

Ravenous wolves colonise France, terrorise shepherds

July 28 2011, by Antoine Agasse



The mountains over Grenoble were once an ideal grazing ground for his 900 sheep. But now, after long banishment, the wolves are back -- bolder and hungrier than ever. Wolves were eradicated in France in the 1930s, but made a comeback in the southern Alps in 1992, crossing from Italy. They have spread through eastern France, first to the Savoy and this year to the Vosges and Doubs regions.

A bloody, stinking sheep's carcass greets shepherd Yves Vignon as he

walks to check on his flock on the foggy Alpine heights. It's the 17th of his ewes to be savaged in a month.

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"We came to this spot on June 24. A week later we were attacked" by wolves, Vignon, 62, told AFP. It was the first of at least four attacks over the past month.

"Every morning when I get up, I wonder what I am going to find on the spot where the sheep have spent the night," he says. "I'm not here to feed those wolves!"

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People are pictured collecting the carcasses of dead sheep from the bottom of a 20-metre-high cliff, in 2004, in Saint-Etienne-de-Tinee. Shepherds claimed that a wolf attack forced the sheep over the cliff.

The predators have also appeared in the Pyrenees and in the heart of France in the Massif Central mountain range, but the government says these far-flung wolves also originate from the Italian pack.

Regional authorities estimate the French [wolf](#) population at between 170 and 200 this year, up from 140 to 170 last year. The government says wolves killed 1,329 animals, mostly sheep, in France this year up to July 22.

"We are beginning to wonder if there is a type of wolf that has no fear... since humans are not doing anything to them," says Pascal Grosjean, a

French government wolf expert.

One such pack of fearless wolves swooped on a flock in broad daylight under the noses of two shepherds and five sheep dogs in the Alps in November 2010, Grosjean said.

European Union law forbids Vignon to reach for a rifle to solve his wolf problem, though as a last resort authorities can authorise the strategic shooting of a particularly deadly wolf, up to a limit of six per year.

Police in the Alps told AFP they had authorised one such hit last weekend after a wolf devoured 10 sheep and sent a further 62 in panic plunging to their deaths in a ravine. Thirty went missing in the overnight attack.

State officials have suggested Vignon fence his sheep in with electric wire -- not a practical option in the remote, rocky spots where he grazes his flocks.

He has considered using fierce mountain sheep dogs to protect his flock, but hesitates for fear they may bite passing hikers.

"Protection measures are never 100 percent effective because the wolf can exploit the slightest weakness," said Grosjean.

The state has already paid out 364,000 euros (530,000 dollars) to farmers and shepherds such as Vignon this year to compensate them for their mauled sheep.

"I hope that after this hasty measure we can introduce a regulation" limiting the number of wolves, said Yves Derbez, who lost 45 sheep to a wolf earlier this month.

"We have to take effective measures now before [sheep](#) farming disappears altogether."

Calls for more freedom to shoot the wolves alarmed environmentalists but many elected officials insisted it was necessary.

"We are perfectly aware of the problems encountered by the farmers," said Green coalition spokesman Pascal Durand. "But we are committed to the coexistence of humans and animals."

The head of the regional council, Jean-Louis Bianco, insisted however: "The wolf is no longer an endangered species," in comments on the radio.

"The shepherds and their flocks are the endangered species."

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