



▲ Hilltop village in wolf country

Walking In Wolf Country

Judy Armstrong ventures into the known unknown, in search of the ultimate alpine predator

Photos by Duncan Macdonald and Judy Armstrong

Walking can be a predictable hobby. We read a map, choose a route, climb a summit, enjoy the view. We know that when the forest track turns left, we will see a footpath signpost and, after following a trail, scramble over rocks to a named peak. The exercise will be invigorating, the views – if we're lucky with weather – inspiring. But, in likelihood, there won't be any mystery.

I don't know about you, but I think a little 'unknown' is a wonderful thing. A deer bouncing out of the mist; a brocken-spectre blooming a shadow across the sky; an eerie noise in a deepening evening: unexpected, unpredictable, shiver-down-the-spine kind of things. They keep life fresh, and give sparkle to the soul.

So I'd been marching around my own patch for a while, enjoying the moorland and heather, the rocky nabs and open spaces. And it's a lovely place but, to be honest, it was feeling more like exercise than excitement. Then I read a snippet in a newspaper about tracking wolves and bells started ringing. I thought for a bit, made a phone call and, a few weeks later, joined a small group in the southern

French Alps. Not in a park where wolves live enclosed, posing for pictures when tourists and their meals arrive together, but in wolf country. In mountainous terrain where the wolves live and roam freely; where humans are the visitors, hunting for signs of this ultimate alpine predator.

I can't tell you exactly where because wolves are contentious. Some people (mainly farmers) want to shoot them for killing livestock; others want to protect them as a wild species. So when Sally Guillaume and her mountain guide husband Bernard decided to offer guided walks on the trail of wolves, they opted for a pretty low profile.

Wolves have been official residents in France since 1993. They wandered in from Italy, earning the 'official' tag once forest guards deemed them to be permanent rather than transient. Now there are thought to be nearly 300 individuals in France with at least 90 percent living in the Alps. While a pack of 11 has been recorded, most groups number between four and eight. The family on Sally and Bernard's patch is five-strong, patrolling an area of 200 square kilometres.

Bernard has been fascinated by these



▲ Wolf print



▲ Judy heads uphill, on the trail of wolves

Slowly, Bernard raises his head and howls. His voice soars into the night, echoes off the valley walls, disappears into the wilderness.

predators for a decade. “As a young boy I read reports about wolves but knew that none lived here. When I heard they had come to this area, I realised I could follow them and learn more about their lives. Now my great interest in the wolves as animals, and my passion for these mountains, have come together. It is like a dream.”

It is a dream that he and Sally share with a small number of walkers. In ‘normal’ life they run Undiscovered Alps, offering adventure and multi-activity holidays in the southern French Alps, but wolf tracking is a new venture and they are keen to keep the impact on the resident wildlife to a minimum.

The plan is to track the wolves in winter and spring, as evidence of their passage is more obvious on snow. I chose to visit in April, but 2011 being a freak year, the snow had already melted. So, our team of five –Duncan and I, Belle (teacher), Lauren (student of animal behaviour) and Imogen (ecologist and botanist) –swapped snowshoes for sunglasses, for our three days in the mountains.

While we would all love to see a wolf, none of us are under any illusions. These are elusive wild animals and the chances of spotting them is remote. Even Bernard

admits to few sightings in a decade of tracking, although he regularly hears them at night and constantly sees signs. “When there is snow, it is much easier to trace their lives,” says Sally. “We can clearly see how many were here, predict the timing, see the direction of movement. It’s exciting to observe their hunting patterns, by the tracks and fur left by the other animals; we’ve found fresh carcasses, too, which shows recent activity.”

We meet over breakfast at a small hotel, then head in to the mountains for a couple of nights at a refuge. This is in the heart of wolf country, so if they’re in the vicinity we have a strong chance of seeing or hearing them.

The terrain is stridently beautiful. Steep, deep valleys of purple and red rock are spliced with waterfalls. The mountains rise through sharp ridges to domed peaks and high plateaux, their concave flanks gashed with gullies. The vegetation is a blend of alpine and Mediterranean, dry and scrubby mixed with lush and dense. “It is difficult to live here,” says Bernard, steering the minibus around hairpin bends. “The farming is hard and the people are moving away. But the area is rich in wildlife and there are areas which are hunted; it is not protected like a

national park.”

Nearly at our destination, he spots a shepherd in a meadow and pulls over for a chat. “This is my friend Pierrot; he was once a chemist, but now he prefers a simple life, working with livestock and living in nature,” he says. Two dogs guard the small flock; one comes to sit on my feet and I feel strangely honoured.

These guard dogs live with the sheep as protection against the wolves. The strategy works, as long as the dogs are in place. Bernard tells of a farmer who put his sheep out every day and night with their guardian, but the first night that the dog was absent, the wolves attacked.

Mostly, though, the wolves focus on ‘fast food’: the mouflon, chamois and deer that populate these valleys. On average, a pack of four wolves kills an animal for food every two days. In this area they are spoilt for choice: over the next few days we see an astonishing variety of wildlife, courtesy of Bernard’s eagle-sharp eyes and awareness.

He is always, restlessly, on the alert. As we start our walk up an untracked mountainside, he pauses: “Do you see that buzzard, just above the ridge? Directly below there is a chamois, asleep on the snow, and three more nearby, eating grass.” Later, as we

Walking in wolf country



▲ The group gathers around Bernard while he investigates the latest evidence



▲ Crossing a bare mountainside

sit outside our A-frame hut, he reaches for his binoculars, then taps me on the elbow. “See that needle of rock? Those are golden eagles, sleeping in the sun.” I look through the super-strength lenses, and gasp.

