a wild wolf looks into your eyes it looks deep and you cannot look away. Something holds you there. Whether it is hypnosis or fear or something else is unsure. I didn't feel fear, but I was held. In that look I felt something change in me, I felt an exchange of information, I don't know what the wolf took from it, but I was left with something, a gift, as it were. I have deliberated over it many times, something primeval that was dormant in me was awakened that day; it's not something I can write about, I cannot even put it into words.

It was a feeling of the wild that I'd never imagined existed and it has stayed with me ever since.

When herding on the mountain I saw wildlife about its business every day, it had grown used to me and I learned its ways. I began to look at things with a predator's eye, looking at formations of trees or mountain features as likely places to catch unwary animals, or as lines along which to herd them into traps from which they could not escape. With this insight I see where the prey will pass, where it will fall and where it hides. In knowing the prey you can work out the predators, and in having an empathy with them it leads me to find their tracks, their scats, their kills and occasionally to glimpse the wolves, to hear them howling and to find myself strangely drawn to howl back.

A LIFE-CHANGING ENCOUNTER

From that first chance encounter my life has been changed, wolves have become a passion for me, I have followed the lives of that wolf and her family ever since. ▶



Wolf

◀ It was three months later that the wolf was officially recognised as being in the Massif du Monge. We lost around 700 animals that first year, sheep, goats and even baby donkeys.

The shepherds were not prepared for wolves and the wolves took full advantage. That winter was even harder for us: the only stock left on the mountain was ours and the wolves followed the game down into our valley. Every morning we found tracks around the barn and every night the dogs went wild. We took it in shifts to sleep in with the sheep, waking frequently to dogs barking or from sheep nightmares.

To find a solution I signed up for the large carnivore project in Romania. There I learned guarding methods from the local shepherds, 24-hour guarding and the use of guarding dogs. I also began learning about wolves. I read all the books and yes, the wolves did do some of the things written in them but they also did things not written down; they were obviously not reading the same books.

EFFICIENT GUARDING METHODS

When I arrived back in France we built a protection park so that the sheep would not have to be crammed into the barn every night. This consisted of a two metre high fence with another metre buried into the ground to prevent tunnelling. We backed this up with an electric fence and began to sleep well once more.

The average number of animals lost during attacks in 1998 was 22. Today we lose on average one or two. We don't have a problem with feral dogs anymore; attacks are in fact down by 98%. The wolves are either scaring them off or eating them, and in doing this they are helping without even knowing it. However, in many ways they are not helping; slaughtering stock will always be seen to be a crime, especially with what appears to be wanton killing, even if it is the fault of shepherds too slow or too poor to guard properly.

The summers for us are still problematic as all the herds are brought together and ascend to the summer pastures, where together there are too many to guard efficiently and are vulnerable. Though we don't lose too many and nature being as it is, sheep often die for no apparent reason. Wolves are and should be a part of nature. Is it not natural that they take the

occasional sheep? The wolves have every right to be there. It is we who have to adapt.

In 1999 we found by sightings and scat analysis that we had six wolves in our area, a breeding pair, two yearlings and two cubs. DNA analysis proved them to be Abruzzese wolves that had found their way there from Italy. The yearlings and cubs accounted for the surplus killings, predators have to learn to hunt and kill and with all the sheep unguarded they could have all the practice they needed. Domestic animals seem to trigger a killing response in wolves even when they have no need.

The wolves adapted to our guarding methods. In 1998 85% of the attacks were at night. Today, as we guard at night and lock away the flocks, the attacks are 70% by day when the sheep are out amongst the trees or drinking at the river.

In 1999 the wolf pack split. Four remained, and two passed over the crest to create a pack further north. I continued tracking these two packs and finding their kills until 2001 when they suddenly disappeared! They stopped howling. I searched but found nothing. Then one day I came across a deer skeleton and, in searching around it for tracks, I found badger and fox skulls, two dead badger cubs, rat skeletons and a dead feral cat. This was not a natural find and I soon realised that the deer had been poisoned. Also two local dogs died, confirming the use of poison. How someone could do this eludes me; how indiscriminate could you be? I have a list of fauna that feed on carcasses, it's long and I have watched it happen many times. First come flies, then butterflies and beetles whilst the blood is still warm. Tits and corvids arrive, eagles and vultures and mustelids follow. Then as night falls, rats, cats, foxes, badgers and wild boar clean up, leaving nothing. Wolves, if not protecting their kill come last, especially if the scent of humans is around. How many animals are you willing to kill before you get the one you were after in the first place? Even I have fed from fresh kills if I have been out tracking for days, living off the forest. I thanked the gods I hadn't found this one.

Poison is documented to be the most efficient way of killing wolves and I fear it was. Over the next few months I found the tracks of only one wolf, the large male. Maybe he'd arrived too late or had been too big for the poison to work properly? But had he had to watch his mate die, his

cubs? He began to be hard to track; it became hard to find a trace of him. I would think he had gone then find a deer carcass or a single track in the bed of a river.

And then a strange thing happened. I don't know if he became lonely or just wanted to know his enemy, but he began showing himself to people. He took to sitting on the slopes opposite the shepherd, watching him, until the shepherd got scared and started to take his gun. He stepped into a clearing in front of a teenage boy out walking. I spoke to the boy and he had seen a wolf; he couldn't talk about it without something changing in his eyes. He'd seen what I had seen, deep into the eyes of a wild wolf.

SIGNS OF RECOVERY

Then in the autumn of 2003 I began to find two sets of prints, often together, the tracks of the male and a smaller set. I found three kills in one week, a deer, a mouflon and a young male wild boar all stripped to the bone. I knew then that there were more than one, a single wolf wouldn't chance bringing down a healthy boar alone. Then, in the winter of 2004, the forest guards found traces of blood in some of the tracks that they were following. DNA tests showed this to be menstrual blood; the wolves were back and they began to howl once more, filling the night with their haunting songs.

In 1990 there were no known wolves in France. Today there are estimated to be over two hundred, covering the Alps from the Mediterranean Sea in the south, all the way up and into Switzerland, across France even reaching the Massif Central. They are moving north, south, east and west, expanding to fill the ranges that were once theirs. Also, from the northern wastes of Russia and Poland, wolves are reaching out to meet them. They are also expanding their territories in Portugal and Spain, forming a pincer movement that will hopefully once again unite the wolves of Europe to repopulate a continent that has been without them for hundreds of years.

Troy Bennett

Troy Bennett gives talks about his work and how he came to accept the wolf in France. He also runs wolf trekking holidays from his base in Baudinard (see opposite for details).