

# PIERRE PIBRE

## FRANCE

### 27 YEARS OLD

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

I started working as a shepherd when I was 15, so for about 12 years.

#### 2. *How did you become a shepherd?*

I was not trained as a shepherd but did my apprenticeship as an organic farmer.

There is no tradition of sheep herding in my family.

#### 3. *Please describe your flock and herding system.*

As I guard the animals of other people I am not always shepherding in the same location. Usually I herd between 1,200 and 1,600 sheep, sometimes up to 2,000. I prefer the *mérino d'Arles* breed as they have a natural flocking behaviour which makes herding easier. They are also well adapted to the climate and topography with good mothering abilities. Usually there are a few wethers (castrated bucks or rams) with the flock. They are tame and are used to cross difficult passages. When there is an obstacle you call them and the flock will follow.

I have my own sheep dogs that I train myself. Currently I have three adult border collies and a young one. When I work in areas with wolf presence there are usually a few livestock guarding dogs (LGDs) as well but they don't belong to me.

#### 4. *Where do you graze the flock?*

I work in the region of *Alpes du Sud* in the south of France. Traditionally, people do alpine farming here and let their sheep graze in the mountains during summer (mid-June to mid-October) and in lower altitudes during the rest of the year. Most of the sheep herding takes place during summer. I sometimes help in spring with tending the sheep and in autumn with lambing.

The summer pastures in the mountains are alpine pastures between 1,500 and 2,700 m a.s.l.

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

There are many reasons why I like working as a shepherd but the main motivation is to live in harmony with nature. There are not many other professions where you can be part of the natural cycle like that. With my flock of sheep I take something from nature but I leave something as well. I use the natural system to sustain my flock without depending on cultivated feed.



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

The biggest challenges here are the working conditions. Often, the huts are in very bad condition, run down and with no water. The sheep owners try to lower the wages while giving you more sheep to guard. This is especially difficult for shepherds with little experience. They have no reference and do not know what to expect and what they can ask for. Inexperienced shepherds are often taken advantage of and I have even heard stories of sheep owners paying unwanted visits at night.

Large carnivores are another challenge. If you compare the work of a shepherd with and without predators around it is a different profession. The whole herding system has to be reimagined: herd management, fences, you have to organise and carry around feed for the LGDs etc. For a shepherd, this change can mean a heavy increase of the workload which often cannot be overcome alone.

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

So far I have only worked in areas with wolves.

#### 8. *What are your experiences with them?*

It depends on the place where I work. Sometimes you can be in an area close to a wolf pack and not get any attacks and sometimes you are right in the middle of the territory of the pack.

The wolves get less shy and become less afraid of

humans. They started to attack in the middle of the day and find ways to overcome livestock protection measures. For example, if the sheep are inside a fence they wait outside until the sheep notice them and start to panic. If the flock tears down the fence the wolves attack them, sometimes there are even sheep tangled in the net. If there are LGDs with the flock the wolves try to lure them away and attack the flock.

**9. Please describe one experience with large carnivores.**

A few years ago there was an attack during the night. I had the flock in a night corral close to my hut. In my sleep I heard that there was something going on. I heard the bells indicating that the flock was being disturbed. Still half asleep I went outside to check on them. When I got there I found that the flock was totally panicking and the fence was broken. My first reaction was to call them calmly, just as I normally do. I tried not to upset them further and to act as usual. Luckily, the sheep listened to my call and returned. I made a fire, mended the net and fixed the fence and then stayed with the flock for the rest of the night.

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

The primary measures are constant guarding and night corrals which I do even if no wolves are around. If I work in an area with wolves the sheep owners usually already have LGDs in the flock. Another very important thing for me are the *aide bergers*, the shepherd helpers. They help with the night corrals, generally disburden the shepherds of the workload and sometimes they sleep with the flock as well. If you have to get out during the night and guard the whole day it gets very exhausting. With a shepherd helper the workload can be reduced.

Lastly, I think making sounds is a good method to scare away wolves. I play the bagpipe when it is foggy, the weather in which wolves like to attack a flock.

All these measures mean an additional workload and a bit of reorganisation of the work. But as with everything you just have to get used to the new situation. Most of the protection measures are also good for the flock even if there are no wolves around. The animals are better taken care of which is better for the shepherd, the owner and the mountain.

**11. Do you get subsidies or counselling support?**

The EU partly finances shepherd helpers. They can be hired in case of wolf attacks to support the shepherd.

The sheep killed by wolves are reimbursed, but this only covers the direct loss and not the sheep that get killed by falling down because of a panicking flock, for example.

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

The presence of large carnivores changes the profession of the shepherd. It can mean more work, more stress, different work and presence of more people. For some shepherds it is the solitude that they enjoy about herding sheep and so they might not welcome the presence of shepherd helpers. So I think it is important not to lose the motivation of the work because otherwise the days become very long and strenuous.

But in the end I think it is not the presence of wolves per se that is the challenge but the management of wolves. Even if there are good protection measures in place, the wolves need to associate them with a negative experience so they actually stay away. If the wolves are getting less and less shy the shepherd should have more liberty to scare them off. The shepherds are the ones working with the sheep and putting livestock protection measures in place. For a better coexistence of wolf and sheep their knowledge and experience should be listened to more and taken into account.

