

Project

PastoraLoup: volunteering to support farmers and protect wolves in France

Lune Vuillemin

Ferus, Arles, France.

Contact: secretariat@ferus.org



Wolves and livestock in France

The grey wolf (*Canis lupus*) disappeared from France in the late 1930s after a prolonged period of persecution and extermination. In the early 1990s, wolves began to return to the southern French Alps from Italy [1,2]. Within a few years, they had recolonised a large part of the Alps and made incursions into the Vosges, Jura, Massif Central and the Pyrenees¹ (Figs. 1 and 2). There were estimated to be about 1,104 individuals in France at the end of winter 2022/23 [3]. This natural recovery was facilitated by legal protection under the Bern Convention, an abundance of prey and suitable habitats as well as the ability of wolves to cross urbanised areas and major transport infrastructure [4]. The wolf is not an exclusively mountain-dwelling species and has the potential to recolonise other regions with favourable conditions.

Nevertheless, the wolf is still classified as vulnerable in France [5] and, despite its protected status, is subject to lethal control. In 2024, permission was given for 209 wolves to be shot, corresponding to about 19% of the population [3]. Shooting is permitted to prevent serious damage to livestock if there is no satisfactory alternative

but should not be detrimental to maintaining the population at a favourable conservation status [6,7]. In certain areas deemed too difficult to protect by other means, shooting may be authorised even if non-lethal protection measures supported by the government² such as livestock guarding dogs, human presence and fences have not been



Fig. 1. A wolf in the French Alps (Photo: Groupe Loup PP Alpes).

¹ <https://www.loupfrance.fr/suivi-du-loup/situation-du-loup-en-france>

² <https://agriculture.gouv.fr/aides-contre-la-predation>

implemented [7,8]. A recent study found that shooting wolves resulted in a reduction in depredation in most but not all cases and, in some situations, may have no effect or even result in an increase in depredation [9]. Therefore, the focus should be on implementing non-lethal measures that can effectively protect livestock from wolves.

Our policy is marked by dialogue and consultation with livestock owners. In 1999 we launched an eco-citizenship programme, PastoraLoup, to support and help farmers and shepherds protect their herds from predators by working with them in the field. In order to reduce cattle vulnerability and potential damage, we reinforce human presence and participate in various pastoral tasks necessitated by the presence of wolves. Ferus is a conservation organisation advocating for predators, so our objective is to offer an alternative to shooting by showing that non-lethal protection measures can work. Nevertheless, the programme is meant to be a genuine space for exchange to promote a mutual understanding between large predator conservationists and livestock farming professionals.

Towards peaceful coexistence

Ferus (Latin for “wild”) is a French nonprofit organisation, founded in 1993, aiming to improve the coexistence of large carnivores and human activities. While we believe this is possible, we acknowledge that the return of wolves to France after a long absence had a significant impact on livestock farming and the work of shepherds.

