



Testimonies of two shepherds confronted with bears and their cubs in the Pyrenees (Ariège, France)

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June 2021

***Translated from the original French document by M. Meuret & Fred D. Provenza
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1 – Purpose of interviews

In the summer of 2020, a shepherdess and a shepherd from Ariège (one of 6 administrative departments on the French side of the Pyrenees), both seasonal salaried workers, declared that they had been directly and closely confronted with bears on the respective high mountain pastures where they were herding flocks of sheep, which had greatly surprised and worried them.

One event took place on July 16 on the summer pasture of Ustou-Col d'Escots (municipality of Ustou) and the other event happened on August 21 on the summer pasture of Ourdouas (municipality of Sentein). After being made public by the breeders and mayors of the concerned mountain pastures and municipalities, they generated a wave of press reports¹, as well as many comments on social networks.

Such alarming statements, when reported by the media, are necessarily brief and incomplete, which raises questions about the more precise and detailed circumstances. This is why, in order to obtain more complete and factual testimonies, the Pastoral Federation of Ariège has collected information through direct interviews with the shepherdess and the shepherd who experienced these two events two or three months before.

This inquiry benefited from the methodological support of an INRAE (French National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and the Environment) researcher from Montpellier, coordinator of the *Coadapht* network of researchers (Coadaptation between predators and humans in their territories), specialized in direct interviews with breeders, shepherds and other users of rural landscapes and resources.

2 – Method

After agreement from the two local Breeders' grazing trusts concerned (*Groupements pastoraux*), Christophe Cambou conducted interviews with the two shepherds by direct and face-to-face dialogues (sociological method of the comprehensive interview). The interviews took place, respectively, on October 12 and 13, 2020, at the headquarters of the Professional Agricultural Training Center for Adults (*CFPPA*) in Saint-Girons, Ariège. The duration of the interviews was 29 and 38 minutes, respectively.

Note taking and drawings was on 3-D aerial photos, with numbering of each step of the events described, as well as audio recordings and full transcription of the interviews for sharing and joint analysis, and identification of possible additional questions to ask as follow-up by phone.

Editing of raw transcripts and aerial photo drawings was done to produce two more fluid and chronological "narratives" while removing all the questions asked during the interviews.

The two testimonies are made public after reading of the original document in French by the two shepherds and also by the presidents of the Breeders' grazing trusts, and their agreement for publication.

3 – Results

3.1. – Testimony of Etienne MOYENIN, shepherd on the mountain pasture of Ourdouas

Etienne Moyenin - I will start with the end of the previous day, Thursday August 20th. So, I had to herd 850 sheep with 5 livestock guard dogs. Three 'Patous' [called Great Pyrenees dogs in the US], two males and one female, one female Patou crossed with a Spanish Mastiff and one female Spanish Mastiff.

That day was the very last night with the sheep flock being left on a "free night resting area" [outside an electrified night pen] at the Har peak (**location #1** in **photo 1**, wide view, **page 6**). At this time of the summer, it is a place where sheep don't really want to use longer at night. With the emergency shelter [also called shepherd's auxiliary-predation hut, **photo 3** below], I was going to make them the electrified night pen next to that hut, which is [Etienne draws the location on the aerial photo] located here (**#2 photo 1**). The hut is at 2000 meters of altitude and the Har peak at 2400 meters. With 400 m of difference in altitude, I leave by foot every morning a little earlier [than the time when the sheep start moving for grazing] to go get the sheep. I had set my alarm clock for around 5:30 AM. During the night, nothing special happened. The night was clear.



Photo 3 – The hut used by the shepherd Etienne Moyenin. Photo © Geoffrey Berg / FTV.

It is on Friday, August 21, at about 5:00 AM [30 minutes before his alarm clock] that I begin to hear the [guard] dogs barking. The sheep are at the night resting area, at the peak. The guard dogs are with them. From the hut, you can hear quite well.

The barking woke me up, knowing that I had set my clock alarm for 5:30 AM. So, I stayed awake. I start to prepare my morning coffee, while being always attentive. By the time I emerged [full wake-up], around 05:10, the dogs were still barking as much. So, without leaving the hut, and from my tiny window that looks [up] towards the Har peak and the sheep resting area, I gave a first shot of light [big lamp - **photo 4**, **page 5**], to see what is going on. Because I felt that the barking was really aggressive. It was especially 2 of the 5 dogs that I heard barking, that I really spotted. It was the female Spanish Mastiff and one of the males Patou.

