

# WEREWOLVES



In the mid 1700s, a brutal murder shook the quiet mountainous region of south-central France. There, in an isolated mountain pasture in the area known as Le Gevaudan, a young shepherd girl was found dead. That news alone was enough to shock the simple peasant families of the area. But when the cause of death was revealed, a panic spread throughout the region. The girl's heart had been torn out of her chest.

<sup>2</sup> It turned out that the horrible murder was only the beginning. Within days, another child was killed, and then another and another. At that time, many of the children of Le Gevaudan were working as shepherds. So it was the children, alone in the mountains, who fell victim to the mad killer that became known as the Beast of Le Gevaudan.

<sup>3</sup> Finally, after several children had been murdered, things seemed to return to normal. Weeks passed with no additional murders. The peace of the area was again shattered, however, when a peasant woman from a nearby village began spreading a frightening tale. The woman said that she had been caring for her cattle with the help

*In this 18th-century illustration, peasants attack the beast of Le Gevaudan as it claims another victim. Stories of werewolves have been around since Roman times.*

of her guard dogs, when suddenly a terrible creature appeared and began to threaten the cattle. According to the woman, the creature was as big as a donkey but walked on two legs, like a person. It was covered with short reddish hair and had a snout like a pig. It was so ferocious that the woman's dogs were terrified of it. Instead of chasing the creature away, as they were trained to do, the dogs turned and ran, leaving the woman and her cattle at the mercy of the beast. Luckily, when the monster approached the cattle, the cows lowered their horns and attacked, causing the beast to flee.

<sup>4</sup> When the people of Le Gevaudan heard the woman's story, they weren't sure what to think. To most of them, the idea of an animal that could scare off guard dogs sounded preposterous. But their disbelief soon vanished. A local hunter known for his dependability and truthfulness reported seeing the same animal that the woman had described. The hunter explained that he had tried to shoot the creature but that his shot had done no good. He wasn't sure if he had missed or if his bullet had simply had no effect on the beast.

<sup>5</sup> Right after the hunter reported the incident, the killings began again. More young children were found dead in the fields, their hearts torn from their bodies. The terrified people of Le Gevaudan concluded that the killer must be the monstrous creature that had been seen by the hunter and the peasant woman from the neighboring town. In desperation, the villagers announced that children would

no longer be allowed to herd sheep up to the mountain pastures. Everyone also stopped going out after dark. And whenever the people of the town did gather together, they talked of nothing but the *loup-garou*, "the werewolf," that was killing their children.

<sup>6</sup> It did not take long for stories of the loup-garou to reach the French king. He sent a detachment of soldiers to search for and destroy the beast. Almost as soon as the soldiers entered Le Gevaudan, they encountered the creature. Quickly they fired on it, but it disappeared into the woods without leaving a trace. The soldiers searched the local forests carefully, but found neither the living creature nor its body. At last the troops were convinced that they had mortally wounded the beast and that it had crawled off to some hidden place to die. The soldiers left the area, and their commander reported the success of the mission to the king.

<sup>7</sup> The people of Le Gevaudan were delighted. They began once again to venture out after dark. The children resumed their jobs as shepherds. Everyone in the region breathed a great sigh of relief. Then, without warning, the nightmare began again. Yet another child was found dead.

<sup>8</sup> At about the same time, an enormous wolf was spotted on a mountain in a nearby area. Again the king dispatched a band of soldiers to search for the creature. The troops did find and kill a large wolf that they claimed was the "Beast of Le Gevaudan." The king proudly

announced that the loup-garou was dead. But apparently the wolf killed by the soldiers was not the loup-garou, for the killings continued. For the next three years, the monster terrorized the villagers in the area of Le Gevaudan. It left a long trail of mutilated corpses and caused many townspeople to abandon their homes and villages.

<sup>9</sup> Finally a local nobleman decided to organize a monster hunt. The hunter, who vowed not to rest until the beast was dead, succeeded in surrounding the notorious creature in a patch of woods. One hunter fired two silver bullets at the beast, and at long last it fell dead.

<sup>10</sup> The monster was described as a huge wolf with close-cropped ears and hooves for feet. Its carcass was carried from village to village so the people could see that the Beast of Le Gevaudan really was dead. It



This 13th-century engraving shows a wolfman who is human below the neck and wolf above.

was early summer, however, and the heat soon caused the carcass to decay. It was, therefore, necessary to bury it in a hurry. Unfortunately, the quick burial prevented people from making a full study of the creature, so today we do not have many details to help us understand what the beast looked like.

<sup>11</sup> We do know that the people of Le Gevaudan were not the first ones to be frightened by a “werewolf.” Even though it was more than 200 years ago that the Beast of Le Gevaudan terrorized the region, the idea of werewolves was an old one even then.

<sup>12</sup> A folktale from ancient Rome tells of a young man named Niceros who had an encounter with a werewolf. One day Niceros decided to walk to another town to visit a friend. He set off with a young soldier who had offered to go along to keep him company. Soon Niceros realized that his companion was no longer walking by his side. He looked back just in time to see the soldier standing at the edge of the road, his clothes lying in a heap around his feet. As Niceros watched in horror, the soldier turned into a huge wolf and ran off into the woods.