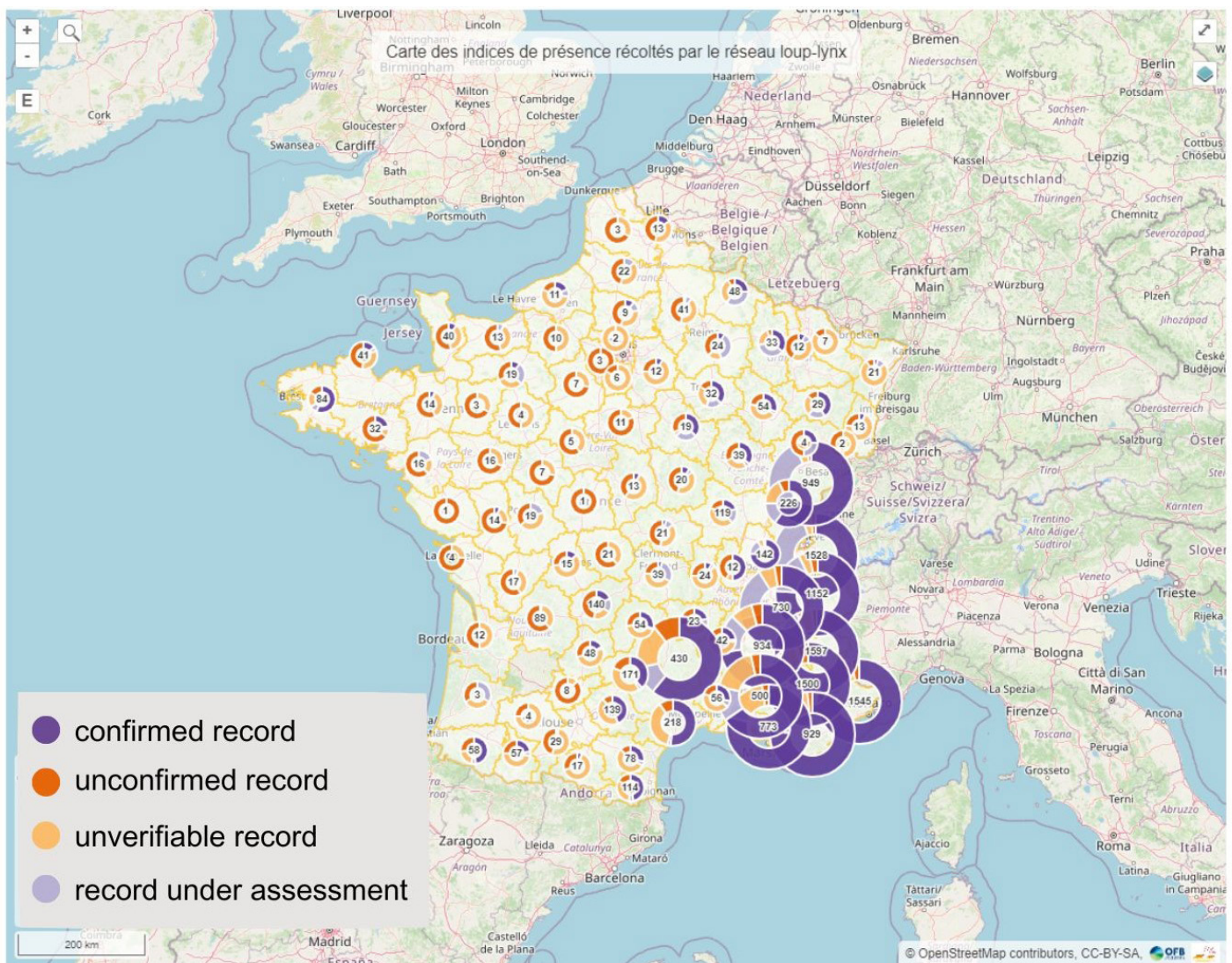


Fig. 2. Distribution of wolf records in France collected by the Loup-Lynx network from January 2013 to October 2024 (Source: OFB³)

³ <https://www.loupfrance.fr/carte-des-indices-de-presence-transmis-au-reseau-loup-lynx>

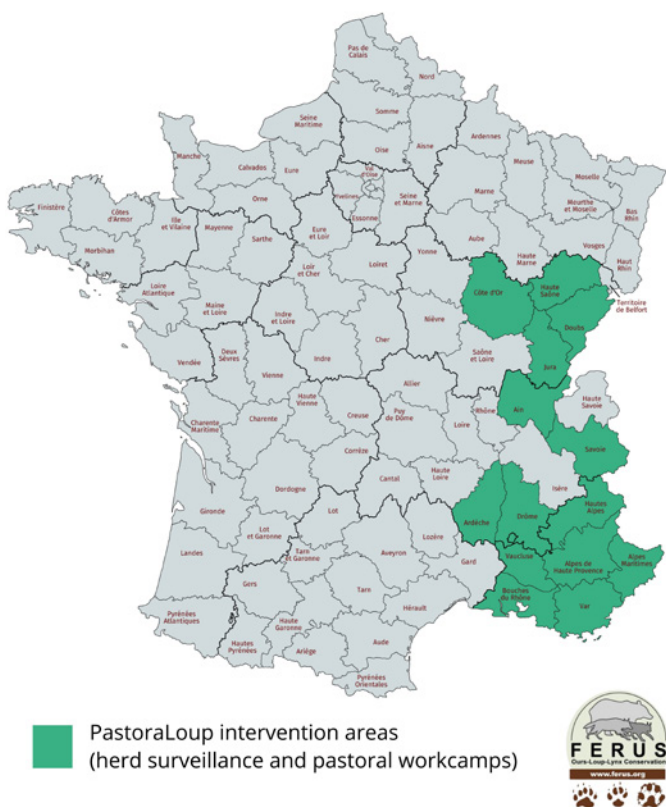


Fig. 3. Regions in France where PastoralLoup volunteers operate.

