

Interview with Nuno Pereira, a horse breeder in northern Portugal

RUNNING WILD, RUNNING FREE

Interviewer: Silvia Ribeiro. Photographer: Pedro Alarcão

How did you become a horse breeder?

I started when my father died, when I was 10 years old! I have been a farmer and livestock breeder all my life, but I also have training in equestrian tourism. I continued the family tradition: my father and grandfather had horses. In the old days almost everyone in the village did, up to 20 each. Horses were also important for transport and work in agriculture, carrying wood, grass and bedding for other livestock. These working horses were kept in a stable near the house but the rest were free-ranging in the mountains¹. Now, most people have left or died, and only a few still have horses.

Please describe your herd and husbandry system.

I have 150 horses now, but I used to have 220. Most are registered in the Stud Book, some are crosses but still with a lot of the *Garrana* breed type. They group in bands of six to 14 mares and a stallion. Each band lives in a specific area in the mountains which changes from summer to winter, depending on food availability, weather conditions and to avoid flies and mosquitos. I pretty much know their habits, and where each band will be at a given period. They graze on common lands belonging to the village and I check on them once or twice a week.

If any foals survive till August–September, we take some to sell and register the rest that will remain with the herd. We never join different bands, to avoid fights between stallions. In the old days, there were more people to help bring horses down from the mountain but not anymore, so I take metal panels and set them

up in a V-shape to guide the horses into a fenced area. Even if we don't have any new foals, we still have to do this sometimes to count the horses so we can get subsidies.

What is your main motivation to keep horses?

I only keep horses because I like them and enjoy watching them in their natural environment. It would be unthinkable for me to put them inside a fence, unable to move freely. I have always loved them and the mountains where I was born. If I ever quit with horses, I will stop going to the mountains, which would be very difficult for me. Unlike tourists, I don't get enthusiastic about landscapes without horses!

What difficulties do you face as a horse breeder?

Mainly insufficient financial support to compensate for wolf damage and all the economic losses as well as expensive sanitary and registration regulations. CAP subsidies² don't cover all costs: registering, "micro-chipping" and other costs can reach €300 to €500 per horse, while subsidies are nearly half that and compensation (if we get it!) is usually one fifth. All the paperwork gives me headaches and then there are the regular checks that take a lot of effort.

In the last couple of years, I stopped claiming for damage from the ICNF³. I lost a lot of time waiting for park rangers and going with them to the mountains. Most of the time they say there's no evidence that animals were killed by wolves, or that the attack was by dogs, and they don't pay. But there are no stray dogs around here. In fact, wolves usually eat village

¹ For more information on horse husbandry in northern Portugal, see Freitas and Álvares, this issue.

² European Union subsidies within the Common Agriculture Policy.

³ ICNF, the Institute for Nature Conservation and Forests, is the entity responsible for wolf management and damage compensation in Portugal.





dogs. This year four dogs were killed. I had a dog on a chain and wolves killed and ate him, leaving only his head. Wolves, vultures and foxes eat an entire carcass in a day or two, leaving no remains to confirm there was a wolf attack.

The ICNF pays very little for horses or foals killed by wolves. It's not worth claiming for damages anymore. I feel no one really cares about horse breeders, or even other livestock breeders.

Have you had any damage in the last few years?

Last year all the foals that were born, around 120, were killed by wolves. This year five mares, some of them pregnant, were killed by mid-February. Wolves are very strong and their packs are getting bigger: I have seen up to nine adult wolves together. They can easily kill adult horses. They kill all the foals and when there are none left they start attacking the weakest mares, the youngest and oldest. Those younger than three years are inexperienced and those aged ten to 14 or more are too old to outrun or fight off wolves. When several attack it is almost impossible even for an adult horse to escape. It seems as if they like horse meat best, preferring them to other livestock⁴.

How do your horses respond to wolves?

Usually, as soon as they sense wolves, they gather together and stay alert, while the stallion watches the wolves' movements. Horses know their territory and where they can easily defend themselves. Sometimes they stand with their heads towards some rocks. I guess they feel safer that way since wolves usually attack adults by grabbing their neck and they can defend themselves by kicking with their hind legs. Mares may make a circle, heads facing inwards and kicking backwards. Foals stay in the middle of the circle and stallions outside, protecting the group and rushing at the wolves.

