

The Rewild Podcast
By James Shooter
Episode 13
Southern Carpathians



Transcript

00:00:08:09 - 00:00:16:00

James Shooter

It's one hell of a view. So down there somewhere is bison, lynx, bear, wolf

00:00:16:01 - 00:00:19:04

Catalin Josan

Yes, Wolf. Everything. Yes.

00:00:19:06 - 00:00:25:00

James Shooter

And people. And people. Exactly. Importantly. Yeah. A shared landscape.

00:00:25:02 - 00:00:48:08

James Shooter

I've climbed to the top of an observation deck in the Southern Carpathians of Romania with Paula and Catalin, two of the rewilding Romania team. A pair of buzzards are mewing from above as buffeted by the wind and a couple of cronking ravens joins them, tumbling through the sky in a show of their aerial acrobatics. The hillsides are adorned in old growth forest.

00:00:48:10 - 00:01:11:09

James Shooter

The high tops are glistening with snow-capped peaks and small open areas of pasture and meadow hint at a landscape shaped by people. Transhumance, the traditional practice of moving livestock amongst grazing grounds in tune to the seasons has been carried out here for many years. And this in a region with one of the highest densities of apex predators the European continent has to offer.

00:01:11:11 - 00:01:18:00

James Shooter

As of 2013, those predators have been rejoined by Europe's largest land mammal, the European bison.

00:01:18:04 - 00:01:25:00

Catalin Josan

The bison are using this valley, this valley and over the ridge, wowl, the other valley as well.

00:01:25:02 - 00:01:28:15

James Shooter

This is a big landscape they're using. Yeah, isn't it?

00:01:28:19 - 00:01:34:16

Catalin Josan

And it's less than 10% of the entire landscape.

00:01:34:16 - 00:01:39:10

James Shooter

You get a real sense of scale when you talk about it like that?

00:01:39:12 - 00:02:05:16

James Shooter

The grazers and browsers of Europe shape the ecosystems they inhabit from the tiny rabbit to the iconic red Deer. They all bite, nibble and chew, disturbing the vegetation on a daily basis. European bison, however, are on a whole other level. These bark stripping, sapling toppling, grass munching, seed carrying, brush trampling, hoofprint making megafauna leave their mark wherever they go.

00:02:05:18 - 00:02:35:24

James Shooter

It's a vital set of natural processes fighting against forest succession that leaves a wake of dynamic, semi-open habitats for others to utilize. It's also an impact that was very almost lost forever. Just a century ago the last free roaming bison was shot, causing their extinction in the wild. Thanks to zoos and private collections, an instrumental captive breeding program has allowed the formidable force of the bison to slowly return to the wild.

00:02:36:01 - 00:03:10:16

James Shooter

I'm James Shooter, host of the Rewild podcast, and this is the Southern Carpathians. I've been wanting to explore the Romanian wilds for many years now. This destination has always conjured up tantalizing thoughts of immersing oneself in one of Europe's last large scale wilderness areas, where many of the features of a fully functional European ecosystem have survived and are allowed to play out in all their ecological glory.

00:03:10:18 - 00:03:35:02

James Shooter

On the edges of core natural areas, rural communities, whilst depleted in number, have survived with low impact subsistence farming. People here move much more in tune with the rhythms of nature. Large traditional haystacks pile up in the meadows. Shepherds march with flocks of sheep, accompanied by guarding dogs and horse drawn carts, still take the place of tractors in many fields and along village tracks.

00:03:35:04 - 00:03:59:22

James Shooter

I mustn't romanticize everything, though. Life here must be tough. And whilst wildlife and wild places are still in relative abundance, there's still room for improvement. Hence the need for rewilding. A meeting with Marina Druga, team leader for rewilding Romania. To discuss what they're up to. We head into the woods behind her home where she tells me about a visitor that gets my pulse racing a little bit.

00:03:59:22 - 00:04:05:01

Marina Druga

Is the forest. yeah. I mean, I have it in the back of my house, but I cannot access this.

00:04:05:03 - 00:04:05:20

James Shooter

Right?

00:04:05:22 - 00:04:23:18

Marina Druga

I don't have a gate, because we close it. Mainly because the bear is coming already for the fourth year in my garden. Really? Yeah. I can open tourism there.

00:04:23:20 - 00:04:25:12

James Shooter

You're joking! Wow.

00:04:25:14 - 00:04:29:07

Marina Druga

So we did we put an enforced fence.

00:04:29:09 - 00:04:30:08

James Shooter

Yeah.

00:04:30:10 - 00:04:37:13

Marina Druga

Because I don't want to have surprises. No, he tried to enter in the house two years ago.

00:04:37:14 - 00:04:39:19

James Shooter

Really? Blimey.

00:04:39:21 - 00:04:43:06

Marina Druga

Yeah, we have experience like that.

00:04:43:06 - 00:04:52:08

James Shooter

So that's just, yeah, that's so off my kind of radar living in the UK, a bear might come into the garden.