PastoralLoup mainly operates in the French Alps (Fig. 3) where sheep, goats and cattle graze in mountain pastures during summer months (Fig. 4). Depending on their needs, farmers can rely on trained volunteers for herd surveillance, workcamps of one or two days for construction projects such as building a night pen (Fig. 5) or the loan of non-lethal predator deterrents (e.g. ‘Foxlights’⁴). During the 25 years since its creation, the programme has evolved from night-time only surveillance to also offer daytime surveillance, as wolves have become more active during the day.

Recruitment, training and activities

We begin recruiting volunteers each year in early spring. The pre-selection process is based mostly on motivation letters. Applicants must show a strong desire not only to protect wolves but to discover the pastoral world, as their mission consists of supporting and reassuring farmers. Volunteers come from all over France, from cities as well as the countryside, and a wide range of backgrounds. In terms of age, they must be over 18 to partic-

ipate, but women and men of all ages get involved, from students to retirees. Not all are from the agricultural or environmental protection worlds, but some are former farmers or young people training in agriculture who want to set up as livestock breeders themselves. Highly committed volunteers come back every year.

Successful candidates are required to attend a mandatory five-day training course on a farm in the Alps (Fig. 6). This is an enriching experience for volunteers as they learn more about wolf and husbandry issues. Training courses also give the Ferus supervisory team a chance to get to know the volunteers so they can be sent on the most appropriate missions.

The programme includes both theory and practice. Ferus presents its work and positions on the issues and the French Biodiversity Agency comes in to talk about the Wolf-Lynx Network and the monitoring and implementation of the shooting policy. Former volunteers share their experience and give advice to the new group. Farmers present their work and the use of livestock guarding dogs. Whenever possible, a shepherd from outside the farm also comes to share knowledge and experience. During the training course, three or four volunteers sleep alone with the herd each night, far from the rest of the group. Conditions are rudimentary: camping, dry toilets, solar-powered showers (Fig. 7). The idea is to get everyone used to living conditions in the mountains.

After completing the training course, volunteers should be able to help farmers with a variety of tasks including feeding dogs, distributing salt or moving pens (Fig. 8) as well as implementing protection measures such as watching over herds at night or during the day during week-long missions. They usually sleep next to the flock with their own camping gear but can sometimes be accommodated in alpine huts (Figs. 4 and 7). Activities are organised from mid-March to November each field season.

Farmers who have participated for several years occasionally ask for help on specific dates. Another type of assistance that Ferus offers is two- or three-year assistance (surveillance, fence construction, etc.) for new farmers who do not yet have livestock guarding dogs, which can take up to two years to raise and train [10]. Protection measures limit predation but do not always prevent it completely. Therefore in 2023 we set up a Pas-

⁴ <https://www.foxlights.com>



Fig. 4. Summer pasture with hut in the French Alps (Photo: Bertrand Lepagnol).

toraLoup emergency team in the Jura Mountains, where cattle breeders are affected by wolf depredation (Fig. 9). This enables us to respond to urgent requests from breeders and shepherds whose cattle have been attacked by wolves. At such times, we try to quickly mobilise volunteers, mostly from the local area, to lend emotional as well as technical support.

In the long-term, we want to expand PastoraLoup and work with livestock owners throughout the Alps and cover other regions where wolves recolonise. It is crucial that the programme remains free of charge for participating farmers. Ferus spends between 100,000 and 110,000 euros per year on the programme. Volunteers cover the costs of transportation to the mission site, food and the training course fee (€ 80). These are tax-deductible and food expenses can be reimbursed in the form of luncheon vouchers.

Results and conclusions

Since PastoraLoup began, a total of 800 volunteers have provided assistance to 1,000 farmers (mainly sheep and goat breeders) in several mountain ranges across 14 administrative regions (départements) with wolves. We had a very good season in 2023 and were able to respond to all requests for help, even in emergency situations. During the year, 61 volunteers were involved in 510 nights and days of surveillance and four workcamps, benefitting 16 farmers in six regions. There were no losses to wolves from any flocks while volunteers or shepherds were present, despite wolves being observed nearby. In 2024 the number of partner breeders increased to 26 and a total of 142 volunteers carried out 918 nights and days of herd surveillance and participated in 18 workcamps in 14 regions.



Fig. 5. Volunteers on a workcamp building a livestock enclosure (Photo: Ferus).

After each mission, volunteers and farmers are asked to fill in a questionnaire about their experience. Additionally, at the end of the season a weekend is organised for volunteers to share their feedback. In 2023, 80% of volunteers gave a positive evaluation of the missions they had participated in and most of them were delighted to discover the pastoral environment. Many reported that they had developed a better understanding of the difficulties faced by farmers and a few even turned to shepherding after their experience with PastoraLoup.