First shot of light around 5:10, 5:15, and: I see absolutely nothing. At this moment, I did not leave the hut, I look though my window, from where I do not see the sheep.

I drink my coffee, but the dogs are still barking. There has not been a moment when they have stopped. The clock is ticking: 5:30 AM. Everything the same since my first shot of light. I've been lighting up really regularly, every 5 minutes or so. At 5:45, the dogs, and I know they are always the same two, continue to bark. But there, I hear that they are not any more at the Har peak, but in another zone, by there (**#3 photo 1**). I did not see them, but I hear them much closer. I then take the decision to go out of the hut, with my big lamp, to see what is happening, but standing at the entrance [of the hut] (**point A on photo 2**, close-up view on sector of the auxiliary hut, **page 7**).

At this moment, while lighting in direction of the Har peak, towards here (**B photo 2**) [EM shows on the photo], at this level, I suddenly see a bear with her cub. Directly, I put the headlight in her face. There, she stopped (**C photo 2**). The dogs were still barking continuously.

The bear walked along a contour line [Etienne draws a dotted curve with an arrow]. At the beginning, she progressed like that [section of curve **B-C**]. But then, with the shot of the light, she made a first stop (**C photo 2**), and she started to puff. A heavy puff.

Then, I shouted [Etienne is static, at **point A photo 2**]. After lighting her with the light, I shouted to try to get her to leave. It must be said that at the beginning of the summer, I had already crossed a bear, and just the fact of having shouted, that had made him leave. He was then just above the sheep.

But this time, that bear was far from the sheep. She was probably coming down from the Har peak. She didn't have any dogs directly after her, but the dogs have moved anyway. Two of the dogs were somewhere in between the sheep up there at the peak and this bear with her cub (**#4 photo 1**).

I was staying even further down, next to the hut. By the time I shouted for her to leave, I was between 150 and 200 meters from her, I would say. And then, all of a sudden, she changed her course. She was going more like this [EM extends her dotted line to the right: **B > C > D photo 2**], really like she was following a contour line, like she was going to go through here (**E photo 2**). But just as I shouted, she started going steeply [45° change of direction downslope] toward the hut (**F photo 2**). I actually saw that change in trajectory (**G photo 2**). And she was going a little bit running, because it's downhill. She was coming in my direction.

As soon as I saw her start to come straight to the hut and me, I went inside right away. I locked myself in the hut (**#2, photos 1 and 2**). And then I heard her coming, still puffing, all around the hut. It didn't last very long. I think she was around the hut for less than 5 minutes. I heard her puffing once here (**H photo 2**). Then I heard her puffing twice more, notably here too (**I photo 2**). But I do not know precisely how long she stayed in total. For sure, less than 5 minutes. It sounds pretty good, though, since this hut is made of nothing but wooden board siding (**photo 3, page 3**), so you can hear what's going on around this hut pretty well. I also remember that all my trash cans and dog food were inside. Nothing [attractive as food for a bear] was lying around outside the hut.

Inside the hut, I had my dog [sheepdog], for the night. When we [he and his dog] heard the bear come puffing around the hut, my dog who was under the bed, she got up and went to stand in front of the door with her ears back, worried.

I stayed inside for a while. I waited until it was daylight, almost an hour after [the bear's coming]. I had to go out again around 6:45 AM, and I found then one of the two guard dogs, the female Spanish Mastiff, who had been barking for $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour, who was there (**J photo 2, #5 photo 1**), sniffing what had happened there.

Clearly, this bear made it clear that I had disturbed her [with my light shots and also my shouting]. Yes, I think that's clearly it. The next day, we found a lot of bear cub poop here (**K photo 2**).

