

Portrait

JÁN ŠUCHTÁR

SLOVAKIA

57 YEARS OLD

1. How long have you been working as a shepherd?

Since childhood, with a few breaks for national service and other work in wintertime.

2. How did you become a shepherd?

Shepherding is in our family. My father was a shepherd and so is my nephew. I learned from my father and I have also attended a few courses and training run by the livestock breeders' association.

3. Please describe your flock and herding system.

We currently have about 700 sheep: 600 ewes, 100 yearlings and 12 rams. We also have 28 cows, eight pigs and 12 dogs: seven Slovenský čuvač livestock guarding dogs (LGDs) and five herding dogs. This dog here is a Hungarian Puli.

Half the flock belongs to us and the rest are assembled from private owners who have a few sheep each. Some sheep are improved Valaška (Wallachian) and the rest are mainly crosses with Lacaune. The Valaška is a native breed but I heard there are now fewer than 10,000 original Valaška in Slovakia. Subsidies have been offered to breed them so now everyone wants to have Valaška, but before they all wanted Lacaune for the higher milk production.

The grazing season begins whenever the grass starts to grow, which might be in March or in April, but usually by around 10th April we are out grazing, although the sheep may still be put in a barn overnight then. Lambs are sold for meat at Easter. We milk the ewes and make cheese on site. Three of us work here and we can all make cheese.

Grazing is rotated around different pastures. At night, the flock is gathered in a corral in the pasture which we move every few days. The stock graze in the pasture until the first snow. In winter, we keep our sheep in barns and private owners take theirs home.

4. Where do you graze the flock?

For the last 15 years or more I have kept sheep here, below the Tatra Mountains in the Liptov region of northern Slovakia, where we have 200 hectares of rented pastures at 700–800 m a.s.l. We set up a camp with trailers for sleeping and cabins for cheese-making and spend the summer here.



5. What is your main motivation to work as a shepherd?

I think you have to be born into it, to have it in you. Nobody would do this work for money!

6. What difficulties do you face working as a shepherd?

It is hard work in all weathers, with long hours for little pay. I would like to have a horse so I don't have to walk so far! It takes us about 2.5 hours to milk the sheep, which we do twice a day: once in the morning and again in the afternoon. Not all the private owners take care of their sheep as they should, trim their hooves and so on. I do what I can but I don't have time for everything.

7. What kind of large carnivores do you have in your area?

Wolves and bears. There are lynx in the area, too, but not at our place.

8. What are your experiences with them?

We haven't had any problems yet this year but it usually gets worse in autumn. There are more problems elsewhere, where pastures are overgrown or they have more lame sheep in the flock. We had losses in previous years, mostly to wolves. Bears only attack during the night, but wolves sometimes attack during the day as well. Wolves cover huge areas. They could be here today and 30 km away tomorrow. Maybe one is on the way to us now!

9. Please describe one experience with large carnivores.

During the day a wolf grabbed a sheep by the throat and then used its tail to herd it away from the others. You don't even notice them coming when they do that because the flock stays calm. One morning a bus was going along the road near here and there was a bear just next to the stream close by. That shows how many of them there are – it is not too few!

10. Which measures do you take to prevent damage and what are the pros and cons?

We guard the flock and have LGDs. There is a shepherd with the flock in the pasture during the day and two of us always sleep in trailers near the flock at night. But a person can't see or hear what a dog can. They don't even have to see a predator: they can smell it, hear it. They have all three of those senses better than us. On the other hand, they may go for people sometimes. We had a problem with that in spring when one of the dogs was tethered too close to the track and it bit a lady on a bike. That could deter customers from coming to buy cheese. But people have no business coming here at night. Then, I release one or two of them, the rest are kept tethered, otherwise they would fight or wander off. They wanted to give me a fine because the dogs did not have kennels. But if dogs have shelter, food and water they just sleep and I have to guard the flock myself! They are not here to look nice; their job is to guard the flock! They should

be fed in the morning so they are alert and protective at night.

We use electric fencing to contain the flock, but I don't believe that an electric fence run on a battery can keep bears and wolves away – it would have to be connected to 220V mains electricity.

11. Do you get subsidies or counselling support?

Yes, we take subsidies for livestock farming when they are available. Who knows what will happen to us if they are no longer paid? As for compensation, I don't bother to declare losses because it is too much hassle and too time-consuming, it is not worth it for one or two sheep.

12. What are the main challenges when dealing with large carnivores in your area?

There are abnormally high numbers of bears. I don't go mushrooming anymore because there are so many bears. There are big bears up in the mountains and they force the smaller ones out of their territories and down close to villages. A couple of months ago there was a mother bear with cubs in the middle of the village. But some people say this situation is caused by people taking their food. There are too many wolves but also too many deer and wild boar. Hunters only shoot a few deer and boar so there are many left. It can be dangerous working in the pastures because wild boar dig so many holes, you can break your leg or injure your back. Fences can keep them out, but not red deer – they just jump over.

