Със своите размери, своеобразния си външен вид и начина си на живот лешоядите се нареждат сред най-впечатляващите птици в Източните Родопи. Тези господари на безбрежния небосклон познават до съвършенство въздушните течения и ги използват умело подобно на парапланеристите, за да пестят енергия в полет при всекидневните си скитания.

The Rhodope Mountains are a true treasury of biodiversity, and a large part of their eastern range is included in Europe’s network of protected areas, Natura 2000. The exhibition presents the wildlife in one of the last surviving wilderness areas in Europe. The Eastern Rhodope Mountains are also the last Bulgarian stronghold of the Black and the Griffon vultures – the protagonists of the LIFE project Conservation of Black and Griffon Vultures in the Rhodopes area.
With their size, their distinctive appearance and their behaviour, vultures are among the most impressive birds in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains. True lords of the skies, they use the air currents with masterful precision to save energy in the air during their daily wanderings – they are natural-born paragliders.

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The Eastern Rhodope Mountains are one of Europe’s biodiversity hotspots due to their location on the crossroad between Europe and Asia and the proximity of the Mediterranean. In combination with the pristine landscapes and the variety of habitats in an area of relatively small human presence this turns them into an irreplaceable haven for many bird species.
The diversity of bird species places the Eastern Rhodopes as one of Europe’s richest areas. This raptor birds’ paradise is the only region in Bulgaria with a natural population of Griffon Vultures. The last remaining colony of the Black Vulture in Southeastern Europe is also close by – in the national park Dadia in the Greek part of the mountain.

Po отношение на разнообразието от видове птици Източните Родопи се наричат на едно от членните места в цяла Европа. Районът е рай за грабливите птици и е единственото място с естествена популация на белоглави лешояди в България. Последната колония на черните лешояди в Югоизточна Европа също се намира в близост, в националния парк Дадя в гръцката част на планината.

Проектът м’Проектът ”Опазване на черните и белоглавите лешояди в Родопите” (LIFE14 NAT / NL / 000901) е финансиран по програма LIFE на Европейския съюз.

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фотографии / Shafan Víškaný, Rewilding Europe
A big portion of the Eastern Rhodopes on the Bulgarian side are included in the European network of nature protection areas Natura 2000. There are 9 such protected areas here, with a total area of 233,347 hectares. Seven are designated as "Special Protection Areas" in accordance with the Birds Directive of the EU. Thus 56% of the territory of the Eastern Rhodopes in Bulgaria falls under EU protection.
In the past all four species of vultures in Europe could be found in Bulgaria: Griffon, Black, Egyptian and Bearded. As a result of the impact of human activities the Bearded and Black vultures are now extinct as breeding species in Bulgaria; the Griffon and Egyptian vultures still breed in the Eastern Rhodopes but they are quite rare. The Egyptian Vulture is the smallest of the four vultures.

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More than 4300 animal species have been documented in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains, nearly 280 of them are birds. The area is also a haven for wolves, jackals and otters. The brown bear has also begun recolonising the area but mostly in the Western range of the mountain.

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The Griffon Vulture was once widespread in Bulgaria. At the turn of the 20th century, however, its numbers started to drop until the species was on the verge of extinction. Thanks to considerable conservation efforts in recent decades the species has begun a slow recovery, and in 2017 it numbered 88 pairs. One of the objectives of the LIFE project “Conservation of Black and Griffon Vultures in the cross-border Rhodope Mountains” is the conservation of the only natural population of the Griffon Vulture in Bulgaria.
Красивите пейзажи са запазената марка на Източни- те Родопи. Дълбоката, тясна долина на река Арда, виеща се между планинските склонове и скалните масиви, е включена в защитена зона „Маджарово” от европейската екологична мрежа Натура 2000. Долината и живописните меандри на реката приютяват и част от най-голямата и единствена естествена колония на белисточните лешояди в България.

The beautiful landscapes are one of the trademarks of the Eastern Rhodopes. The deep, narrow valley of Arda River, winding across the mountain slopes and the spectacular cliffs, is included in Madzharovo Protected Area of the environmental network Natura 2000. The river valley with its picturesque meanders shelters part of the largest – and the only natural – colony of the Griffon Vultures in Bulgaria.

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The diverse terrains and the climate influences both from continental Europe as well as the Mediterranean determine the Eastern Rhodopes as one of the regions with the richest biodiversity in Europe. The surroundings of the town of Madzharovo and Ivaylovgrad Reservoir are a paradise for orchid lovers – more than 26 species of these beautiful flowers can be observed here; some are endemic species listed in the Bulgarian Red Data Book.
Някога Източните Родопи били покрити с гъсти гори. Днес гората заема едва една трета от планината и е основно широколистна. На най-големи площи се просмучват дъбовите насаждения, в по-високите южни части се срещат дъбови и букови гори. Сред дървесните видове са косматият дъб, мъждрянът, червената хвойна и два вида бук; на територията на България източният бук се среща само в Източните Родопи и Странджа.