I'm not sure what this female bear did after [coming to the hut]. My idea is that she must have gone down to the *Tuc des ours* [mountain locality]. But this is only a hypothesis, because the next day [August 22], at this place (**#6 photo 1**), my [guard] dogs behaved a bit strangely. They were all going in this direction (**#7 photo 1**). Me, I had made descend the sheep through here (**#8 photo 1**) to make them pass then over here (**#9 photo 1**). And there, the 5 dogs all went in this direction (**#6 and #7**).

photo 1). On the other side of a crest, I have my neighbors [shepherds, dogs and flock] of *Bentaillou*. And in the morning [of August 22], I heard guard dogs still barking here (around **#10 photo 1**), but they were not mine, because mine had remained with my sheep.

The rest of the day of August 21, there was an expertise by sworn agents of the OFB [French Office of the biodiversity, in charge of bears and their damage surveys]. I first hurried to recover my sheep which had all remained up there, around the Har peak, because I had the rendezvous with the OFB agents at the hut. While going up there to the sheep, I first found here (**#11 photo 1**) around 7:15 AM the one of the 2 Patou males who had barked for such a long time with the Spanish Mastiff female. I found then the 3 other guard dogs, which had remained up with the sheep, at the night resting place.

During the week [the days before the event], on Monday or Tuesday, we had a female bear with 2 cubs photographed on the mountain pasture here (**#12 photo 1**), and here too, at the level of the Ourdouas cabin (**#13**, out of frame **photo 1**). But personally, I saw only one cub. After that, thinking about it afterwards, I said to myself: But if that is the case, I could also have been positioned myself [next to the hut] between her and her second cub?

I also know, because I talked about it afterwards with the OFB agent, that there is another female bear with a single cub circulating around here. They took a picture of her [camera trap] on the Isard mountain pasture at 6:00 AM the very same day [August 21]. So, that's just a little bit later than when I saw one here. This guy told me that it was unlikely that she could have traveled so far, with a cub, in such a short time.

The neighbor [shepherd] was attacked that night [August 20 to 21] on the Isard pasture. He also heard the dogs barking at my place. He had some predation damage that night. So, is it her or not? Maybe, by hypothesis, the bear I saw would have been the one with the 2 cubs, and that the second cub would have been somewhere anyway? But I'm very sure I only saw one cub.

It's either my big lamp shots, my shouting, or the second bear cub that wasn't with her. Maybe it's all of that mixed together ...

And I had to wait for her to take three or four strides [in my direction], before I said to myself: "It's getting hot, get in! [into the hut]. It seems to me that in the first few strides, the cub followed its mother, it didn't stay where it was. But once inside [the hut], I didn't look anymore, not even through my window. The window looks up, the door [without opening], down. The door stayed closed, I even locked it!

(...) The following week [August 24 to 28], other specialized OFB agents [in charge to scare bears with non-lethal ammunitions] went up. One night, with the sheep which were sleeping over here at night (**#14 photo 1**), they posted themselves here (**#15 photo 1**). A bear came at their backs, from below. They told me that they made him leave by shooting 6 times, with double detonation.



Photo 4 - The "big lamp" used by Etienne Moyenin. Photo from the TV documentary by Geoffrey Berg and Rémy Carayon (France 3 Occitanie).

