



**ABOVE: Bernard and Sally lead the way on their Walking with Wolves trip**

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 with an immense view of mountains dropping to a misty sea of green and blue. Two eagles soar, black specks in the distance. At our feet a fox shambles through a meadow, beside a stream. A male chamois watches the fox, keen to know its intentions. When the fox starts to run, the chamois follows it across the mountain. We creep along the ridge to maintain the vantage point but are distracted by a herd of mouflon on a nearby hill; and the fox is gone.

## Sleeping out

As we hike back to the hut, Bernard shows us a scrape where a wild boar spent the night. Later, under a pine tree draped in silver lichen, he shows a bare dirt bed where a chamois slept and beside it, a smaller one, for her baby. And then, incredibly, we glimpse the fox again, huge in his winter coat, dark red-brown, slinking through the leaves.

Back at the hut, Lauren finds a wolf dropping just 30 metres from the door. “Oh my God! Look how close it came! Let’s sleep outside tonight and see if it comes back!” And we do, for a while... until midnight, when we realise we are ready-wrapped in sleeping bags, perfect takeaway for boar or wolf, and race for the hut in the panic of children. Dawn is a time of mystery; the morning glows like gold. The reeds around the lake shimmer, ducks flap and fluster, and Imogen, who has slept alone on the crest where Bernard howled, stretches into the new day.

After breakfast we climb to a ridge to gaze across a valley where Bernard heard howling the week before. Belle smiles. “We can’t see them but they know we’re here. It’s incredible; I feel truly part of their environment.” She pauses, then says: “It is such a joy, being off the beaten track. Bernard’s knowledge has allowed us to see what we might have walked past. There are no people, just wild country. And

while we haven’t seen a wolf, we might have. We didn’t hear them howl last night, but they might have wandered through the camp while we slept.” And she’s right: the possibilities are as magical as the reality. I think about that as we eat our last lunch together, on an airy ridge overlooking the wolves’ territory. We scan the great combes and valleys for the last time, then descend a vertiginous slope, over rocks and through woodland. As I inch my way down a gully, I spot wild flowers whose names I’ve learned, see a track and know it’s a roe deer, notice trees bending to the south after the weight of winter, north-borne snow. I listen to the birds, watch for boar prints in mud patches. It’s as if a door to a new world has been opened.

We reach the valley in stages, everyone smiling with private discovery. Duncan has seen a black grouse, Imogen has found a new flower, Belle is pondering the intricacies of human-animal interaction. Our adventure is over but we sit for a moment, looking up at the jigsaw of peaks and ridges, trees and cirques. In there is a pack of wild animals, resting and waiting for the night, for a meal, for a new dawn. We can’t see them because this is their world... somewhere, the wolves are watching. 🐾

## Plan your trip

Undiscovered Alps offers wolf tracking weekends for individuals or groups from a base in the southern French Alps. Tel: 0845 009 8501, or (Fr) 6 77 36 29 42, [www.undiscoveredalps.com](http://www.undiscoveredalps.com)

### WOLF LORE

The Office National de la Chasse et de la Faune Sauvage (ONCFS) is a 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, it set up the *réseau loup* (wolf network). This aims to collate information from people on the ground including ONF guards (forestry wardens) and knowledgeable enthusiasts such as Bernard Guillaume. This 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, initiates and funds particular studies. One such study is Le Protocole Prédateurs Proies (PPP) which is looking at the impact of the wolf on the prey species; their numbers, behaviour, change 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](http://www.oncfs.gouv.fr)