

Wolves at the door, Alpine shepherd can't imagine any other life

November 14 2018, by Gersende Rambourg



Shepherd Gaetan Meme has just finished his third season of transhumance in the French Alps, or the tradition of guiding livestock up into the alpine pastures to graze and staying with them

He sleeps fully dressed, dreading a midnight wolf attack on the flock of

sheep penned in close by his hut, high up in the French Alps.

"The fears of last year came back," says Gaetan Meme, after his third season of transhumance, the timeless tradition of guiding livestock up into the rich alpine pastures to graze and staying with them.

The green velvet mountains dotted with rocky outcrops between the Belledonne massif and the Maurienne valley, an idyllic playground for hikers, are his kingdom from June to October.

It's a magnificent backdrop that can quickly reveal a dark side when you have to look after 1,300 vulnerable animals.

"When my first sheep was killed I immediately felt that I had failed, that I had not carried out my duty," Meme says gravely of the 2016 attack, which has haunted him ever since.

"I quickly found the body, there was a huge red stain. Bite marks on the neck, the rib cage ripped open... the heart, lungs and liver had been eaten."

From the start of his first season, the 24-year-old shepherd found himself face to face with the wolf, trying to fight it off.

"He was there on the end of my staff every evening for a week," he recalls.



From June to October, Gaetan Meme, 24, is in the mountains looking after 1,300 sheep

"The sheep were so disturbed they broke out of the pen in panic."

Sleepless nights took a toll and fatigue convinced him another sheep had been savaged. In the end, he's not sure if barking dogs woke him or a nightmare.

To beat the wolves, you have to throw them off the track, he says. Move the penned area, make plenty of noise, light a fire, make scarecrows—all can help.

"I put some fur from the female dog on that one (a nearby scarecrow), to

give it a smell," he explains, standing outside the picturesque wooden hut, white curtains on the windows.

There are about 1,000 shepherds left in France today.



But the shepherd has to contend with wolves which have attacked his flock

The solitary life still attracts plenty of youngsters seeking a change, but few stay on beyond a couple of seasons.

"Everywhere you go, you are an outsider. You are a curiosity, often attracting a mixture of fear and fascination," Meme, who is single, says.

Waking up to Jimi Hendrix

For him, the job is a lifetime vocation. "I can't remember ever wanting to do anything else," he says.

As a young boy he would spend "hours looking out of the window" but was afraid of animals, until he got a cat.



Gaetan Meme says you have to throw the wolves off the track by moving the pen area, among other things

"Today I have more contact with animals than humans," he admits.

At 6:30 a.m., Jimi Hendrix guitar riffs wake Meme. Black hair and green eyes, dressed in thick corduroy trousers, a sleeveless jacket and lumberjack shirt, he looks every inch a shepherd.

Every other morning, before releasing the sheep, he spreads salt over the rocks. The ewes love it, "like we do crisps with a drink, it makes them thirsty and hungry," he says.

The flock charges after the salt, making a thunderous noise full of bells and bleating. The shepherd answers with a very good imitation.

He looks for limps, pulls up a hind leg and trims a damaged hoof.



The solitary life of a shepherd still attracts plenty of youngsters but few stay on beyond a couple of seasons

'A nomad who goes nowhere'

The flock grazes all day. The ewes are either pregnant or have lambed recently.

Up at 2,000 metres (almost 6,600 feet) above the little village of Saint-Colomban-des-Villards in the Savoy region, the shepherd's biggest concern is fog when "the ewes spread out" and become lost.

And they do not like rain. They get cold and their fleece soaks up the water. If there's no shelter, they halt and "stand with their rear facing the wind" until it's over.

The days are long as the clouds float over the peaks. "You should not worry about doing nothing for hours," smiles the young man, who listens to a small transistor radio all the time.



"Everywhere you go, you are an outsider. You are a curiosity," says shepherd Gaetan Meme, of his lifestyle

He follows the sheep where they like to graze, helped by three dogs.

It involves a lot of walking without really going anywhere. "I'm a nomad who goes nowhere," he laughs. "I know only the pasture. Not what lies above or round the side."

When he was 15 and at agricultural college, Meme followed a shepherd in the Pyrenees for work experience. "I did not want to go back down the mountain," he says.

Today, it takes him a month to re-adjust to city life when he moves back

to Angers, in western France, in October.

But he admits it only takes a couple of days to acclimatise when he climbs the meadows in spring. "Being with yourself, which many people run from, is exactly what I look for," says Meme.



There are about 1,000 shepherds left in France today

Cruel fairy tale

He uses different whistle sounds for left and right. And talks to the sheep which have names. "Leica, oh go behind. Left I told you, go.

"Rey...", he shouts at a young sheep dog still in training. It's short for 'reste', meaning remain or stay. "We don't use 'sss' sounds, it excites the dogs," he adds.

Prudence, a big white bitch needs plenty of patting, but she is very smart, working only at night, on instinct. Born on a sheep farm, "she thinks she's one of the flock and protects it".

Suddenly something startles the shepherd. He spots a ewe, her leg caught between two rocks and badly fractured.



For Gaetan Meme, being a shepherd is all he can ever remember wanting to do

She is too heavy to be carried back and too injured to keep up with the flock, so spends the night alone.

And as in a cruel fairy tale ending, the big bad wolf passes by several days later and gobbles up the stricken [sheep](#).



It takes Gaetan Meme a month to re-adjust to city life when he moves back to Angers at the end of the shepherding season



Shepherd Gaetan Meme says that when he lost the first sheep to a wolf attack "I immediately felt that I had failed"

© 2018 AFP

Citation: Wolves at the door, Alpine shepherd can't imagine any other life (2018, November 14) retrieved 6 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2018-11-wolves-door-alpine-shepherd-life.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.