00:04:52:09 - 00:05:03:24

Marina Druga

Yeah, Yeah, we. We had the bear here in starting actually from this area, up to three kilometers. Like for seven months last year.

00:05:04:00 - 00:05:04:15

James Shooter

Wow.

00:05:04:16 - 00:05:07:04

Marina Druga

Every day. Every day of the night.

00:05:07:06 - 00:05:07:21

James Shooter

my gosh.

00:05:08:00 - 00:05:10:11

Marina Druga

There were three. I think in total there were three.

00:05:10:14 - 00:05:15:00

James Shooter

Wow. Yeah. But they're not doing it anymore. They kind of went back into the forest.

00:05:15:05 - 00:05:20:23

Marina Druga

for the moment. Yeah, but there's no guarantee that we cannot meet with them. They are now everywhere.

00:05:21:00 - 00:05:22:01

James Shooter

Yeah.

00:05:22:03 - 00:05:41:09

James Shooter

It's hard not to draw comparisons between life for me in the UK and life here in Romania. A badger used to get into the metal bins at work where we used to store peanuts for topping up bird feeders. It would merrily scoff its face whilst I was fast asleep and I'd wake up to slightly less peanuts and a bin lid slightly skew whiff on the top.

00:05:41:11 - 00:06:03:03

James Shooter

That was mildly annoying. Marina and her neighbours had to reinforce their garden gates to stop some inquisitive brown bears popping in. I think what I'm realizing from my travels across Europe is that we all suffer from what I'm going to call 'Shifting Predator

Syndrome' in the places where we're currently unwilling to live alongside any apex predators. United Kingdom.

00:06:03:05 - 00:06:32:04

James Shooter

And they've been outside of living memory for the population there. We imagine the worst possible scenarios and are totally unprepared for a return. This makes us unwilling to bring any back as those peanut robbing badgers are currently our largest terrestrial predator. Something like a lynx can seem rather unnerving. In countries like Slovenia, where a recent lynx reintroduction has taken place, there was little resistance because it was perceived there would be much less conflict than the bears and wolves already present. In countries like Romania

00:06:32:06 - 00:06:43:20

James Shooter

people are living alongside bears, wolves. Lynx are now bison too. There, of course, can be issues, but they equip themselves with the necessary measures. Get on with it and it becomes a part of normal life.

00:06:43:22 - 00:07:17:17

Marina Druga

I think rewilding is quite new for Romania because until this bison initiative in southern Carpathians, nobody thought about looking to the natural processes. Conservation NGOs in Romania and looks more to the projects. They have a different activity to restore habitats, plant tree and so on. But just a few initiatives. Did that kind of work which actually restored the habitat like reintroduction of Beaver in the central part of the country.

00:07:17:19 - 00:07:48:04

Marina Druga

But when this started, it wasn't thought like a rewilding initiative. I think it's taking more and more shape and the more NGOs and stakeholders started to look towards with much better eyes. And they understand that rewilding doesn't mean that you need to remove people from wild landscape and let that become the wildest in the world. And no, because that was the initial fear.

00:07:48:07 - 00:08:06:04

Marina Druga

Fear? Yeah. But now they started to understand that it's not about just nature, but it's also living with nature and learning to coexist and still have nice wilderness and natural processes and benefit from those.

00:08:06:06 - 00:08:30:00

James Shooter

Many of the natural habitats of the Southern Carpathians have been preserved, and it was chosen as one of rewilding Europe's core rewilding landscapes, in part because of its suitability for bison reintroduction. Two national parks, make up over 50% of the region,

and they have restrictions in place with different zones of protection, a proportion of which are totally off limits for extractive activities, whilst other zones allow sustainable harvesting.

00:08:30:03 - 00:08:54:16

Marina Druga

The main reason I think it's the forest management, because we still have a very nice forest management in Romania and we were lucky that in that particular areas. Just a few clear cuts were made in the past. Okay. So in range of 15 years they are doing some small open areas in the plot three times in that 15 years.

00:08:54:16 - 00:09:28:09

Marina Druga

So it's allowing for the forests to have age structure which actually brings biodiversity. And because of the management of the livestock, this allows also for the habitat to be shaped and to keep those open areas open. I mean, the grasslands and meadows now unfortunately, the livestock number is decreasing, so bringing bison back there is quite important because that's the role of the bison to keep the open areas more and more.

00:09:28:11 - 00:09:52:19

James Shooter

Like in many rural European landscapes hunting plays a large role here, but the management and evaluation of game species is based on old methods where data is sporadically collected in the field by the hunters themselves and perhaps doesn't give a reliable representation of the state of play. Marina's team would like to see a more systematic approach through a national program because it's in everybody's interest to better understand the ebbs and flows of wildlife populations.

00:09:52:21 - 00:10:17:14

Marina Druga

Hunting management should be also about raising awareness about diversity and changing how they can get some incomes, because that's the reality. If you have a hunting ground to manage you need money to do it, so that's the reality. We cannot change that. But you can get those money not just from shooting, you can shoot with the photo camera if you want, and that's quite expensive.

