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# Thinking big

Home to some of Europe's most spectacular nature, the Southern Carpathians of Romania have huge rewilding potential. In 2023, the Rewilding Romania team took steps to expand their efforts and impact across the landscape and beyond.

## Next level rewilding

Between 2014 and 2023, Rewilding Europe and WWF Romania translocated 99 European bison to the Țarcu Mountains – a part of the Southern Carpathians rewilding landscape where no wild bison had roamed free for at least 250 years. Based on a genetic study carried out in 2022, the current population of bison is estimated at around 180 individuals, which includes the release of eight additional bison in 2023, plus new calves born during the year.

With the population of wild bison in the Southern Carpathians now thriving

and expanding naturally, the focus in 2023 shifted to taking the recovery of this keystone species to the next level. Discussions with two national parks adjoining the landscape – as well as with hunting associations – were designed to

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## 105,000+

hectares of land will benefit from rewilding as a result of agreements with Retezat and Domogled National Parks.

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enhance cooperation, ensure the growing bison herds can continue to increase their geographical range safely, and explore opportunities to expand wildlife comeback. The Rewilding Romania team also worked on enterprise and engagement, to further elevate human-wildlife coexistence, amplify the benefits that wild nature delivers to local communities, and build further support for their mission.

## A broader agenda

This broader rewilding agenda, which will encompass more than simply bison-related work, is led by Rewilding Romania, which was established at the end of 2022. The Rewilding Romania team also oversees rewilding efforts on the Romanian side of the Danube Delta rewilding landscape – which are due to kick off in earnest in 2024 – and are working to promote rewilding to a larger audience.

“In 2023, we spent a lot of time thinking about the bigger picture for rewilding in the Southern Carpathians,” says Rewilding Romania Executive Director Marina Drugă. “This allowed us to identify our priorities beyond the bison

release site, which is just a small part of the rewilding landscape. We worked hard to build relationships and understand how we could diversify and scale up positive impact for nature and people.”

### Bison beyond

The Rewilding Romania team estimate that more than 20 bison calves were born in the Southern Carpathians in 2022–2023. Representing the highest number of calves born in any year since reintroductions began, this shows the free-roaming herds are flourishing in the landscape. Accounting for births and deaths, it means more than half the total population of bison in the Țarcu Mountains has now been born in the wild. The range of the bison population is also steadily increasing, and is now estimated to be around 370 square kilometres – the fastest range expansion of any reintroduced European bison herd. This can be attributed partly to the fact that the animals receive no supplementary feeding, as is the case with a number of other free-roaming European bison populations.

The 318,000-hectare Southern Carpathians rewilding landscape, which encompasses a 59,000-hectare Natura 2000 site, comprises alpine meadows, old-growth forests, cliffs, and canyons. The area currently inhabited by the free-roaming bison population, which consists mostly of half-open beech and spruce forest, is home to a wide range of other wildlife, including brown bears, grey wolves, Eurasian lynx, red deer, and wild boar.

This landscape is bordered to the north by the 43,000-hectare Retezat National Park, and to the south by the 62,000-hectare Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park. In September 2023, when a group of eight bison crossed into the latter and were caught on camera trap, their arrival was welcomed by park authori-

#### Country



#### Focal landscape

Southern Carpathians

#### Size of landscape

318,065 ha

#### Work started in

2011

#### Larger landscape

Southern Carpathian mountain range including a connected series of national parks and protected areas ranging from the Danube River valley in the south to Retezat NP in the north.

#### Main habitats

Temperate forest, sub-alpine grasslands, cliffs, and steep river valleys.

#### Focal species

European bison, red deer, wolf, brown bear, Eurasian lynx, griffon vulture.

#### Team leader

Mariana Drugă

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ties. The Rewilding Romania team also saw one of the male bison translocated in 2023, together with bison already in the landscape, travel 20 kilometres to the north of the release site, in the direction of Retezat National Park. At the current rate of expansion, the team expect bison herds to cross over into this park within two to three years.

The Rewilding Romania team are working to identify natural corridors connecting the rewilding landscape and both national parks, with the aim of predicting where bison will move through the landscape in the future, and ensuring they are able to move safely.

“It’s great that both parks are happy to welcome bison, and that as numbers are increasing animals are moving there of their own accord,” says Marina Drugă. “Supporting the population growth and range expansion of the bison will boost natural grazing and browsing in the landscape. This, in turn, will help to maintain and enhance the biodiversity-rich mosaic of woodlands and grasslands that characterise much of the Southern Carpathians. It will also help to restore the complexity of local food webs, with benefits for carnivores and scavengers.”