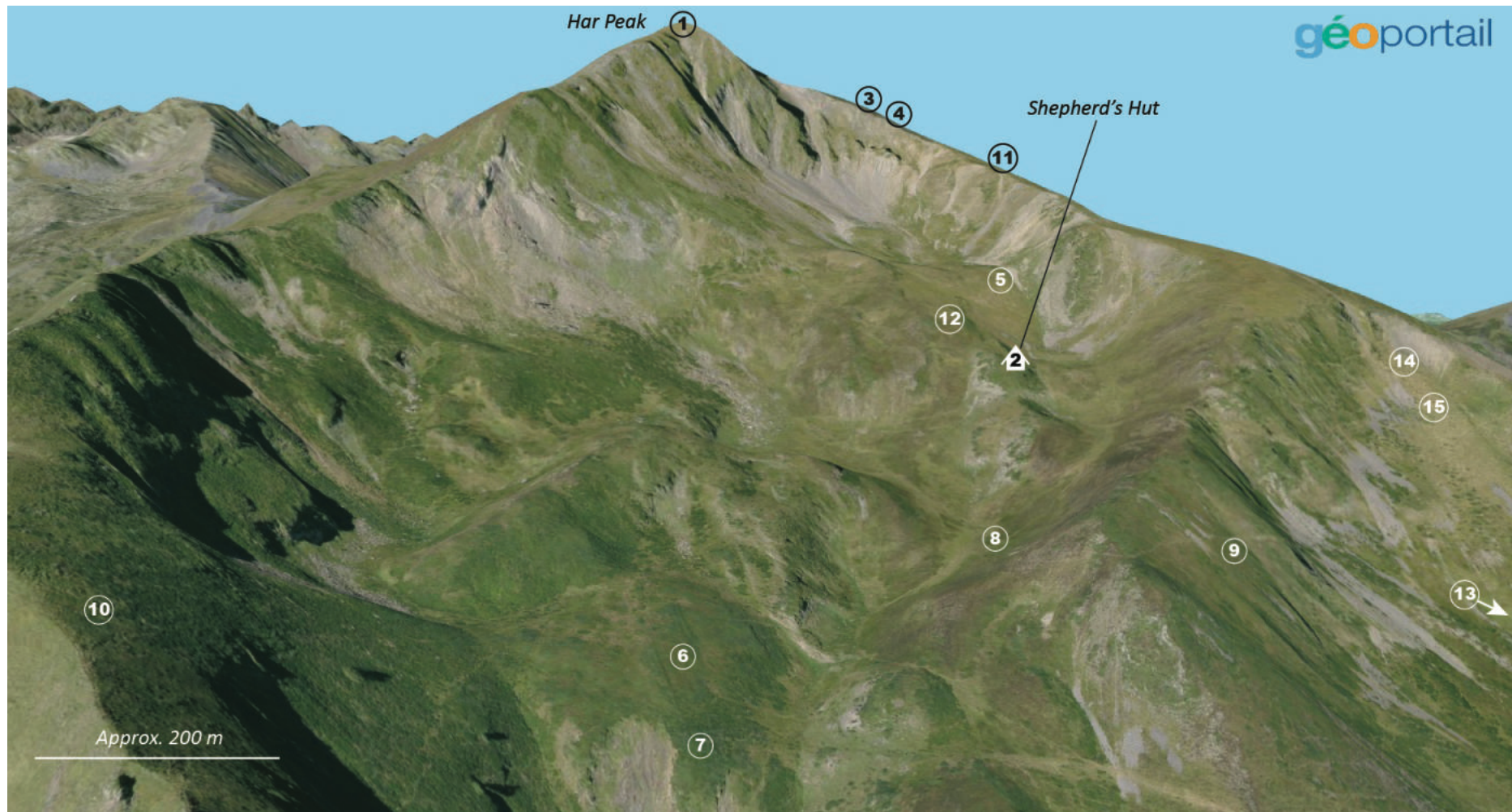


Photo 1 – View of the Ourdouas mountain pasture where the events described by the shepherd Etienne Moyenin took place.



Photo 2 – Close-up view on the sector of the shepherd's hut, where the events described by Etienne Moyenin took place.

3.2. – Testimony of Anne-Laure BRAULT, shepherdess on the mountain pasture of Ustou-Col d'Escots

Foreword: Following several bear attacks on sheep flocks in Ustou, the Prefect of the Ariège authorized the reinforced scaring of bears during the summer on two summer mountain pastures, including that of Ustou-Col d'Escots. This is why, after having watched over the lower part of the mountain pasture all along the beginning of the season, two OFB agents were present with a bear non-lethal scaring mission on the upper part, where the events described here took place in mid-July.

Anne-Laure Brault - On July 16 in the evening, it was about 9:00 PM, the fog had risen recently, it was a very thick fog. The sheep were returning to the night resting place (**#1 on photo 5, page 11**) which is right next to the shepherd's cabin (**#2 photo 5**). The majority of the sheep were on the cirque in front of the cabin, so they were already halfway back. There was only to launch the dog to finish to group them all at the night resting place.

I left in the fog, from a little further away from where the majority of the flock was, to gather the last few sheep batches. I had one of the batches in particular in mind, the one I had seen was higher than the others. So, trying to get a little shout out to those ones [to get them to come back, and not stay alone in the thick fog]. I went with 2 sheepdogs, my 6-month-old dog and an experienced older dog. I didn't have to go very far because I heard the sheep's bells right away. I thought to myself: "That's cool, they're coming in on their own! I knew by the direction of the bells that this was pretty much the batch I was going to look for. They were right above me, but I couldn't see them yet.

