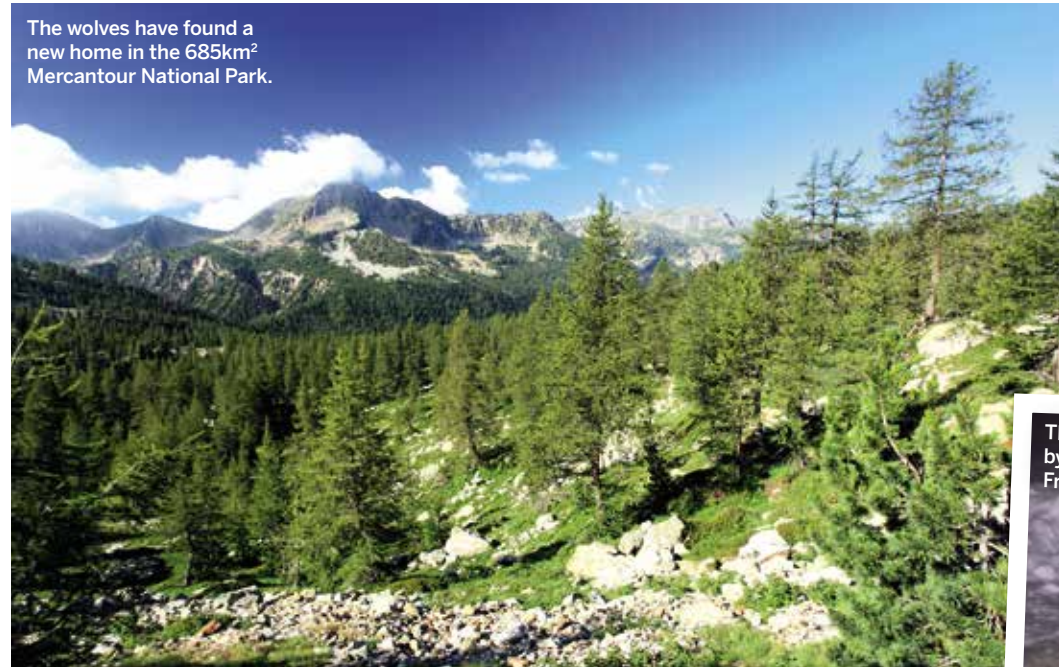




There are 1,000–2,000 wolves in Italy.

The wolves have found a new home in the 685km² Mercantour National Park.



THE NUMBERS OF THE BEAST

12,000

The estimated number of wolves in Europe, excluding Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, spread between 28 countries. This figure is roughly twice the wolf population of the lower 48 states of the USA.

This wolf was photographed by a camera-trap near the French city of Gap.



FRENCH WOLVES MEET RESISTANCE

A POPULATION OF WOLVES IN ITALY HAS SPREAD TO FRANCE, WHERE THE ANIMALS ARE COMING INTO CONFLICT WITH FARMERS. SIMON BIRCH ASKS WHAT CAN BE DONE, AND WHETHER THERE ARE LESSONS FOR THE UK.

Persecuted to extinction in the 1930s, the wolf quietly slipped back into France in 1992 over the Alps from Italy – and as one of Europe’s most maligned and misunderstood animals, it’s been dominating the French headlines ever since.

With the most recent survey from 2014 suggesting that 282 wolves are now roaming across France (down from 301 in 2013), the question of what to do about the wolf has become one of the most bitter and divisive in the country.

Environmental campaigners such as Jean-Christophe Poupet of WWF-France welcome the returning wolf with open arms. “We’re very excited that the wolf has come back,” he says. “It’s

very important to have it back on French territory, because it is the apex predator of our forest and mountain ecosystems and can help keep the numbers of wild grazing animals in check.”

Others, though, aren’t as happy, such as Pierrot Samuel who farms sheep in the southern French Alps where wolf populations reach their peak density. “I didn’t get into farming just to feed my sheep to a wild animal,” says Samuel, who last year lost 25 of his 250-strong flock to wolf attacks.

“There’s been an explosion in wolf numbers and there are too many,” he concludes.

In 2014 there were a reported 8,576 sheep and other livestock killed by wolves; the French authorities now operate a

Right: the tour operator Undiscovered Alps runs trips to track wolves. Far right: in 2015 farmer Pierrot Samuel lost 25 sheep to wolf attacks.