00:10:17:14 - 00:10:32:22

Marina Druga

I mean, there are people in this world which will be hundreds of euros just to have a nice photo with the bear or just with the chamois, with the marmot. So you can do that because you have those species in the landscape and it's not that difficult to do it.

00:10:32:22 - 00:10:47:00

James Shooter

So yeah, so if you if you can highlight the fact that there's real value in those species and you know, people wanting to get there and I mean I would love to do that as a

photographer, you know. Yeah, this is one of the attractions to this area. For me, it would be the the.

00:10:47:02 - 00:10:48:23

James Shooter

The amazing wildlife here and.

00:10:49:00 - 00:11:06:12

Marina Druga

Hunters knows a lot. I mean, they know the landscape like probably better than their own house. They know when they will bother species or just it's the perfect moment to have a group of small tourists or photographers there to see that species.

00:11:06:12 - 00:11:31:21

James Shooter

Nature photography tourism is where I started my professional career and part of my work is still involved in this field. Photographic hides, day guides and photography, holidays are plentiful back home in Scotland, supporting a range of businesses and individuals like yours truly. And all this in a country where our biggest predator is again, those peanuts stealing badgers. So if it can happen there, I dare say Romania with its bears, wolves and lynx wouldn't do too badly at all.

00:11:31:23 - 00:11:44:20

James Shooter

Now that bison have been brought back and there are plans afoot to reintroduce vultures to those experiences only get more tantalizing. A rewilding buffet of ecological heroes to try and capture on camera. Sign me up.

00:11:45:01 - 00:12:20:06

Marina Druga

Of course, we are focusing now on bison. We're focusing very much on co-existence in that area. So we will try to establish the bison smart community around in Tarcu mountains where three municipalities are partners already in a LIFE grant And we will we are planning to develop a coexistence plan in each of these, a local commune where actually people have has benefits from the bison.

00:12:20:06 - 00:12:28:14

Marina Druga

And of course we have different compensation measures or ways of increase positive attitude of the people towards bison.

00:12:28:17 - 00:12:29:23

James Shooter

What does a fully rewilded

00:12:29:23 - 00:12:32:11

James Shooter

Southern Carpathians look like in 50 or.

00:12:32:14 - 00:12:33:07

James Shooter

100 years.

00:12:33:07 - 00:12:33:15

James Shooter

Time?

00:12:33:15 - 00:13:00:06

Marina Druga

I would like to see myself in 20, 30, 40 years. I don't know. And I will sit in a very small hut in the mountains with binoculars to look at the vultures feeding from a bison. It's not necessary a very nice image, but it's a dream. And now when we will have that, this means that we have natural processes in the area.

00:13:00:06 - 00:13:02:08

Marina Druga

And that's something that's allowed to happen.

00:13:02:10 - 00:13:31:00

James Shooter

It's time to leave Marina and the Bears on the doorstep, as I'm due to meet Catalin senior ranger for the Southern Carpathians team. I'm excited to learn more from him about the enigmatic bison and their role in a rewilding landscape. We drive to an area close to their release site where orchards, no longer managed by aging farmers, border wilder woods, scattered plum and apple trees have been left to their own devices for years, and you can feel nature on the sidelines waiting to be let in.

00:13:31:02 - 00:13:44:12

James Shooter

It's a fairly grey day here, but the yellowing Willow Calkins of early spring brings some colour to the field boundaries. It's become a favoured location for a couple of the more competent males and it gives me an opportunity to learn about their tracks and signs.

00:13:44:18 - 00:13:59:08

Catalin Josan

This one looks really nice, but again, it's not that fresh, so we thought we would see our fresh tracks. It's from maximum one day old, but this is maybe a week.

00:13:59:10 - 00:14:01:23

James Shooter

So how would you actually age a footprint?

00:14:02:00 - 00:14:19:21

Catalin Josan

Well, it's a little bit tricky because you can only estimate, but this one is if it would have been fresh, then you would get a disturbance like this. You would see rough, not rough, but the smooth edges.

00:14:19:23 - 00:14:20:08

James Shooter

And.

00:14:20:10 - 00:14:50:10

Catalin Josan

Sharp edges, crisp edges, and you would get soil that's obviously freshly disturbed. This one has been reined in at least once because everything is a little bit rounded. It's just then you can see the top over there. It's where water collected and the little bit of mud gathered. So this one is at least one week. Yeah, because we know it didn't rain for the last four or five days.

00:14:50:12 - 00:14:52:16

Catalin Josan

But this one was rained in right.

00:14:52:16 - 00:14:58:00

James Shooter

So that's good. Yes. That's interesting. Each what each kind of mark tells a story doesn't it?

00:14:58:02 - 00:15:19:22

James Shooter

Whilst it's pretty cool to be walking in the footsteps of giants, there's much more to a hoof print than simply telling us which way the animal was going. These indentations are actually one of a myriad of ecological contributions the bison provides, with large males tipping the scales at up to a tonne, their weight punctures the ground four at a time in areas thick in vegetation.