And there, I notice that the bells go fast. I say to myself: Well, it's strange, they go too fast to go back alone? [without a dog behind them]. So, at the beginning they were (**#3**) above me (**#5**), but then this batch of sheep ended up (**#4**) about the same level as me, I can hardly judge the distance, but it was only a few dozen meters.

And that's when I got a really good look at both the sheep and the bear. A group of 30 to 40 sheep (**#4**), and a bear that was right behind them, really on their backsides (**#6**).

At first I thought: Oh well, it's a bear. I had an immediate rush of stress. And then, very quickly, I also heard sounds of what was happening right above me. I looked up and saw a bear cub (**#7**), very small, really a baby bear. Just like we are saying for humans, it looked like a newborn kid. He was walking, but you could have picked him up like that [Anne-Laure shows as if she was holding him]. He was talking to his mother. He saw his mother leaving, and so he was chirping, he was talking a lot... It was quite a scene. I said to myself: Shit! It's a mother, and there's her bear cub. I had a sort of panic moment, because I had been told that this was the most dangerous [encounter].

In fact, at that moment, several things happened at the same time. The mother chasing the sheep (**#6**). I saw them pass in front of me, then they left, they were pushed, they were going in the direction of the night resting place [Anne-Laure traces a **dotted path with an arrow, #8**] where the other sheep had already arrived (**#1**). At least, that's what I imagined at that time.

In relation to that scene, with the mother chasing the sheep, I have to say that it wasn't a huge panic. The bear was chasing the sheep, she was really right behind them, and the sheep were moving along very quickly. But this bear, I think, could have run a lot faster than that. When I saw her running, I thought she was hyper agile and graceful. Much more than a sheep. I also understood the thing about her huge legs that hug the ground. I guess when she's really running at her best, it's not like that. I even thought that maybe she was playing, or showing something to her cub? Because, and this is what I mean, she could have killed some sheep, but she didn't. All she had to do there was to give a paw and she would crush one. She was really on their asses, so you could consider that an attack, but there were no dead sheep.

So, to properly locate the scene. I didn't see at first when the mother separated from her cub to chase the sheep. When I saw the cub, the mother was already on my [level] line (**#5 and #6**), she

passed about 20 m away from me, and the cub had stayed above, maybe a little further [from me], about 25 or 30 m away (#7). He was looking down at me. The bear didn't see me, or at least I didn't think so. But the bear cub, he saw me almost immediately. And as soon as he saw me, he stopped chirping. Immediately, he froze. He was silent and he became motionless. He looked at me until I left. He didn't move. He looked down at me.

I had a moment of panic, I huddled between the rocks, with my sheepdogs. I saw that I was getting the [phone] signal and I called one of my bosses [breeders]. I told him there was the bear and I didn't know what to do. But I quickly hung up. What I was doing was like not very conscious actions.

I came to my senses. All this lasted only 5 minutes maximum, the time to evacuate the stress. And during those 5 minutes, the bear cub didn't move, but he could see me. As soon as I lifted my head [from between the rocks] he was there, frozen and mute, on the spot, watching me.

My sheepdogs, I always told them: Shh, shh, shh! To stay absolutely quiet and mute. The young one is very barky, but they stayed quiet. I kept them as close to me as possible.

After those 5 minutes, I thought I absolutely had to warn the two bear scaring agents [OFB] too, because the bear was probably going to kill some sheep and I didn't feel safe at all where I was. I thought, I can't stay here, I have to go back [to the cabin]. But if she comes back for her cub, she'll see me.

I still decided to come back to the cabin, but the whole time [coming back] I was so scared of crossing paths with the bear. When I got to the cabin, the [OFB] scaring agents were inside the cabin, because I told them they could come in to warm them up.

All the sheep must have seen the little group coming [at high speed] and smelled the bear. Normally, they wait on the small circus, all over there (#9), even sometimes a little bit also just above. And there, in fact, all the sheep were pushed, even almost behind the cabin (#10), on the other side, so the scaring agents thought that it was probably me who had been too strong with my dogs [to push the sheep so quickly on their return to the night resting place].

