



Project

Volunteer help to protect livestock: bridging urban and Alpine worlds

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Introduction

Large carnivores disappeared from Switzerland by the 20th century due to various human-related factors [1]. Their absence allowed farmers to graze livestock in the Alps without the threat of depredation. Then, in the 1990s, the first evidence of wolves (*Canis lupus*) naturally returning to Switzerland was recorded [2]. The first pack was established six years later in the Calanda massif of Graubünden canton, since when the wolf population has steadily increased across the Alps [2]. A survey in November 2023 estimated a minimum of 91 wolves in the canton [3] and by September 2024 Graubünden had 13 packs (Fig. 1). Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*) are also becoming reestablished in the region and individual brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) occasionally arrive from neighbouring Trentino, Italy [3].

The coexistence of large carnivores and human activities presents significant challenges. As the wolf population has grown, livestock depredation on alpine farms has become more frequent. Livestock is most vulnerable to predation during the summer grazing season in

high-mountain pastures. Many farmers use damage prevention measures such as electric nets and livestock guarding dogs, which are financially supported by the federal government, although attacks still occur, for example where fencing has a weak point. Wolves account for the majority of these attacks¹, with bears and lynx being responsible for very few. Sheep make up 94 % of the losses, goats 5 % and other livestock 1 % [2].

While pastoralists perceive the wolf as a threat to their livelihoods, many other people (especially in urban areas) see it as a symbol of wild nature (Fig. 2). The challenge is to find a balance between the interests of nature conservation and agricultural practice so that both the protection of wolves and the livelihoods of farmers can be guaranteed.

With the return of large carnivores, effective livestock protection has become essential to ensure the sustainability of pastoralism in the Alps. Our project, Pasturs Voluntaris, addresses these challenges by enlisting dedicated volunteers to support alpine farmers in implementing robust protection measures. The primary goal of the project is to enhance livestock protection in alpine regions,

