



Interview

A volunteer's experience

Carole Munro

interviewed by

Robin Rigg & Silvia Ribeiro

What was your motivation for volunteering?

When my family relocated to the Prealps of southeast France, I was stunned by the rich biodiversity of this beautiful area and became passionate about conservation. To me, the fact that wolves had returned to the area 20 years earlier was incredibly exciting, but I soon realised that many people didn't share my enthusiasm. Graffiti calling for the death of wolves and sensational newspaper headlines reporting attacks on livestock made it obvious that what to me was a symbol of hope meant the complete opposite to many locals. Encountering a shepherd at the village market reciting one of his poems describing a future where wolves had caused the collapse of pastoralism and become a danger to people is what really made me realise how deep these feelings run. That was when I started looking for ways to help ease tensions by communicating with and helping livestock owners, and I found that several organisations were doing exactly that.

Who did you volunteer for?

I have been involved in projects with Ferus in France and OPPAL in Switzerland [Editor's note: see pages 4–9 and 24–28 in this issue]. Wolves don't recognise political borders, so I was keen to see how things are approached in different countries. Both organisations aim to promote

coexistence between large carnivores and human activities by supporting livestock owners. Ferus's PastoraLoup project offers help with flock surveillance as well as installation and improvement of long-term protection measures such as fencing. They work mostly in southeast France but more recently also in the Jura Mountains. OPPAL is focused mostly on livestock surveillance in the Swiss Alps and Jura. More than just helping to lighten the load for livestock owners, both projects create opportunities for dialogue between people with different views of large carnivores.



Carole Munro

Are there any entry requirements?

No qualifications are necessary to be involved. I met volunteers of all ages and from all walks of life. However, many of the flocks are traditionally taken to mountain



*Volunteers keeping cattle safe in the Jura under a starry sky
(Photo: Alexis Martin).*

pastures which can be difficult to access. Some of the more remote areas can only be reached on foot which requires a good level of fitness. To take part in livestock surveillance, both projects require volunteers to undergo training. Places to attend the PastoraLoup training programme are very limited and you have to provide a cover letter highlighting your motivations in order to be considered. OPPAL is open to larger numbers and you just need to book a place on a training session. Both programmes cover similar topics such as an introduction to large carnivore biology and monitoring, current conservation initiatives and government actions for livestock protection, use of livestock protection methods, basic first aid and safety considerations in remote mountain locations. Biologists and government officials are involved in the training sessions, and so are local farmers. OPPAL's main training session takes place over a weekend, with additional short sessions throughout the year. PastoraLoup training takes place over five days and is based on a farm. It's a great opportunity to spend time on a farm that has implemented successful protection measures follow-

ing predation events and for honest conversations with livestock owners over shared meals.

What did you help with?

My first mission with PastoraLoup involved helping a horse owner in my local area. They had seen two wolves outside the paddocks and were worried about their horses' safety, especially as they had an old mare and a foal. Their immediate response was to enquire about permits to shoot the wolves if they came back. The PastoraLoup team offered their advice on improving fencing and lined up volunteers to help construct a large wolf-proof enclosure around the paddocks and to undertake night surveillance in the meantime. I spent a week there finishing off the fence during the day and doing night-time rounds to check on the horses and make my presence known to deter any potential predators. The owners had previously been watching the horses overnight themselves, so knowing that volunteers were around gave them peace of mind and a chance to rest. I stayed in my van next to the paddocks and shared meals with the horse owners.

With OPPAL I spent a few nights in different mountain pastures for night surveillance of sheep in the Alps and cows in the Jura. In the Alps, a small flock of sheep was kept within an electric wire enclosure and visited daily by the owners. Volunteers would regroup the sheep in the evening to make surveillance easier. In the Jura, one herd of young cattle was kept within an electric wire enclosure at all times while another herd spent the day out with a shepherd and was brought into a small electric wire enclosure at night. No livestock guarding dogs were present in any of the pastures. All areas were easy to access and had either a converted shipping container or a caravan with beds, basic food items and cooking facilities provided by OPPAL. All surveillance activities for this project were undertaken in pairs, from dusk to dawn, with at least one person awake at all times keeping an eye on livestock and surroundings with thermal binoculars and doing surveillance every hour or so.

How was the communication with the hosts and organisers?

Both organisations are made up of passionate people and they are always happy to help and to answer any questions. Contact with livestock owners varies. Some are keen to meet volunteers and have a chat; for others it's



Volunteers regrouping a flock of sheep in the Alps before starting overnight surveillance (Photo: Carole Munro).

an opportunity to leave the flock in capable hands and rest. The wolf is rarely the subject of conversation. Volunteers are not there to advocate for the wolf or to try to change people's minds but simply to offer a helping hand and bridge a gap.

What safeguarding procedures were in place?

Both programmes included a module on first aid and safety in mountain environments. We had clear instructions on what to do, and not do, to keep the livestock and ourselves safe. Most day-to-day communication while we were out in the field was facilitated by a mobile phone application (WhatsApp group). Emergency protocols were highlighted and there was a contact person on call from the organisation. I understand that some projects prefer volunteers to work alone so as to be as non-intrusive as possible, but I felt more comfortable when working in a team.

What was the biggest challenge you faced?

Most nights were calm, almost meditative, and offered a chance to reflect, but some were more difficult. Keeping watch during a heavy thunderstorm was certainly a challenge. To keep the thermal binoculars dry we had to retreat from our tarp shelter to my van, which I was able to park in a good vantage point and we went out for regular checks.

Did you see any wolves?

Thankfully I didn't witness any predation attempts, although I did see a wolf when I was watching cattle. It was just crossing the hill opposite us and not coming towards the livestock, so there was no need to try our repelling gear. But it did make my heart race, and I had no trouble staying awake for the rest of the night after that!

Can you recall any other memorable moments?

I really enjoyed being able to observe a range of animals become active at night, from small hedgehogs and dormice to a beautiful stag.

How much are these projects helping to reduce conflicts?

Both projects are very well organised and provide invaluable help to livestock owners and a chance for volunteers to experience the challenges of living with large

carnivores. The projects have helped reduce damages as several attacks were stopped by volunteers implementing repelling techniques. In my case, I was able to slightly ease the burden on livestock owners and give them peace of mind that their animals would be safe overnight. Projects have already been expanding and covering new areas that have seen carnivores return more recently. However, many livestock owners who could benefit are still not ready to take the step of working with conservation organisations, so a remaining challenge is to find a way to communicate to livestock owners that these programmes are there to help and not to challenge their views.

What did you gain personally?

Volunteering was a great experience and I learnt a lot about farming and protection measures. It helped me see things from a different perspective and better appreciate the challenges that livestock owners face in areas where predators have returned. I now feel better equipped to have conversations on the subject outside the volunteer programmes. Overall, the experience exceeded my expectations and I plan on staying involved in both France and Switzerland, hopefully every year.

Do you have any advice for new volunteers?

Just go into the experience with an open mind. I imagine a lot of volunteers are motivated by a desire to help large carnivore conservation, but make the most of the opportunity to listen to livestock owners, learn about farming and the difficulties they face.



A volunteer learning how to install electric netting during a training session (Photo: Carole Munro).