I barely took the time to explain to them. I said: I saw the bear attacking, and there was a cub. Soon the scaring agents fired their first shots. We couldn't see anything [with the thick fog], we thought that maybe the bear was still attacking, that there were dead [sheep].

The flock, I managed to group all the sheep together to make them sleep right in front of the cabin. It was dark. I talked to the scaring agents for a while and then went to bed. The scaring agents took their turn [on watch]. It's their job to be vigilant at night.

At midnight and a half, one of the scaring agents came to wake me up, the one whose turn it was [to be on guard]. He was a bit panicked. There had been another attack. The fog was still thick and the sheep were completely blown all over the place, you could hear the bells all over the plateau below, all spread out. The scaring agent told me that this time he thought the attack had come from above.

We stayed an hour discussing what to do, we were really not well. But I didn't want to gather the sheep [being scattered on the plateau] because I was afraid that if I sent my sheepdogs, the bear would eat them. So, I said to myself: Never mind, I'll leave the sheep. We couldn't see anything [with the fog]. I finally went back to bed and slept until 5:30 AM.

When I woke up, one of the scaring agents explained to me that there had been another [third] attack during the night, around 2:30 AM. The sheep had returned to their usual night resting place (#1) on their own, and this time the scaring agent had thought the attack had come from below (#11). Again, the sheep scattered all over, but the scaring agent did not wake me up at the time. I think I was sound asleep. They also told me that they had to shoot several times, first when I came back, around 9:30 PM, then at 12:30 AM, then again around 2:30 AM.

I really felt that this was not a normal situation at all. As the scaring agents were leaving the next day, I called everyone. The breeders, a support service [*Pastorale pyrénéenne*], telling them that I needed help... I mostly left messages because at that time [6:00 AM], everyone was asleep.

And finally, there was another shooting in the early morning, around 7:30 AM. The fog had lifted by 7:00, and the scaring agents were able to use their thermal imaging camera again, something they had not been able to do all night because of the deep fog.

There, with the thermal camera, they saw that there were 2 adult [bears] and 2 cubs, a little more than 400 meters from the sheep that were at the night resting place (#1). Anne-Laure draws the perimeter of grouped presence - **dotted rectangle #12**. These bears stayed for a long time. They were not stuck together, but they were not far from each other. We could see on the thermal camera, they were together. (...) The scaring agents then positioned themselves to dominate and shoot. They shot everything they had, I would say at least 10 bullets. I'm not sure, but it was a big hullabaloo.

At the time, we said to ourselves that they were in team, these bears, that they had perhaps attacked each one in turn. We were not sure. That's why we were quite upset by what was happening. The bears had come in groups, they had stayed all night in the area, they had not been afraid of the shots, except perhaps the very last ones in the morning, which [probably] succeeded in chasing them away, even if we did not see them run away. After that, we didn't see them [bears and cubs] again. That last big scare, with a lot of shooting, seemed to work...perhaps.

The other thing that stood out for us was that there were no dead [sheep], when they could have easily killed several. That's really weird. The time after midnight when the scaring agent came to wake me up, the sheep were scattered all over the place. Even when I saw the bear chasing closely some of them, she could have killed some. So, weren't they educating, or training, the cubs? Showing them things? But this is of course only a hypothesis.

After that, I don't know who these bears are. It is possible that it was a mother, with her young of the year before, adolescent, or then what they call a "sub-adult", and 2 small cubs of the year. There, the specialists with whom I spoke afterwards told me that it was perhaps possible. On the other hand, two mothers together, each with its cub, it does not seem to exist. And these specialists also told me that an extra male was excluded. That the males, they necessarily killed the cubs.

But there is also another thing to tell. The next day, at about 7:30 AM, Agustin, an shepherds' helper from the support service [*Pastorale pyrénéenne*] came to help me. He had slept in another cabin. I was waiting for him to give the initial direction of grazing route to the flock. It was really daylight already. And Agustin arrived a little panicked. He said: Did you see, did you see? We had a very sick old ram, which was always in the same place, and he, Agustin, who came to us from above, with binoculars he saw a bear very well, and he was sure that it was a male, a huge male!... He said to me: As big as a car..., which was right above us, above the cabin. I didn't see him, but this big male was, according to him, in the small circus, the small hollow (#13), next to the ram, so not far at all, about 150 or 200 m [from the cabin]. We went up, but we did not see him again. (...) We said to ourselves that it was another bear passing by.