¹ <https://www.kora.ch/en/species/wolf/depredation>

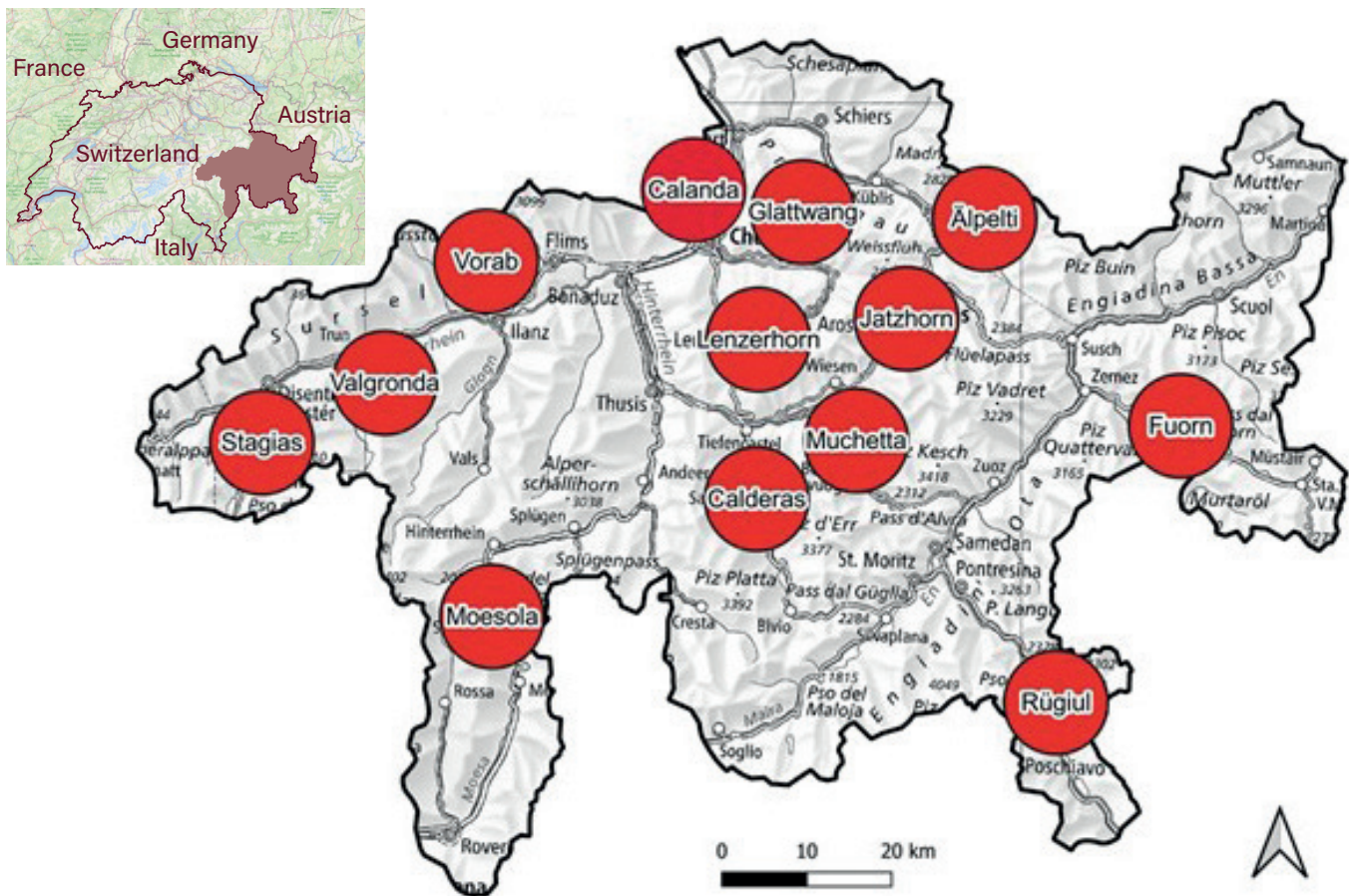


Fig. 1. Locations of wolf packs (red circles) in the canton of Graubünden, eastern Switzerland, as of September 2024 (Source: Amt für Jagd und Fischerei Graubünden, ESRI World Topo and swisstopo).

ensuring the sustainability of traditional pastoral practices while fostering coexistence with large carnivores. By enlisting volunteers, we aim to support farmers in their efforts to protect livestock, thereby contributing to the preservation of the cultural heritage and natural landscapes of the Swiss Alps (Fig. 3).

Recruitment and training

Volunteers are required to complete a two-day training course prior to being assigned to farms. This equips them with both theoretical knowledge and practical skills needed for their upcoming tasks. The theoretical component includes a series of lectures on general livestock protection in Switzerland, the biology and behaviour of large carnivores, management of small ruminants and livestock guarding dogs (Fig. 4). These lectures are given by experienced sheep farmers and experts on large carnivores. The practical side covers hands-on skills such as how to correctly set up and take down pasture fences (Figs. 5 and 6), sheep handling including basic hoof care



Fig. 7. For some people, the wolf is a symbol of wild nature, for others it represents a threat to their livelihoods (Photo: WWF-Switzerland).



Fig. 2. A sheep flock being moved to a new pasture in the Alps (Photo: Pasturs Voluntaris).

and recognition of abnormal behaviour, and safe interaction with livestock guarding dogs. This combination of theory and practice ensures that volunteers are well-prepared for their roles in supporting livestock protection.

All individuals aged 18 and older are eligible to participate. The average age of volunteers is around 50 and the proportion of women and men is roughly equal. While a basic level of physical fitness is beneficial, it is not a strict requirement for taking part. Sure-footedness in rough terrain is advantageous for participation in missions. After completing the course, volunteers are assigned to one of three categories (easy, medium, difficult) based on the difficulty of the tasks. This ensures that volunteers are given roles suited to their abilities and, at the same time, farms receive the type of support that meets their specific needs. This approach helps maintain a high level of satisfaction among both volunteers and farmers.

Deployment and support

Our volunteers are deployed to alpine farms across the canton of Graubünden during the summer grazing season (typically from June to September). They assist farmers with daily livestock management tasks and implement protective measures against large carnivores. These tasks include setting up and maintaining electric fencing (Fig. 7), monitoring livestock guarding dogs and helping with corralling animals at night. This hands-on experience fosters a deeper understanding of alpine pastoralism, especially among volunteers from urban areas (more than 80% of volunteers come from outside Graubünden).

In order to participate, farms are required to use at least one of the two livestock protection measures (fences, livestock guarding dogs) officially recognised by the federal government. Farmers are informed about the pro-

ject in much the same way as volunteers, with regional media playing a key role in raising awareness. Articles in local publications have sparked interest among farmers, many of whom have since expressed their willingness to collaborate. In addition, partnership with the cantonal agricultural training centre has significantly boosted the project. The centre has referred alpine pasture managers facing staff shortages to the initiative, further expanding the network of participating farms.

