



# The town that went wild

In Pettorano sul Gizio, residents are benefitting from lives that are increasingly entwined with local nature.

**Star turn**  
From the vantage point of Piazza Rosario Zannelli, the ochre-tiled rooftops of Pettorano sul Gizio are surrounded by a sea of green, the forested slopes of nearby hills covered in a verdant blanket of pine, beech, oak and ash. Today, this captivating panorama is enjoyed by growing numbers of visitors, who are

drawn to this charming town in Italy's Central Apennine Mountains to enjoy the culture, cuisine and – increasingly – the local wild nature.  
Officially listed as one of Italy's "borghi piu belli" (most beautiful small towns), tiny Pettorano is the unlikely yet hugely appealing star of Central Apennine rewilding. Perched on a







- **Country**  
 Italy
- **Focal landscape**  
 Central Apennines
- **Size of landscape**  
 550,000 ha
- **Work started in**  
 2013
- **Larger landscape**  
 Apennines mountain range throughout Italy, connected network of protected areas with major national parks.
- **Main habitats**  
 High alpine mountains, alpine grasslands and valleys, small rivers, and temperate forests.
- **Focal species**  
 Marsican brown bear, Apennine wolf, Apennine chamois, griffon vulture, red deer.
- **Team leader**  
 Mario Cipollone



▲ Rewilding Apennines team leader Mario Cipollone sets up a camera trap in a wildlife corridor between Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Park and Majella National Park.

◀ The village of Pettorano sul Gizio.

**An ongoing recovery**

While nature is always dynamic, man’s interference in the landscape often leads to rapid and dramatic change. If we could jump inside a time machine and travel back 120 years, the view from Pettorano’s Piazza Rosario Zannelli would be significantly less picturesque. A sepia photo taken from the square in around 1905 reveals hillsides almost completely stripped bare by a combination of livestock overgrazing, clearance for agriculture, and the efforts of local “carbonari” (charcoal makers).

“At this point, nature was by and large seen as something to be controlled and exploited,” says Mario Cipollone.

Fast forward 40 years and Pettorano’s natural recovery began after the conclusion of the Second World War, as Italy entered a period of unprecedented economic growth and high population mobility. The disparity of wealth and of employment between urban and countryside areas triggered a period of intense rural depopulation across the Central Apennine region.

hilltop above the Gizio River, it is neatly sandwiched between two of the most important protected natural areas in the country – the Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise and Maiella National Parks. Both are home to a range of iconic wildlife – such as wolves, wild boar, Apennine chamois, red and roe deer, golden eagles, and griffon vultures – while the flagship species is the endemic and endangered Marsican brown bear, which boasts a small but slowly increasing population of around 60 individuals.

Flanking Pettorano is the Monte Genzana Alto Gizio Regional Nature Reserve, one of five areas that are being identified by the Rewilding Apennines team as coexistence corridors between these national parks and other important natural areas. By rewilding these corridors, and enabling and encouraging local communities to live harmoniously (and profitably) alongside wildlife, the aim is

to expand the territory into which animals can safely disperse and thrive.

“I like to think of it as a positive feedback loop,” says Rewilding Apennines team leader Mario Cipollone. “As more people here get behind rewilding, the more quickly nature can recover, which enhances the benefits it can provide to local communities. People in those communities then become even more supportive of rewilding and passionate about and proud of the nature around them. Pettorano sul Gizio is a prime example of how this cyclical process can work.”

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► Bruno D'Amicis talks about his work as a photographer at the ERN gathering in Pettorano Sul Gizio.

▼ Milena Ciccolella, owner of the Il Torchio restaurant.

“There was a mass exodus of people to large cities, which left behind a vast expanse of unattended land,” says 43-year-old wildlife photographer and videographer Bruno D'Amicis, who moved to Pettorano with his family two years ago, drawn to the area's wild nature. “This was the beginning of the rewilding process, as human pressure on the landscape around the town declined and nature started to bounce back.”

“Having known this area since childhood, I've witnessed the return of wild nature really start to accelerate over the last two or three decades. Larger animals have come back of their own accord, particularly ungulates (such as red deer) and wolves.”

