

Hounds on hills

by Max Munday

Perched comfortably on the summit of Pic de Tebarray in the Haute Pyrenees, I stare down at the winding trail of the GR11 as it drops away towards the French border. A few other walkers have reached the col and will be heading south towards Panticosa. I find out later that these are an Israeli pair – brother and sister – two Germans, and a Catalan from Barcelona. The German-Catalan contingent had teamed up for this stage of the GR11. However, as they come up over the col, one last man appears climbing up to the col with a small dog. From my vantage point, 500 feet above, I wonder how the dog is going to deal with the small steep section before the col where someone has ‘helpfully’ installed a steel cable in the ‘least’ dangerous part of the gully. The dog continues undaunted. His tail wags. Waiting to see how this scene unfolds, and whether the dog will overcome the cabled section, I briefly reflect on all the different hounds that I have encountered on the hills.

Meeting dogs in the Pyrenees, or elsewhere, is not always a pleasant experience. Every year, whether it’s the Pyrenees, Wales, Scotland or the Alps, brings some kind of canine encounter or another. This often occurs in surprising places. Some years ago, the annual canine incident involved a three-legged dog in a camper van belonging to a fireman who was kindly giving us a lift down to a village called St Juan de Plan. While the fireman was happy to rescue us from the pouring rain and cold, the large dog was not, and what this hound had lost in terms of a leg was more than compensated by teeth. Fortunately, my son was placed next to the snarling beast while I resided some distance away and at least would not be devoured first.

Conan Doyle is partly responsible for an intrinsic, if sometimes irrational, fear of hounds in high places. But in the Pyrenees such fears are not wholly unjustified. Something almost as bad as the Baskerville hound is here. How often has the innocent mountaineer walked through a valley, approached basking sheep, and realised too late that in the midst of the stinking mess of sheep and excrement lurks perhaps one or two of the local Patou dogs. Typically these are indistinguishable in their off white camouflage from their charges – that is... until it is too late. Similar to scruffy retrievers on steroids, these are not the English Collies that faithfully round up the sheep, and might give a nip to the unwary walker crossing the farmyard. Neither can these be effectively deflected by the sight of a ski-pole or sharply aimed pebble. No. These are there for protection; they are fearless, and are able to take on wolves or bears. These bigger adversaries are now largely absent from the Pyrenees, meaning the faithful Patou has to make do with having a go at the hapless walker or mountaineer. The general advice in any tourism brochure is “retreat slowly from the herd”. This friendly advice is always accompanied by a well-groomed, much friendlier-looking Patou who seems to be smiling at you from the page. I wish this was a factual representation. More often than not, one stumbles suddenly over sheep in a fold. A bark. A quick movement. And he’s there – not smiling at you.

I remember a few years ago desperately trying to pull my ski-poles and ice-axe from my rucksack to defend myself from two on-rushing animals. Funnily enough, this occurred not too far from where I am now perched. Nowhere to run or hide, no stones to throw, on comes a cold fear in the pit of the stomach as the cold yellow eyes advance – vintage Conan Doyle – will my throat be ripped out like poor old Baskerville? On that occasion as the dogs

close in within gnashing distance I am saved, not by Dr Watson, but two shepherds turning the hill in the nick of time to call them off. The dogs are clearly disappointed. At other times the gruff bark in the distance is sufficient to justify a long detour around the sheep.

The dog is doing well on the ascent. The Israeli pair encourages it as they clamber up the steep ravine.

This ancient fear of dogs followed me to the Romanian Carpathians this year where the Cicerone guide book helpfully provided blood curdling pages documenting the dangers which can occur with hounds on the hills. Reality was rather different. On the first day out on the hill – Mount Omu near Brasov – we stopped at a small café where what I supposed was the owner's dog wandered up and parked at my feet. I'd never seen a dog like that before. Subsequently, the dog attached itself to us and followed us faithfully up the mountain for some miles. This was a scruffy hairball of a dog, an indeterminate breed, haunted by a legion of flies, yet remaining very friendly. Having read recently about how a small hound had attached itself to an ultra-marathon runner in China for hundreds of miles, we decided this hound had to be sent back as soon as possible. In harshest tones the hound was halted. He stayed on the same spot for some time watching us go higher and higher and as we turned a corner, he was still a small grey speck on the grass far below. The scene nearly brought my son to tears!

'Allez, allez, allez', they're encouraging the small dog. I wonder why they do not put it in their rucksack. Some dogs would be perfectly suited to a life carried in a rucksack. Nevertheless, they carry on up the hill. I watch. I am mesmerized.

Another day and another 'mountain' range not far from my home in West Wales. I walk along a road heading up to the hills and two young collies are parked outside a farm house. Will they rush and bark, take a nip at my heels perhaps? No, tails are wagging and on either side I am accompanied merrily up the path by these two bouncing collies who are clearly short of other diversions on this summer day. Attempts to send these two back are ignored. A high style and fence are no barriers and I am followed across a field. But wait...here is a large flock of sheep and they are off! I am mortified as farmers in my area shoot first and ask questions later! Horrified, I watch as the two dogs expertly gather the sheep in my direction. This is like an episode of the BBC competition "One Man and His Dog" but the dogs are totally in charge. Hoping against hope that this scene is not being noticed from nearby farmhouses, I make quickly for a sheepless field where my two new companions follow obediently leaving a flock of somewhat startled looking sheep. After much imploring and threatening these two are sent back to the farm. Probably the most entertainment they have had in a year.

I am joined on the summit by the Israeli boy. His name is Avi from Tel Aviv. He takes in the view, and is ecstatic because this is his first peak in the Pyrenees. We return to the col together where his sister is playing the pan pipes. Here I join my son, who is taking it easy at the col, and is contemplating the downward cabled section less than eagerly –

"Is it worse than it looks? Where is the chap with the dog who was coming up it then?"

Apparently the dog had got part of the way up the cabled section – seemingly making better and more sustained progress than others that day – but had required some assistance half way up the cabled section where it was carried by one of the Catalan for the last 20 metres.

Apparently this furry mountaineer did not belong to anyone on the col, but had been following the assembled multinational party across the GR11. According to the German youngster still eating his lunch on the col: "It has been pissing its way across the Pyrenees with us for over a week; the Catalan has agreed at the end to take charge of it!"

"What do you call it then?"

"Oh, we've called it GR!"