00:15:20:02 - 00:15:33:23

James Shooter

This opens up a neat little vessel for seeds to infiltrate, giving new life a chance in an often impenetrable world. But I'm getting ahead of myself. First, let's find out from Caitlin a bit of background to these formidable bovines.

00:15:34:00 - 00:16:10:20

Catalin Josan

The European bison almost went extinct a few hundred years ago for overhunting, and they went through a severe bottleneck where less than 20 individuals remained and they recovered with the help of the scientists. And we have historical data they thought that they were living on, on the territory and the territory of our country. So they all they've always been here and we can see that they still have a place in in nature they selected from the animals that were in the zoo.

00:16:10:24 - 00:16:44:11

Catalin Josan

They selected based on the genetics, the best the parents for the future baby bison. And they started from from there. And slowly, slowly they built up their numbers and then started breeding centers, specialized breeding centers where only bison are being bred for rewilding initiatives. And this is going on throughout Europe. But yeah, things are looking good and the bison that are already in the wild are breeding happily.

00:16:44:13 - 00:16:46:12

Catalin Josan

So we we hope for the best.

00:16:46:14 - 00:17:12:10

James Shooter

Catalin and the team are working closely with two breeding centers in Germany to help manage the captive bred bison for releases. The scientists there carefully select genetically diverse individuals from across the continent so that they can continue to produce healthy offspring. Remember, the species was once extinct in the wild and only survived because of 54 individuals left in captivity, all of which originated from just 12 animals.

00:17:12:12 - 00:17:18:17

James Shooter

As you can imagine, this bison matchmaking is still vitally important to improving the genetics of the whole population.

00:17:18:18 - 00:17:39:10

Catalin Josan

Each bison that's being captively bred, he has a pedigree, has trace lineage and is recorded. So you can access these records and select from all the bison that are available across Europe. You can select the best ones that fit your population.

00:17:39:10 - 00:17:43:19

James Shooter

A lot of work goes into this mix and match. Yeah, here, there and everywhere.

00:17:43:20 - 00:18:16:21

Catalin Josan

And then mix and match and pick them and then transport them to Germany and then keep them over there for a few months. So they establish a social hierarchy and then bring them to Romania and then yeah, it's, it's, it's quite a lot of work. What we do it for from passion and from, from, from or from a point of view where we feel a lot of satisfaction when things go right.

00:18:16:23 - 00:18:43:11

James Shooter

There's usually plenty of snow in the southern Carpathians throughout the winter, and I was pre-warned that I might need snowshoes to keep up with the team in the field, but due to unusually mild conditions, that hasn't been the case. The bison, on the other hand, are much better prepared than me. They come with built in winter gear, allowing them to handle even the harshest of weathers, the thick fur and body fat build up in the warmer months, which arguably is somewhat similar to me.

00:18:43:13 - 00:19:09:13

James Shooter

However, their fur coat covers everywhere, apart from those leathery nose, horns and hooves. It also has two layers a fine soft under fleece to act as insulation, almost like down on a bird and longer waterproof hairs on top to keep them dry. In times of heavy snowfall. The bison actually allow snow to cover them, which provides further insulation from the freezing temperatures, somewhat like an igloo overcoat.

00:19:09:15 - 00:19:36:01

James Shooter

Their long legs and slender build mean they can move more easily through deep snow and they often walk in a single file in a bison train. Those following the lead animal can then save energy, moving along a path already carved. They also utilize their big snowplow heads to move snow, expose and buried vegetation and their winter foraging of bramble leaves, bare branches and bark ensures they continue to contribute ecological disturbance year round.

00:19:36:03 - 00:19:37:17

Catalin Josan

This is also some bison damage.

00:19:37:19 - 00:19:38:02

James Shooter

wow.

00:19:38:08 - 00:19:54:02

Catalin Josan

So whenever you see bite marks that are here low. Yeah. And then chunks of bark go up and then get broken at the top. And then he chooses like spaghetti. Yeah. I have some videos of that.

00:19:54:05 - 00:20:01:03

James Shooter

Might say yeah, let's see that at some point. It's amazing to see the story of it though, with the teeth marks here. Yeah, And incidentally.

00:20:01:05 - 00:20:28:20

Catalin Josan

This is what we want them to do to strip the bark off of young trees and kill them basically, so they don't reforest the fields and open spaces in the forest. Yeah. Just so we

have more biodiversity. But the border between the forest and the open grassland, it's where a lot of the insects leave. A lot of the birds.

00:20:28:22 - 00:20:51:01

Catalin Josan

So having bison in the forest because it's such a big animal and strong and eats a lot, it's a lot more helpful than having just deer and roe deer because their impact is not as obvious as with the bison. Where the bison feeds, you will notice.

00:20:51:06 - 00:20:51:15

James Shooter

Yeah.

00:20:51:21 - 00:20:59:12

Catalin Josan

And if you have a herd of 180 bison, then they will they will produce some impact.

00:20:59:14 - 00:21:03:14

James Shooter

Wow, so is some of this kind of trample damage as well. Okay. Yeah.