As well as providing technical support to breeders and shepherds, PastoraLoup can also be a human experience as it generates social ties in the midst of a conflictual issue. Volunteers and farmers alike emphasise that one of the strong points of the programme are the connections it generates, which sometimes turn into real friendships. Breeders also highlight that the presence of volunteers relieves the mental burden on shepherds, enabling them to sleep more peacefully in the knowledge that someone is with the livestock. Such active solidarity provides an opportunity for citizens with very different lifestyles to meet and exchange ideas. Getting to know and understand each other better are key objectives of the project. The space for dialogue and openness, where everyone takes into account and respects the positions of others, enables us to move beyond the usual “pro-wolf” versus

“anti-wolf” divide and work together to implement equitable and sustainable solutions, which are an essential prerequisite for peaceful coexistence.

Acknowledgments

PastoraLoup is supported by the French Ministry of Ecological Transition and Territorial Cohesion and the Anyama foundation. We would like to thank all farmers and volunteers working together towards peaceful coexistence.

References

- [1] Carbone G & Peillon A (1993) Bienvenue aux loups [Welcome to the wolves]. *Terre Sauvage* 73: 23–43 [in French].
- [2] OFB (n.d.) Le loup en France. Suivi – Analyses et indicateurs. Le suivi génétique: espèce, lignée, profil individuel et hybridation [The wolf in France. Monitoring - Analyses and indicators. Genetic monitoring: species, lineage, individual profile and hybridization]. Office Français de la Biodiversité. URL: <https://www.loupprance.fr/suivi-du-loup/suivi-analyses/> [in French].
- [3] PRARA (2023) Note technique du 28 décembre 2023 portant à connaissance le nombre maximum de loups (*Canis lupus*) dont la destruction est autorisée en 2024 [Technical note of 28 December 2023 notifying the maximum number of wolves (*Canis lupus*) authorised to be destroyed in 2024]. Préfète de La Région Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes. URL: <https://www.auvergne-rhone-alpes.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/2024-a24912.html?lang=fr> [in French].



Fig. 6. Livestock breeders and volunteers in a barn during a training course (Photo: Ferus).

- [4] Chapron G et al. (2014) Recovery of large carnivores in Europe’s modern human-dominated landscapes. *Science* 346(6216): 1517–1519.
- [5] UICN France et al. (2017) La Liste rouge des espèces menacées en France. Mammifères de France métropolitaine [The Red List of threatened species in France. Mammals of mainland France]. UICN France, MNHN, SFEPM & ONCFS. URL: https://inpn.mnhn.fr/docs/LR_FCE/Liste_rouge_France_Mammiferes_de_metropole_2017.pdf [in French].
- [6] MTECT (2024) Plan National d’Actions 2024–2029. Loup et activités d’élevage [National Action Plan 2024–2029. Wolves and livestock farming]. Ministère de la Transition Écologique et de la Cohésion des Territoires. URL: <https://www.ecologie.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/documents/PNA%20Loup.pdf> [in French].
- [7] MTECT (2024) Arrêté du 21 février 2024 fixant les conditions et limites dans lesquelles des dérogations aux interdictions de destruction peuvent être accordées par les préfets concernant le loup (*Canis lupus*) [Order of 21 February 2024 laying down the



Fig. 7. A volunteer’s tent near a flock with livestock guarding dog (Photo: Ferus).

- conditions and limits under which derogations from the prohibition on destruction may be granted by the prefects concerning the wolf (*Canis lupus*), Ministère de la Transition Écologique et de la Cohésion des Territoires. URL: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000049184760> [in French].
- [8] MASA (2022) Arrêté du 30 décembre 2022 relatif à l’aide à la protection des exploitations et des troupeaux contre la prédation du loup et de l’ours [Order of 30 December 2022 on aids for the protection of farms and livestock against wolf and bear predation]. Ministère de l’Agriculture et de la Souveraineté Alimentaire. URL: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000046847661> [in French].
- [9] Grete O (2021) Understanding the depredation process in grey wolf (*Canis lupus*) and its interactions with lethal measures: Focus on the French Alpine Arc. PhD Thesis, Montpellier University, France. URL: <https://theses.hal.science/tel-03558247>.
- [10] Dawydiak O & Sims DE (2004) Livestock protection dogs – selection, care and training, 2nd ed. Alpine Publications.



Fig. 8. Volunteers learning how to install electric nets (Photo: Ferus).



Fig. 9. A volunteer from the PastoraLoup Jura Mountain team guarding cows (Photo: Ferus).