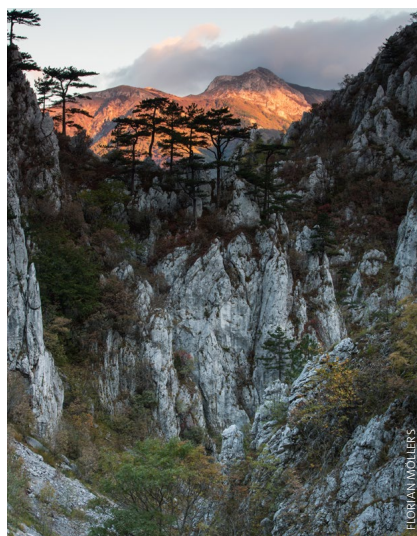


▲ Bison in the Southern Carpathians.  
 ► Domogled National Park.

### Partnership progress

In March 2023, Rewilding Romania began discussions with the authorities of both Retezat and Domogled National Parks, focused on establishing collaboration agreements. These agreements, which were subsequently signed at the beginning of February 2024, will support rewilding efforts across more than 105,000 hectares of additional land. A plan of work for each of these parks has already been agreed. The Rewilding Romania team are aiming to set up 60 camera traps in Retezat in May 2024 – and later in Domogled – which will provide a better idea of the existence and abundance of wildlife in both parks, and help to inform rewilding measures moving forwards.

“The partnership with Rewilding Romania will provide us with valuable resources, expertise, and support in our work to promote biodiversity,” says Acimov Zoran, Director of the Retezat National Park. “By working together, we can better manage habitats, monitor wildlife populations, and implement measures that benefit both wildlife and local communities.”



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## 180

The current bison population in the Southern Carpathians is estimated at around 180 individuals, with more than 20 calves born in 2022–2023.

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### Vulture comeback

Romania was home to significant vulture populations until the first decades of the twentieth century. All four European vulture species – griffon, cinereous, Egyptian, and bearded – are reported to have existed in the country, but factors such as habitat loss, declining availability of prey, and deliberate persecution led to their decline and eventual disappearance.

Following visits to both Domogled and Retezat National Parks by the Rewilding Romania team and a vulture expert in late 2022, the former was selected as the best place for Romania’s first-ever griffon vulture reintroduction programme, with suitable habitat for nesting and good availability of natural carcasses. An agreement was signed with both the park authorities and ROMSILVA, Romania’s national forest administration, while members of the team visited the Iberian Highlands rewilding landscape in Spain in April to learn more about vulture reintroduction.

Discussions with national authorities about artificial feeding stations and the involvement of livestock breeders were also productive, as were numerous meetings held with local communities and shepherds to prepare for the arrival of the vultures. A potential site for a pre-release acclimatisation aviary in



▲ The Rewilding Romania team are planning a comprehensive educational programme in 2024.

► The reintroduction of griffon vultures in the Southern Carpathians will enhance biodiversity, restore the circle of life, and boost nature-based tourism.



Domogled has been identified, and permits to build the it should be obtained by the end of 2024.

“The new partnership with Rewilding Romania will enhance conservation in Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park, with both parties sharing an interest in vulture reintroduction,” says park director Gașpar Ioan. “As a keystone species, griffon vultures will benefit other species by helping to maintain and enhance the health of the landscape and limiting the spread of disease.”

“We expect to start releasing griffon vultures in 2025, which is hugely exciting,” adds Marina Drugă. “Reintroducing these iconic and ecologically important birds will represent another step forward to realising a healthy and resilient landscape governed by natural processes. It will also boost the appeal of the Southern Carpathians as one of Europe’s best nature-based tourism destinations, which will have a positive socio-economic impact on local communities.”

### Enterprise and engagement

The Rewilding Romania team also stepped up their enterprise and engagement efforts in 2023.

“We spent much of the year making Rewilding Romania and rewilding better known and understood across the

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landscape,” says Paula Bora, the Rewilding Romania enterprise officer. “We focused on understanding the needs of local communities, and how rewilding and the recovery of nature could benefit them. In the past community-related efforts have been largely confined to the Armeniș area, close to the bison release site, so it was time to expand our scope, in line with the scaling up of practical rewilding.”

The team sponsored and carried out promotional activities at two marathons, which helped to bring many local communities together and spread the message about rewilding. They began collaborating with accommodation owners, souvenir producers, and a local museum, as well as manufacturers of local products, such as preserved foods and dishes made according to local recipes. And they also organised a number of educational events in schools, as well as a week-long junior rewilders camp, with a comprehensive

educational programme planned for 2024.

“We were invited by schoolteachers to talk about conservation and rewilding, responsible consumption, fair trade, and sustainable local development,” says Paula Bora. “The kids really loved it, and asked us when we were going to come back. These children also talk to their parents, so it was a great way of building engagement.”

Today, a decade on from the first release of animals, Romania’s largest population of wild European bison is flourishing and recolonising habitat in a hugely encouraging way. This is not only delivering benefits for wild nature and local communities on a growing scale, but helping to carry the positive message about rewilding into new hearts and minds. As rewilding efforts enter a new phase, in line with a scaled-up vision for the landscape, the future for bison, people, and wider nature recovery in the Southern Carpathians looks bright.