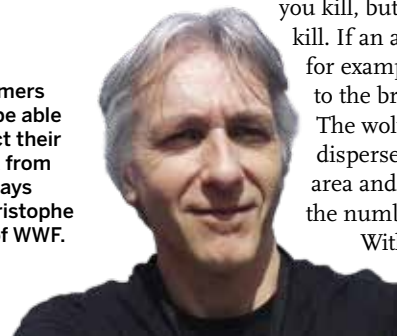


compensation scheme, which paid out roughly €2 million (£1.56 million) to make up for the farmers’ losses.

But even though farmers are not losing out financially, Samuel is keen for the relevant authorities to take more action.

“The compensation is okay but we shouldn’t have to rely on government handouts,” he says.

More farmers need to be able to protect their livestock from wolves, says Jean-Christophe Poupet of WWF.



“We want the number of wolves to be controlled.”

Following pressure from sheep farmers, the French government has now agreed to increase the official annual cull of wolves to 36, something which has angered environmental campaigners.

“Shooting wolves will solve nothing,” says Poupet. “It’s not a question of how many wolves you kill, but which wolves you kill. If an alpha male was shot, for example, this would lead to the break-up of a pack.

The wolves would then disperse into a much wider area and this could increase the number of attacks.”

With wolves protected in France under European laws, the French

environmental group Ferus and WWF are taking legal action against the government in a bid to stop the cull. Instead of shooting wolves, campaigners say that the long-term solution has to be one of people learning to live with them.

LIVESTOCK DEFENCE

Many farmers, for example, now have specially trained dogs to protect sheep, as well as wolf-proof fencing, all paid for by the government at a cost of roughly €10 million (£7.82 million) a year.

But Poupet argues that more needs to be done. “There are many sheep farmers who don’t have any kind of protection for their sheep,” he says. “We need to find new solutions for this.”

Last summer, WWF and

Ferus helped 10 farms in the southern French Alps install devices emitting flashing lights designed to deter wolves. And while it cannot be proved that they made the difference, there were no wolf attacks on sheep grazing in their mountain summer pastures in 2015.

But what about other solutions, such as encouraging wolf-ecotourism projects that could help generate revenue for local economies and ultimately benefit farmers such as Samuel?

On the ground there seems to be little appetite for this idea, according to Sally Guillaume from Undiscovered Alps, one of the few tour companies that run wolf-tracking trips in the southern French Alps.

“Large-scale wolf-tourism projects risk commercialising and possibly damaging the area,” says Guillaume. “This area is special because there are so few visitors.”

Wolf reintroduction has been

mooted in the UK, so does the French experience have anything to teach us?

“Bringing back the wolf would be catastrophic,” is the answer from Jean Aime, a forest guard in the southern French Alps. “You’d have to completely change the way in which you farm sheep.”

Indeed even one of the leading lights of rewilding in Britain accepts that much work needs to be done. “No one I know is proposing an imminent reintroduction of wolves to Scotland,” says George Monbiot, a columnist and the author of *Feral*. “It’s a proposal that cannot come to fruition without a lot of discussion and negotiation.”

But despite all of the opposition to the wolves’ presence in France, there is little or no support for wiping them out, and they aren’t seen as a danger to the public. Most people accept that

it would now be nearly impossible to eradicate them, in any case.

So it seems that wolves are in France to stay. And with reported sightings in both Belgium and the Netherlands in recent years, perhaps it’s now more a question of where they will head next. 🐾

“BRINGING BACK THE WOLF (IN THE UK) WOULD BE CATASTROPHIC. YOU’D HAVE TO COMPLETELY CHANGE HOW YOU FARM SHEEP”

282

The population of wolves in France in 2015 – a growth rate of about 15 per cent a year since they returned to the country in 1992.

8,576

The number of cow and sheep kills in France in 2014 that were attributed to wolves (and for which farmers received compensation).

40km

The distance from Paris that a wolf was spotted in 2015.

11.3%

The proportion of a Spanish wolf’s diet that is made up of domestic livestock (mainly sheep and goats). More than 60 per cent of prey items that were killed by wolf packs in north-east Spain were found to be roe deer, while 10 per cent were wild boar.

FIND OUT MORE

The Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe has a distribution map: <http://bit.ly/1PCR5xX>

Wolf: Bruno D’Amico; print and Pierrot: Sally Guillaume; Poupet: self-portrait; Mercantour: mercantourphoto/Alamy; camera-trap: Jean Aime