00:21:03:16 - 00:21:25:24

Catalin Josan

Yeah. This is another another role of bears to open up trails for themselves and obviously other animals because you can see they just bulldoze through thick areas like it's nothing. Yeah. And this one, I think it's all the way around. You see, this has no chance of surviving.

00:21:26:01 - 00:21:27:07

James Shooter

And again, that's quite fresh.

00:21:27:07 - 00:21:29:21

Catalin Josan

Right? Yeah.

00:21:29:23 - 00:21:38:09

James Shooter

And then there'll be some standing deadwood and then eventually fall over and. Yes, return to the forest. Yeah. Amazing. You really see the. Yeah. Role in the ecosystem.

00:21:38:09 - 00:21:50:05

Catalin Josan

This is we've been going through here and it's obvious open and obviously open and wild boar can go through here. Wild boar. I don't think it could go through there.

00:21:50:07 - 00:21:50:21

James Shooter

Yeah. Okay.

00:21:50:22 - 00:22:06:09

Catalin Josan

It's very thick. And even though the wild boar are strongly built, they would much rather go through here than than plow through it. They get well. But the bison doesn't have a problem because the bison is this high.

00:22:06:15 - 00:22:22:23

James Shooter

So they must almost have a double opening effect to the forest because because of that, allowing the species in. Right. So yeah, if you in a forest landscape without them, lots of the forest areas are will be undisturbed. Yes. When they come back you get disturbance from many species.

00:22:23:01 - 00:22:50:07

Catalin Josan

Yes that's true. Yeah that's true. They because of the disturbance that they make and the fact that they live in herds, you can imagine 20 bison, 24 or 500 kilo animals going through through an area that they would create a lot of disturbance, a lot of open trails, a lot of pockets that they make easily accessible for for other animals.

00:22:50:09 - 00:22:58:21

James Shooter

And that how do they interact with other species. So they pray for some of those predator species, do wolves ever take on bison, or are they too big and bulky?

00:22:58:23 - 00:23:50:15

Catalin Josan

At the moment we don't have concrete evidence that the bison have been preyed upon by wolves. We do have some camera footage of wolves interacting with bison, but not attacking and killing is just like getting to know each other and finding each other's role in the in the relationship. But we hope and we suspect that it will come a time when the back a pack of wolves will tackle a bison or a baby bison or whatever, and they will start to actively preying on them because this is the natural way and this is what we want them to do, because a healthy bison population that's being kept healthy by the wolves ensures a healthy wolf

00:23:50:15 - 00:24:20:17

Catalin Josan

population. Every bison that's present comes from reintroduced animals. So there was a point where all the bison were fairly habituated with the human presence and human buildings and human smell and all sorts of things. But the females are a lot easier to get rehabilitated into the wild because the moment they give birth, the baby is not habituated with humans.

00:24:20:19 - 00:24:27:17

Catalin Josan

He's scared. He's very easily scared by humans, and their scent and it runs away. So the female follows.

00:24:27:21 - 00:24:49:18

James Shooter

Bison live in matriarchal social groups where adult females, their calves and young males herd together and follow an older female who leads the group to grazing in resting areas. Adult bulls may be solitary or hang out together, either in bachelor pairs or small groups. They tend to satellite a mixed sex herd only really coming together during the breeding season.

00:24:49:20 - 00:24:56:06

James Shooter

Herds can roam quite far and wide to find food. And here the bison happily move amongst four different river valleys.

00:24:56:08 - 00:25:31:21

Catalin Josan

We have here two or three males that come and go and produce or cause conflict, but also some female herds. But the males are usually a lot more stubborn and lot more insensitive to human presence. Yeah. So usually you have you have problems with the older males that have been reintroduced. Okay. Rarely we get born in the wild males.

00:25:31:24 - 00:25:33:07

Catalin Josan

Okay. Causing trouble.

00:25:33:07 - 00:25:39:00

James Shooter

So that's interesting. So yeah, it might just take a few generations before that conflict starts to disappear anyway.

00:25:39:04 - 00:26:08:02

Catalin Josan

We hope. We hope so, yes. And this is also an example where you can understand why this area is so good for bison and at the same time is so bad for the bison because the people still own this land and still have rights upon this land and the fruit and the trees and whatever. And you can see this is a very wild orchard.

00:26:08:02 - 00:26:35:23

Catalin Josan

Yes. It's not obviously not worked anymore or not worked that hard. And for long periods of time, people are not here. They're not, they're not being present. Yes. So they don't have a present and olfactory claim on this place. So the bison will come here and benefit from the fruits. And these trees are also bison food, these young trees.

00:26:36:00 - 00:26:50:13

Catalin Josan

And they will destroy the trees. Yeah. And for the people, it's obviously a problem, even though they are not doing much with them, it's still there, their tree and it's, it constitutes damage for them.

00:26:50:16 - 00:26:55:21

James Shooter

It's really hard kind of transitional zone because the bison don't know that, you know, they want to look after these trees still.

00:26:55:22 - 00:27:09:12

Catalin Josan

And they just, they just the bison are just doing their thing and they're moving through, through a place that seems wild and uninhabited. But in fact it's not 100% like that.