Have there been any recent attacks?

A couple of weeks ago I saw a wolf attack one of my bands. It was 8:30 in the morning. The wolf kept trying to reach the band, but the stallion chased it away, with his ears back and nose to the ground. Each time the wolf ran away, the stallion went back to the mares. I saw this happen four or five times in 15 or 20 minutes, after which the wolf gave up. Sometimes

it tried to get closer by sneaking behind some rocks. Two mares were more attentive to what was going on, but the others just continued grazing, probably because it was only one wolf and there were no foals in the group.

What methods have you tried to protect your horses?

It's hard to apply prevention measures in the free-ranging system. It's not easy to change the husbandry, either with fencing or confining them at night. Horses get stressed and it's difficult to change their habits. Putting dogs with horses is out of the question: free-ranging horses will not accept them and logistically it's difficult since it would mean going there more frequently to feed and check them.

Once I gathered all the new-born foals and kept them in a fenced pasture closer to the village, but when I moved them to the mountain pasture they were all killed very quickly. This was because they had been isolated from their mothers so didn't learn how to defend themselves from wolves.

About 15 years ago I bought a mule from Asturias in northern Spain, where they were commonly used with horses. I had it for two or three years and during that time wolf killings stopped. But I had to take her out of the herd because she was really aggressive to

⁴ For an assessment of the impact of wolves on wild ponies see Freitas and Álvares, Issue 24.

people if they got close to the horses, and even seriously bit my brother. She was really bonded with the horses, caring towards the mares, and had no problem with the stallion. It was very easy to get her used to the mares. I kept her with one of them in the stable for 15 days and when I let them out she accompanied the mare and integrated well into the herd. But it is not easy to get mules, they are very difficult to find in Portugal and in Spain they can be very expensive.

Do you think your experience with wolves is typical?

It's very similar to that of other horse breeders in the region. None of them consider implementing the measures proposed by the ICNF. According to the law since 2017, compensation is only paid if horses are shepherded and livestock guarding dogs are present or if they are confined in wolf-proof fences. This is not possible to implement in the traditional husbandry system of these horses. Horse breeders are getting tired of the situation, and when this happens they may end up using poison, which kills other animals like foxes, ravens or vultures. Wolves are smart and are not killed as easily. This is expected to get even worse for us next year, when the ICNF completely stops compensating damage to horses if there are no prevention measures in place.

Do you have any suggestions to deal with these challenges?

I am not against wolves, but some action must be taken to control the situation and breeders need to be supported. Authorities should help with deworming costs, for example. The reality is that many farmers end up not registering or deworming their horses since this is very expensive and, when they are killed

by wolves, the compensation (if they get it) is not enough to cover all costs.

Moreover, if there is not enough wild prey, horses will continue to be killed in large numbers by wolves. Mountain goats⁵ have increased in number but they are not an easy prey for wolves; they use rocky outcrops to escape and stay out of reach. In my view, breeders of horses and other livestock should be paid per head to compensate all future losses by wolves. This would not require confirmation of damage, with all the costs and effort involved by breeders and park rangers.

What benefits do free-ranging horses offer?

Horse breeding can help keep people in rural areas, the younger generations, so they don't leave the villages, which are already very depopulated. Many villagers are thinking about not keeping horses or other livestock anymore. Some are getting old, their sons have left and they get no economic benefits.

Sooner or later there will be no horses as the mares are getting older, there are no foals to replace them. Many farmers will end up selling the few horses they have left. When there are no more horses in the mountains, wolves will turn to other livestock, since there is not enough wild prey. Horses are a very important resource for wolves. In fact, in the last decades, as small stock declined in numbers, horses became the most available prey and predation on horses increased.

Horses are also important for the environment, since they feed on shrubs, controlling vegetation encroachment and helping to prevent big fires. They can also be a good source of revenue when used in equestrian tourism⁶.

⁵ Iberian ibex (*Capra pyrenaica*).

⁶ For more information on equestrian tourism, see the video *Stories of Coexistence: The Alarcão family appreciates freedom – for themselves and the wolf* in the Videos section of this issue.