Eugenio Vitto Massei, who was also attracted to Pettorano's increasingly wild surroundings, moved to the town from Parma in 2019.

“My father's ancestors came from Pettorano, and I spent many summers here as a child,” he explains. “I've seen many changes in local nature since this time. These days I can even hear animals moving around in the evening from my balcony, which is unprecedented. Nature is taking over many of the spaces that humans used in the past.”

### A socio-economic engine of change

Pettorano sul Gizio is typical of many small settlements nestled in the folds of the dramatic Central Apennine landscape, which have long suffered from a challenging socio-economic outlook brought on by rural depopulation. In this regard they are no different to towns and villages across Europe: while rural regions currently account for nearly half of the EU's total land area, they only contain around 20% of its population.

Ensuring communities benefit economically from wildlife comeback has always been an integral part of the rewilding process, as it helps to further



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promote coexistence and generate additional support. In this way, the recovery of wild nature around Pettorano is now offering unique and burgeoning opportunities to many of its residents, just as rewilding is acting as an engine of positive socio-economic change in every other landscape where Rewilding Europe and its partners operate.

“Thanks to the efforts of the Rewilding Apennines team, and partner NGOs such as Salviamo l’Orso (Save the Bear), Pettorano has become a real hotspot for rewilding and conservation enthusiasts,” says Bruno D'Amicis. “It's been great to see increasing numbers of these people visit Pettorano, and even relocate here. It's been an economic and social shot in the arm for the town.”

Located in one corner of Piazza Rosario Zannelli, Il Torchio is one of the most popular restaurants in Pettorano.

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**30%**  
 Between 1975 and 2015 the population of Pettorano increased by 30%.  
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► Pettorano sul Gizio in 1905 and 2022. Contrast the bare mountains of the earlier photo with the lush young beech forest that now surrounds the town.

“We are now hosting many rewilding events,” says owner Milena Ciccolella. “These have been a real-life saver in economic terms, and have stimulated us creatively, as we now offer vegetarian dishes on our daily menu. We are also planning to offer cooking courses to ‘rewilding guests’. The recovery of nature is slowly but surely adding value to the Pettorano economy.”

“The fact that rewilding is now attracting people to come to Pettorano to stay for weeks and months – not just a few days – is really important,” adds Eugenio Vitto Massei, who rents out apartments in the town, as well as the office space used by Rewilding Apennines. “Not just economically, but also because these people form strong relationships with local residents. They are breathing new life and ideas into the community.”

### Connecting with the wild

Across Pettorano’s social spectrum, rewilding is enabling and encouraging both residents and visitors to forge and reforge connections with nature. With iconic species such as the Marsican brown bear and Apennine chamois acting as ambassadors for the landscape, growing numbers of people are now exploring the town’s wild surroundings.

“As Pettorano becomes wilder the number of nature lovers visiting and staying in Pettorano is increasing,” says Julien Leboucher, who works as a Bear Ambassador for Rewilding Apennines, and also as a hiking guide with his partner Stefania Toppi. “We are collaborating with the town’s Valleluna Cooperative to develop and promote nature-based tourism in the Monte Genzana Alto Gizio Regional Nature Reserve, and plan to create environmental education programmes and outdoor activities for local schoolchildren in the reserve in 2023.”

“The Covid-19 pandemic inspired me to start hiking in the mountains around



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Pettorano again,” says 55-year-old architect Massimo Ricciotti, a long-term resident of the town. “I’m so happy that bears have returned to this area. Usually, I walk in nature once a week – it’s a kind of therapy for me, a time where I can relax and clear my head. I know many other people who benefit in the same way.”

Even many of those in Pettorano’s youngest generation are excited at the thriving wildlife populations that now surround them.

“I love it that we can see animals every day here,” says Bruno D’Amicis’s youngest son Nils, aged seven. “We can hike or play next to the river and go searching for animal tracks. I often spot roe deer and foxes from my school window or the schoolbus. In Pettorano I feel like I’m in nature, and that’s a good feeling.”