00:27:09:14 - 00:27:12:15

James Shooter

And what are the main fruit trees that are grown here?

00:27:12:17 - 00:27:14:01

Catalin Josan

Apples and plums.

00:27:14:01 - 00:27:16:10

James Shooter

Apples and plums. And that's mainly for jams.

00:27:16:12 - 00:27:25:02

Catalin Josan

It's mainly for jams and alcohol. Okay. But I would say the other way around, alcohol and jams.

00:27:25:04 - 00:27:26:16

James Shooter

That's fair enough.

00:27:26:18 - 00:28:00:14

James Shooter

The bulldozing bison team offer up some truly remarkable functions in their natural habitat, but you can quite easily understand why some of those effects might not be wanted around your fruit trees or your potatoes. These animals that have been reintroduced over the last ten years and coexistence is always at its trickiest right at the beginning when wildlife and people are learning to live alongside each other once again, Catalin and the Bison Rangers are busy raising awareness, increasing knowledge in local

communities and providing practical solutions for helping to protect crops like gifting farmers electric fences.

00:28:00:18 - 00:28:37:09

Catalin Josan

And you can imagine two Rangers or four Rangers chasing a bison through this area because we want to keep them up here in the forest. So we try that for a couple of times and it's completely exhausting because you can also you can only use the roads, you cannot use the thick areas like the bison does. And in 10 strides, the bison is completely far away from you and you don't have much to do.

00:28:37:11 - 00:28:44:11

Catalin Josan

And then you give up. And by the time you go back to the car, the bison is there before you.

00:28:44:13 - 00:28:46:07

James Shooter

So that sounds exhausting.

00:28:46:07 - 00:28:47:20

Catalin Josan

Yeah, it is.

00:28:47:22 - 00:29:10:24

James Shooter

To try and get the upper hand. Caitlin and the Bison Rangers will soon be hosting a workshop to see if they can utilize herding dogs like border collies to help drive the bison away from human settlements. It obviously sounds a bit stage managed, but some of the captive bred bison need a little rewilding themselves. Behaviour and genetics will both require ongoing monitoring as the population expands.

00:29:10:24 - 00:29:49:23

Catalin Josan

We have done last year dropping sample collection that we have analyzed from the genetic point of view, and we managed to sample about 80% of the population through some statistical algorithms. We have estimated the population to about 180 individuals, and we have the genetic make up of most of them. And based on these recording recordings, we are making further selections from for reintroducing new animals.

00:29:50:04 - 00:30:29:00

Catalin Josan

And we are planning to have a sample collection from Droppings again to make a study on their diet so we know exactly what they are eating when they are eating. And based on that, we will make another study to show if it's how many individuals this area can support. Yeah, we hope to to have a stable population, a healthy population that's self supportive and it takes its place in in the cycle of nature.

00:30:29:00 - 00:30:41:11

Catalin Josan

So it eats grasses and trees. It's being eaten by predators. And it provides a healthy environment for everybody, including humans.

00:30:41:13 - 00:30:55:17

James Shooter

When it comes to bison benefits Paula Bora is the woman tasked with making the link between prospering rural communities and wildlife come back. We head up the hillside beyond the orchards at the bottom of the valley and into the heart of this magnificent mountain scape.

00:30:55:20 - 00:31:06:21

Paula Bora

In the northern part of the landscape. In the desert mountains where I live, their local pride regarding bison is very high.

00:31:06:24 - 00:31:08:08

James Shooter

really amazing.

00:31:08:10 - 00:31:37:19

Paula Bora

It was, I think, the first bison enclosure in Romania. But people have this local pride, so we have bison here. We were the we had the first enclosure in the country. You can even we even have a bison statue in the entrance of the small town up in the in the forest. So there if people hear about bison, they are very happy.

00:31:37:21 - 00:31:38:20

James Shooter

That's amazing.

00:31:38:22 - 00:31:39:09

Paula Bora

Yes.

00:31:39:13 - 00:31:46:16

James Shooter

Yeah. So trying to capture that excitement, I suppose, and send it to other communities is the next job kind of.

00:31:46:19 - 00:31:54:21

Paula Bora

Yes. So they're in the northern part. We even have a big restaurant called the Bison Restaurant. Yes, we have. We call it Zimbrul.

00:31:54:21 - 00:31:55:19

James Shooter
Zimbrul yeah.

00:31:55:21 - 00:32:16:23

Paula Bora

Mania. Yes. We also had their local beer factory. It was called H. Now, because Hațegana is the name of the the town. But the beer tag, of course, it has zero bison on. So yeah, you can see how. Yeah, the pride.

00:32:16:23 - 00:32:22:11

James Shooter

There is very high and beer is always one way to get into people's hearts.

00:32:22:13 - 00:32:43:04

James Shooter

I'm pretty sure all wildlife reintroductions would go down much better with beer involved. I jest of course, please don't try and release Keystone species under the influence of alcohol. On a more serious note, Paula is building on this theme to cement an increasingly positive relationship between the local subsistence farmers and the new hairy neighbours.