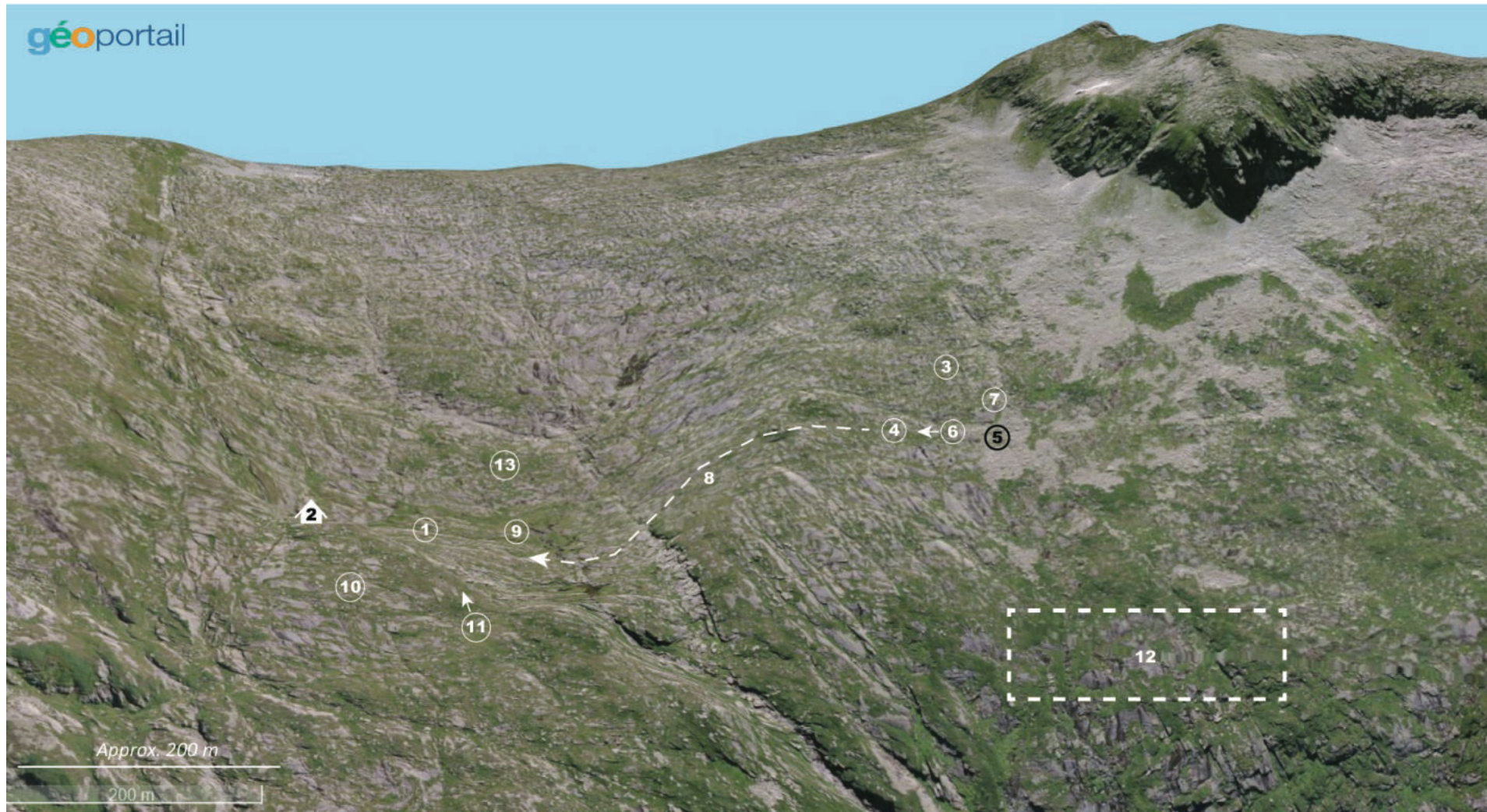


Photo 5 – View of the summer pasture of Ustou-Col d'Escots where the events described by the shepherdess Anne-Laure Brault took place.