Two eagles perch shoulder to shoulder on a grey rock rib, leaning in to each other like a couple in conversation. I can see sun on their feathers, which ripple in the breeze. As I watch they slide off the rib in a lazy glide and begin a display of tumbling and spinning, their movements silky as mercury.

Another day, after a lunch in an alpine meadow, we startle a female chamois and her

young. They raise their heads and dash to the horizon in high, floating bounces. That afternoon we hear black grouse in a courting dance, a low whooping followed by warbling like wind whistling through a window. We track them through steep woodland, trying not to snap twigs or puff loudly as we climb. Suddenly Bernard stops: “They are just behind that tree. Be cautious now...” and then, in a flash of black wings, they are gone.

But it doesn't matter because we have reached a ridge where two eagles soar, black specks in the distance. Below the ridge a fox wanders through a meadow, watched

by a male chamois. We creep along the ridge to maintain the vantage point, but are distracted by a herd of mouflon on a nearby hill; when we return, the fox is gone.

As we hike back to the hut, Bernard shows us a scrape where a wild boar spent the night, and a chamois bed under a lichen-smearred pine. And then, incredibly, we glimpse the fox again, dark red-brown, slinking through the leaves.

Sometimes we forget we are tracking wolves, until Bernard sees another sign of life and brings us back to reality. He pounces on droppings, investigating the contents –hair



▲ Shepherd's hut on an alpine plateau

Wolf Walking

Undiscovered Alps offer wolf tracking weekends for individuals or groups, from their base near Gap in the southern French Alps. In 2012, scheduled trips are April and December; customised visits are available on request. **Tel: 0033 (0)6 77 36 29 42, www.undiscoveredalps.com**



▲ Duncan and Imogen gaining height in an alpine meadow

from a roe deer, a shard from a chamois hoof – but his favourites are fresh wolf tracks. As part of his contribution to the wolf analysis programmes (see panel Wolf Wisdom) he carefully measures and photographs the paw prints and distance between them. “So, you see it is a wolf by the length and shape of his stride. The wolf is narrow chested and long legged, it strides rather than bustles like a dog. He is descending the mountain. We can tell it is a male from the print size...”

Belle has a particular fascination with the droppings, which she gathers in plastic bags and takes home for her students. Kids these days don't know how lucky they are... Imogen is in ecstasy over the alpine plants and Lauren has deep conversations with Bernard, via Sally's translation, about wolf behaviour. Duncan and I are soaking up the scenery, thinking about long treks across these wild and wonderful mountains. And somewhere, maybe nearby, the wolves are watching.

While days are filled with hope and curiosity, the evenings are stuffed with suspense. Our base is a cosy hut owned by the forest service, positioned on a small

plateau beside a reed-fringed lake. A few metres from the hut, the plateau ends abruptly in a cliff that dives to a deep, tree-filled valley. This lip is a favourite perch for Bernard and Sally: with the advantage of height, and no interruption from human noise, they often hear wolves hunting and howling at night.

So, after a communally-prepared meal in the little hut, we head to the plateau edge. The sun is setting in a wildfire of gold and within minutes the mountains are a jigsaw of blue and black. The sky shimmers with stars; the night is silent.

Slowly, Bernard raises his head and howls. His voice soars into the night, echoes off the valley walls, disappears into the wilderness. He is calling to a wolf pack that might be there, or it might not – if it is, Bernard is confident of an answer.

His howl is eerie: sonorous, like a siren with a deep pitch and a high note. It rolls around inside my head and then dies away, swallowed by the night. No-one speaks. A roe deer coughs, a harsh bark in the



◀ Judy heading for a high point, in a final scan for wolves

▼ Bernard scanning for wolves from a high vantage point



Wolf Wisdom

The Office National de la Chasse et de la Faune Sauvage (ONCFS) is a French government organisation in charge of following and analysing the wolf (along with other animals). After the first sighting and official recognition of the wolf in France, they set up the *reseau loup* (wolf network). This collates information from people on the ground including ONF guards (forestry wardens) and knowledgeable enthusiasts such as Bernard Guillaume. It helps create a picture of colonisation movements, reproduction, new territories, work out best ways of reducing livestock damage, organise farmers' compensation schemes, etc.

The ONCFS, along with other organisations, initiate and fund particular studies. One such study is *Le Protocole Predateurs Proies* (PPP) which is looking at the impact of the wolf on the prey species - their numbers, behaviour, changes of habits etc. It is the first in France and Europe and focuses on the prey species rather than the wolf. Undiscovered Alps' wolf tracking trips contribute to the information gathering for PPP.

www.oncfs.gouv.fr

black valley. Bernard almost quivers with anticipation; every fibre of his frame is tense. “Maybe a wolf frightened it; maybe the pack is on the move. Last time we howled, they responded from that valley; anything is possible.”

But tonight the wolves are quiet. The sky sparkles and the chill bites our bones. It's too cold to stand so still, and we retreat to the hut. Snuggling into sleeping bags on wide bunk platforms, we leave the forest to the animals.

Before we drop into sleep, Belle speaks softly. “We can't see the wolves, but they know we're here. It's incredible; I feel truly part of their environment.” She pauses, then adds: “It is such a joy, being off the beaten track. Bernard's knowledge allows us to see what we might have walked past. And while we haven't seen a wolf, we might have. We didn't hear them howl, but they might even wander through the camp while we sleep.”

I nod to myself: it's like looking for ghosts, ethereal shapes among the trees, mysterious in the night. The possibilities are as magical as the reality and even the thought sends a glorious, unexpected shiver down my spine.