00:32:43:06 - 00:33:11:23

Paula Bora

Here, people use what they need and then the surplus, they they sell it and they try to sell it to local markets, not always succeed. So there's also a lot of food waste. That's why we thought about a co-existence measure from an enterprise point of view. We want to build the bison food brand and this project has three main stages.

00:33:12:00 - 00:34:14:00

Paula Bora

The first stage is, our rangers are mapping land use in the area, so they're trying to understand which one is an orchard that still produces fruit farms. So after this we find the more more vulnerable areas for bison conflict and we prioritize working with these locals and farmers. In the second stage, we have already found a local business that is open to buy fruits and vegetables from these vulnerable areas and to preserve them into syrups and jams and traditional spreads to kick start this bison food brand and a third stage is to build a financial mechanism that will enable these kind of businesses to contribute to the percentage of their sales.

00:34:14:02 - 00:34:28:03

Paula Bora

We call it like a nature LEVI And these funds will be will consist in a bison fund that will be used to implement extra co-existence measures. So it's kind of circular.

00:34:28:04 - 00:34:28:22

James Shooter

Full circle.

00:34:28:22 - 00:34:29:24

Paula Bora

Yes, the full circle.

00:34:30:00 - 00:34:46:17

James Shooter

I love that. Yes, that's really good. And yeah, it turns what could be considered an issue. Bison conflict. into a positive association. Yes, he's got a little bit more money for your product and then it goes back into protective measures anyway. Yeah, that's great to hear. Yeah, I like it.

00:34:46:19 - 00:35:12:14

James Shooter

Paula's career path to working in rewilding wasn't your standard route, if there is one. Yet this is an important point that proves we need people from all walks of life with a wide range of skills to further the cause. She was a straight-A student of economics and marketing management, and just as she was getting ready to start working for a big corporation, Paula realised life in an office wasn't going to be for the call of the wild was too strong.

00:35:12:16 - 00:35:17:03

James Shooter

I can relate to that. Well, not the straight-A student part. But, you know.

00:35:17:07 - 00:35:46:23

Paula Bora

Another thing is that since I was a child. I'm absolutely obsessed with bison. I don't know why I've been vocal about it even online. I even started the hashtag that was used by people - zimbria. And that's how Catalin saw me, our rewilding officer, and then he invited me to a bison trekking experience and I was instantly hooked.

00:35:47:00 - 00:36:02:03

Paula Bora

And then when I saw the job description, it really sounded like a dream. I never, ever would have dreamed that I would get to do to work what I love and work so close to bison. It's such a privilege.

00:36:02:07 - 00:36:06:14

James Shooter

It sounds like it was perfectly made for you specifically. I mean, exactly that.

00:36:06:16 - 00:36:40:03

Paula Bora

What were the chances for a rewilding project to come in my in my home? Yeah. I'm going to give you an example how bison is actually growing local development, not only

in this particular village or in this particular area, but in the whole rewilding landscape. For example, this reintroduction site is roughly 10% of the whole rewilding landscape. But the interest for wildlife tracking has grown in the whole area because of the bison.

00:36:40:04 - 00:37:09:04

Paula Bora

People come here, they want to do wildlife tracking, but this area can only offer you two three days of great activities to do. But people have longer vacations. They want come with, they travel so much, they want to come for seven or ten days. And then they ask, okay, so what is more than this? What's what's this landscape has to offer more than bison.

00:37:09:06 - 00:37:24:10

Paula Bora

And then we take them for to see chamois or marmots or, you know, so people come here for two, three days and then the whole landscape benefits for this extension of.

00:37:24:12 - 00:37:32:01

James Shooter

The bison, are the hook, the brand for the area, Yes, it draws people in and then you can show them lots of the other exciting things here. Yeah.

00:37:32:03 - 00:37:57:04

James Shooter

In this region, small holdings cling to hillsides half hidden by the trees. The farm buildings are in various states of decay, stone based with timber lofts and terracotta roofs. The ones in good nick provide a base for the shepherds who still walk their sheep in the summer months. They're a testament to the hardiness of the people here. Some of them are quite substantial structures, which is impressive considering the distance the materials must have been transported in from.

00:37:57:06 - 00:38:08:18

Paula Bora

Part of our Ecotourism Development strategy is also to restore the charm and authenticity of these kind of these kind of buildings.

00:38:08:22 - 00:38:09:18

James Shooter

They're actually really beautiful.

00:38:09:18 - 00:38:34:00

Paula Bora

Turn them into accommodation so we would have these kind of traditional accommodation and also new and innovative architectural designs that are nature integrated and more modern. But yes, they are.

00:38:34:00 - 00:38:35:06

James Shooter
We have really beautiful.

00:38:35:08 - 00:38:36:07
Paula Bora
They are very beautiful.

00:38:36:07 - 00:38:38:00
James Shooter
Natural. Exactly. Material.

00:38:38:00 - 00:38:47:07
Paula Bora
I think I think the tourists that are interested in wildlife are more open to sleep in this kind of authentic.