<sup>13</sup> Niceros was badly shaken by what he had seen, and he hurried along to his friend’s house. When he arrived there, he learned that a large wolf had just killed several of his friend’s sheep. The wolf had gotten away, but not before Niceros’s friend had stabbed it in the neck with a spear.

<sup>14</sup> Later, as Niceros was walking home, he passed the place where he had last seen

the soldier. The clothes were gone, but the site was marked by a large pool of blood. As soon as Niceros reached his own village, he went to the home of the soldier. He found the soldier lying in bed, with a doctor bandaging a wound on his neck.

<sup>15</sup> The story of Niceros was well-known in the Middle Ages, the period of time between 500 and 1400 A.D. During that period, many suspected werewolves were brought to trial and condemned to death. Some poor souls were executed as werewolves simply because they bore such “signs” as having hair on unusual parts of their bodies. Others were proclaimed werewolves on the basis of eyebrows that grew together in the center of their foreheads or of index fingers that were longer than their middle fingers.

<sup>16</sup> In those dark days, it was believed that people who were in league with the devil could transform themselves into werewolves. The werewolves of the Middle Ages were pictured as regular, four-legged wolves. They were not the sort of half-man, half-wolf creature that we are familiar with from the movies. Hollywood’s werewolves have given the old stories some new twists. The idea that a full moon can cause a person to turn into a werewolf is strictly from the movies. So too is the notion that a person bitten by a werewolf will turn into one himself.

<sup>17</sup> All ideas of werewolves, it seems, grew from people’s imaginations and from ancient superstitions. The earliest hunting societies often worshipped certain wild

animals, which they called their totems. One group might have worshipped a bear, for instance, another a wolf. They believed that they had a special connection with the animal, perhaps even that they were descended from it. They believed that the skins of their totems had magical powers. The men would often put on the skins and perform special ceremonies involving drugs, chants, and dances. They thought that the animal’s strength, power, or courage would be transmitted to them. Some of those men probably even became convinced, through the effects of a combination of drugs and their strong beliefs and desires, that they had become the animal. They would then act like the animal.

<sup>18</sup> Given people’s powers of imagination, it’s not hard to see how the idea of werewolves developed from such a beginning. ■

*If you have been timed while reading this article, enter your reading time below. Then turn to the Words-per-Minute Table on page 195 and look up your reading speed (words per minute). Enter your reading speed on the graph on page 196.*

### Reading Time: Lesson 19

\_\_\_\_\_ : \_\_\_\_\_  
Minutes      Seconds

## **A** Finding the Main Idea

One statement below expresses the main idea of the article. One statement is too general, or too broad. The other statement explains only part of the article; it is too narrow. Label the statements using the following key:

**M—Main Idea**

**B—Too Broad**

**N—Too Narrow**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. In the 1700s, a wild beast that the natives called the loup-garou, or werewolf, terrorized villages in the area of Le Gevaudan, France.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. The idea of werewolves—men that turn into wolves and kill people—has been around for thousands of years.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. People that turn into vicious wild beasts have existed in the folklore of many people for centuries.

## **B** Recalling Facts

How well do you remember the facts in the article? Put an X in the box next to the answer that correctly completes each statement about the article.

1. The Beast of Le Gevaudan killed mainly
- a. sheep.
  - b. children.
  - c. soldiers.
2. The soldiers who hunted the loup-garou were sent by
- a. the general of the local army.
  - b. neighbors from a nearby village.
  - c. the king of France.
3. When he was in the form of a wolf, the Roman soldier
- a. killed sheep.
  - b. killed a number of people.
  - c. attacked a man named Niceros.
4. In the Middle Ages, suspected werewolves were
- a. tried in court.
  - b. executed without trials.
  - c. put in cages.
5. In the myths and legends of werewolves, the beasts do not
- a. kill people or animals.
  - b. enter into agreements with the devil.
  - c. turn into wolves at the time of the full moon.

## Critical Thinking

Put an X in the box next to the correct answer for questions 1, 3, and 4.  
Follow the directions provided for the other questions.

1. From the article, you can predict that if people had been able to study the corpse of the Beast of Le Gevaudan more thoroughly,
  - a. we would have a better idea of what the creature looked like.
  - b. people would believe in werewolves today.
  - c. movies about werewolves would never have been made.

2. Choose from the letters below to correctly complete the following statement. Write the letters on the lines.

In the article, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ are alike.

- a. the creature that Niceros saw
  - b. the creature that a peasant woman saw
  - c. the creature that a hunter saw
3. What was the effect of the murderous attacks on children tending sheep in Le Gevaudan?
    - a. Everyone in the region breathed a sigh of relief.
    - b. Children were no longer allowed to herd sheep in the mountains.
    - c. The children resumed their jobs as shepherds.
  4. If you were a leader, how could you use the information in the article to quiet people's fears about a killer beast on the loose?
    - a. Encourage people to stay indoors after dark.
    - b. Put on animal skins and perform special ceremonies.
    - c. Send out hunters to track down and kill the beast.