Results and impact

Since its inception in 2021, Pasturs Voluntaris has successfully trained and deployed over 170 volunteers. As of September 2024, the project had supported 16 alpine summer pasture farms and 12 homesteads at lower elevations. Without exception, participating farmers have been positive about the assistance provided and are very grateful for the support. For example, a sheep farmer in Graubünden stated that, “Both helpers exceeded my expectations. Generally, that’s not the case for me, as my standards are always very high. Therefore, I am all the more pleased and surprised by the excellent support from both of them. Thank you very much for the arrangement.” After receiving initial support, many farmers request further help in subsequent years.

Volunteers gain valuable insights into the realities of alpine farming, fostering greater empathy and support for rural communities. Two volunteers expressed their satisfaction as follows: “Our deployment was a wonderful experience. We learned a lot and were glad to be able to help. Pasturs Voluntaris is a very well-organised and very useful initiative. We felt very comfortable with the farmer and enjoyed working with him.”

We do not have precise data on whether and to what extent the use of volunteers in livestock protection has led to a reduction in attacks by large carnivores. However, livestock losses have decreased across Switzerland in recent years, despite an increase in the wolf population. In the canton of Graubünden, the number of losses at the end of August 2024 was 35 % lower than at the same time the previous year².



Fig. 3. Livestock guarding dogs with sheep (Photo: Pasturs Voluntaris).



Fig. 4. Volunteers learning to instal fencing in rough terrain (Photo: Pasturs Voluntaris).



Fig. 5. Correct assembly and disassembly of electric nets needs to be learned (Photo: Fabienne Maier).

² <https://www.pronatura.ch/de/2024/sinkende-risszahlen>



Fig. 6. Volunteers helping to set up and maintain electric fences in an Alpine pasture (Photo: Pasturs Voluntaris).

Building bridges

One of the biggest challenges facing the project is the resistance of farmers to accepting support from environmental organisations. Many farmers are sceptical, fearing that such involvement could restrict their traditional practices. The project has been accused in the media³ of being “a wolf in sheep’s clothing” and has been rejected by many wolf opponents who say it is run by environmentalists that want to make life permanently difficult for farmers. However, thanks to positive feedback from those who have participated, spread by word-of-mouth, more people are learning about the tangible benefits of our project and acceptance is steadily increasing. This is helping to break down barriers, paving the way for broader collaboration and better outcomes for both livestock farming and wildlife conservation.

Despite the positive developments, there is still considerable opposition among farmers to co-existence with large carnivores. Many farmers are concerned that current protection measures are insufficient to prevent losses of livestock. They would therefore like to see greater opportunities to control the wolf population [Editor’s note: see *the interview on managing wolves in Switzerland in CDPnews issue 28*]. Furthermore, farmers often feel overwhelmed and inadequately supported, especially in regions where there are repeated wolf attacks. Even if projects such as Pasturs Voluntaris can demonstrate successful livestock protection, the demand for more flexibility, particularly through targeted shooting or wolf population regulation, remains a key concern for many farmers.

A unique aspect of Pasturs Voluntaris is its role in bridging the gap between people in urban areas and the alpine farming community. Volunteers from cities gain

³ <https://sb9c56c2782c72505.jimcontent.com/download/version/1690303681/module/12038360921/name/Pasturs%2520ist%2520ein%2520Wolf%2520im%2520Schafspelz%2520C%2520Bauernzeitung%252024.06.2022.PDF>



Fig. 7. Transporting fencing and other materials can be challenging in the mountains (Photo: Pasturs Voluntaris).

first-hand experience in livestock management and the challenges posed by large carnivores (Fig. 8). This exchange of knowledge and experience promotes mutual understanding and respect, contributing to a more cohesive approach to wildlife conservation and agricultural sustainability. Pasturs Voluntaris demonstrates that volunteer involvement can play a crucial role in enhancing livestock protection and fostering the coexistence of large carnivores and human activities. By supporting farmers, we contribute to the preservation of alpine biodiversity and cultural heritage, building bridges between urban and rural communities.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all our volunteers for their dedication and hard work. Special thanks to the farmers who have welcomed and collaborated with our volunteers, as

well as to our funding partners, especially WWF-Switzerland, ProNatura and Migros Unterstützungsfond, for their generous support.

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