

RUTH HÄCKH

GERMANY

55 YEARS OLD

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

I grew up on a farm with sheep and helped with the animals from an early age. When I was 22 I started an apprenticeship to become a shepherd and have been working as a shepherd ever since.

2. How did you become a shepherd?

I did the official shepherd apprenticeship in Germany but I also come from a family with a shepherd tradition: my father, my uncle and great-grandfather were all shepherds. I took over the farm from my father when I was 35 and since then have my own farm and flock of sheep. When I did the shepherd apprenticeship it was still rather uncommon for women to learn this profession and I was one of the few female students. Even though there are a lot more women working as shepherds today, many people are still surprised when they see a woman taking care of the flock.

3. Please describe your flock and herding system.

Up until a few years ago I had 400 ewes with which I practiced traditional migratory herding. The stretch between the summer and winter pastures was covered on foot.

Nowadays I only have a small flock of about 200 ewes. They are all Merinolandschafe, a type of merino sheep which is well-adapted to the conditions in southern Germany and the tradition of transhumant shepherding. They are able to walk long distances and can be outside the whole year round. To guard the flock I use Altdeutsche Hütehunde, old breeds of German shepherd dogs. My main income is generated through the production of lamb and funds for landscape maintenance, which is an income for many shepherds in Germany nowadays.

4. Where do you graze the flock?

The summer pastures are in Schwäbisch Alb, a small mountain range in the south of Germany. There, the sheep graze in the traditional juniper heathlands. The summer pastures are at around 1,000 m a. s. l.

The winter pastures are at Lake Constance. The climate around the lake is milder and therefore it provides good grazing in the winter months.



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

My motivation to work as a shepherd is to work with animals and outdoors, in nature.

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

The biggest challenges in this profession are the long working hours, with up to 70 hours a week, and the low income, which is with around 6 Euros per hour below the minimum wage. Added to this is the burden of bureaucracy, legal obligations to keep records, controls etc. And the subsidies, on which we depend nowadays, are often paid with a delay. Besides that, more and more grasslands, which provide food for our flocks, are lost due to agricultural intensification and the cultivation of crops for biogas.

And with the return of the wolf comes yet another challenge for shepherds in our area.

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

In my area there are no large predators for now. But there have been individual wolves ranging through this part of Germany with occasional damages, so I think they will be an issue for us in the future.

8. Are you are prepared for the return of large carnivores?

Even though there are no wolves in our area yet, it worries me as I think livestock protection measures

are going to increase my workload a lot. I know that the protection measures should be put in place before the problem arises so I have been confronted with the issue.

I generally fence my sheep with an electric fence. If this should be no longer sufficient and I have to use higher nets and fladry it will be a problem for me as it will be more workload and the heavier nets will be difficult to handle.

9. *What are your main concerns in terms of large carnivores and livestock protection?*

As long as wolves are under unrestricted protection livestock protection will be more and more an issue. As I said in the previous question, I am concerned that the workload will increase and it will be impossible for me to handle it.

Livestock guarding dogs (LGDs), for example, cannot be kept according to the current animal welfare law in Germany (it is not allowed to keep dogs inside electrified nets).

Only some of the federal states support livestock protection measures with subsidies, others not. And if there is an attack by a wolf only 10 to 20% of the actual damage is covered because the flock is frightened over a long time which means they don't eat properly, there are more diseases, miscarriages etc.

For now my sheep are safe. When the wolves will spread more and the requirements for livestock protection are going to be more demanding it will be no longer feasible for me. In the long run, it will be the large sheep farms that are going to survive, the small holdings are going to disappear.