00:38:47:09 - 00:38:49:01
James Shooter
I'd happily stay at a small house.

00:38:49:01 - 00:38:50:22
Paula Bora
Yes. Than in a big hotel.

00:38:50:24 - 00:38:53:10
James Shooter
Yeah. Yeah, definitely. Definitely with nature on your doorstep.

00:38:53:10 - 00:39:02:14
Paula Bora
But yeah, this is one of the opportunities to develop small local businesses that can generate extra income.

00:39:02:16 - 00:39:03:12
James Shooter
Yeah, and I imagine.

00:39:03:12 - 00:39:03:22
Paula Bora
Cost.

00:39:03:24 - 00:39:19:12
James Shooter
For locals where the things are getting lost and you know, the farming practices is dying down and opportunities for people to stay in some of that disused buildings obviously with renovation would be quite attractive. If you were just

00:39:19:12 - 00:39:45:16

James Shooter

looking to promote the region and build some profit, it would arguably be much easier to bring in ready trained guides, build some guesthouses and utilize an established tour operator to kick start the process. Yet it's slow travel that wins the race when you aim to create authentic experiences and long term benefits. Rewilding Romania have been providing training to local mountain guides so that they too can offer wildlife watching trips.

00:39:45:18 - 00:40:07:21

James Shooter

They've been helping small but brilliant local food producers get the certifications they need to start selling to tourists through local restaurants and accommodation providers. The team have even started to build a local tour operator with the intention of binding this network of local businesses together into a holistic one stop shop for bison friendly experiences. Who doesn't like the sound of that?

00:40:07:23 - 00:40:47:04

Paula Bora

Just imagine that you go bison tracking in the woods and you see tracks and maybe you even see bison, and then somewhere on top of the hill in the middle of bison land, you find a small, charming house where a local is cooking something and you have the opportunity to eat something and sleep there and wake up on top of a hill in the middle of bison land, this is I don't know, this is something that I see happening in ten years.

00:40:47:04 - 00:41:17:11

Paula Bora

I want this experience to be real and also this bison food brand. I really believe in it and I think it will become very strong. It connects local economies with social issues and nature conservation. It has such a rich backstory that I think it will and it should become very strong.

00:41:17:13 - 00:41:21:18

James Shooter

Amazing. I like it and it sounds like an experience I would definitely enjoy to come back.

00:41:21:22 - 00:41:27:22

Paula Bora

Yes. Well, sleeping in a charming place and eating amazing local food.

00:41:27:24 - 00:41:30:19

James Shooter

Yeah, who could argue with that. Yeah.

00:41:30:21 - 00:41:55:06

James Shooter

And come back I will. I want to see this place in every season. A landscape that can support both lynx, bear bison and one day soon, vultures, too. With a foundation of more than 1 million hectares of protected areas, this is a truly large scale rewilding landscape in which natural processes are leading the charge. It's so exciting to see the effects the bison are having.

00:41:55:12 - 00:42:16:14

James Shooter

You've got to see it for yourselves. And I've only seen the signs of two bulls in one particular spot. Scaling that up as they grow in number it's almost unfathomable to imagine the changes they'll bring. It's easy to see why some would describe it as damage, the definition being physical harm that impairs the value, usefulness or normal function of something.

00:42:16:16 - 00:42:43:18

James Shooter

Once you have your ecological hat on though, that word is actually more aligned to the ecosystem without bison being present. A woodland without that disturbance factor is by very definition damaged. The normal function of the ecosystem is changed. It's amazing to think the bison resurgence was only possible because of animals in captivity. Zoos get bad press sometimes, yet they've offered a lifeline to countless species that we couldn't cling on to in the wild.

00:42:43:20 - 00:43:06:12

James Shooter

12 founders are to thank for the entire modern day European bison population. We were so perilously close to losing these incredible animals for good. If that isn't a wake up call. I don't know what is. Let's hope that the trendsetters for other beating extinction. Because one thing's for sure European bison are now back from the brink and going strong.

00:43:06:14 - 00:43:44:10

James Shooter

Long live the zimbrul. Thanks for listening to episode 13 of The Rewild Podcast. An utterly hopeful story of a species making waves once more through woodland across the continent. You'll be thrilled to hear that there are now estimated to be around 7500 free roaming bison in European landscapes. What a thrill. Huge thanks to Marina, Catalin and Paula for showing me around the beluga lagoon for supplying the tunes at the Gemma Shooter for the stunning artwork.

00:43:44:10 - 00:44:08:13

James Shooter

Once again, the biggest of thanks goes to Rewilding Europe for collaborating with me on this series. The Southern Carpathians is one of ten inspiring rewilding landscapes across the continent, set up with local teams on the ground. If you're enjoying the series, please do share it with your friends and leave us a rating or review. It helps us reach more people to spread some nature positivity.

00:44:08:19 - 00:44:17:11

James Shooter

Next month I'm in the watery world of the Danube Delta. So do join us then for an insight into one of the continent's most important wetland ecosystems. Catch you next time.