In the past the Eastern Rhodopes were covered with dense forests. Today only one third of the mountain is forested, mainly with deciduous trees. Oak woods cover the largest area, and beech woods are found in the southern parts of the mountain, at higher altitudes. The list of tree species includes downy oak, flowering ash, prickly juniper and two species of beech; in Bulgaria the Oriental beech can be found only in the Eastern Rhodopes and Strandzha Mountain.
In the Greek part of the Rhodope Mountains the Black Vulture breeds in an old coniferous forest of Black and Calabrian Pine. It builds its nest on the top of the tree crown; the nest is impressive: 2 metres wide and 1 metre high. As part of the conservation activities under the LIFE Vultures project artificial nests are placed on trees in the Bulgarian part of the Eastern Rhodopes in an attempt to attract birds to settle here for breeding and thus expand the population.
The network of nature protection areas Natura 2000 is the centre-piece of the European Union's nature and biodiversity policy. The network comprises territories across the continent; its objectives are to guarantee the preservation of the most valuable and threatened species and their habitats.

Екологичната мрежа от защитени зони Натура 2000 заема централно място в политиката на Европейския съюз за опазване на природата и биологичното разнообразие. Тя обхваща територии на целия континент с цел да гарантира запазването на най-ценните и застрашени от изчезване видове, както и обитаваните от тях места.
Nature often amazes with the combination of beauty, ingenuity and practicality. The woodcock orchid is a protected species in Bulgaria; on the picture it is being tended by Black-veined Whites, a common species of butterfly here. The beautiful flowers of the orchid are highly praised by plant lovers and photographers but their goal is quite practical: the species relies on sexual deception for its pollination; the flowers resemble female bees and even mimic the scent of receptive females. Male bees are fooled and try to mate with the flower, pollinating the orchid.
The majestic mass of Yumruk Kaya, a cliff face that looms above the waters of Studen Kladenets Reservoir, viewed from Studen Kladenets Natura 2000 Protected Area in the heart of the Eastern Rhodopes. The area includes the reservoir and the surrounding cliffs along the Arda River Valley – excellent habitats for the Black, the Griffon and the Egyptian vultures.

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Commonly known as ‘kartal’ in Bulgarian, the Black Vulture is now extinct in our country as a breeding species; its only breeding colony on the Balkans is located in Dadia National Park in the Greek part of the Rhodope Mountains, close to the border with Bulgaria. Individuals from the colony often visit Bulgaria in search of food, giving us hope that one day the species might return here. The LIFE Vultures project is aimed at the stabilization and the expansion of the population of the black vulture in the Rhodope Mountains on both sides of the Bulgarian-Greek border.
Bulgaria’s biological diversity is one of the richest in Europe. The ecological network Natura 2000 covers 34% of the country’s territory, placing it on third place in Europe after Slovenia and Croatia. Natura 2000 areas are not reserves under rigorous protection where human activity is prohibited. On the contrary: the network aims to enhance sustainable land management and to create opportunities for local development in harmony with nature.

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Even though they are small in size, European Sousliks play a key role for the biodiversity and nature in the Rhodope Mountains, as they form an important part of the diet of many rare species of raptors and land carnivores. However, in recent decades the number of these rodents in Bulgaria is plummeting. Should they disappear, the survival of the many birds and land animals that feed on them would also be under threat.

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Highly acidic stomachs are typical for all vultures; the acids help neutralize potentially dangerous microorganisms in the carrion that the birds feed on. Vultures are thought to have some of the most efficient stomachs of all animals on the planet. Their stomach acid is so strong that it can dissolve bones and even metal.
The picturesque landscapes of the Eastern Rhodopes are breathtaking. Byala Reka is a Special Protection Area within the European environmental network Natura 2000, located near the national border with Greece. It provides important feeding and resting sites for two globally endangered species: the Black and the Egyptian vultures.

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Vultures do not attack domestic or wild animals, they feed entirely on carrion. Known as 'nature's health officers', they are able to clear out even large animal carcasses within a few hours after its discovery. Thus they prevent the spread of diseases among domestic and wild animals, and among humans too.
Nearly 280 bird species have been established in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains; that is about 70% of Bulgaria's bird diversity. The area is of huge importance for the conservation of many rare and endangered species; due to its geographical position it can surprise nature lovers with many 'Southern specialties', such as the Blue Rock Thrush, the Black-eared Wheatear, the Sardinian Warbler, the Black-headed Bunting etc. The rivers and reservoirs attract a diversity of waterfowl, too.
The head and the neck of the Griffon Vulture are bare; thus when the birds feed on carcasses, bacteria and other parasites cannot attach themselves to their feathers and cause infections. The adaptation keeps the birds healthy regardless of a diet that could easily prove harmful to other animals. Thanks to their sharp vision vultures are able to spot dead animals from a kilometre or even further away.
The LIFE Vultures project area covers the Eastern Rhodope Mountains on both sides of the Bulgarian-Greek border. The Black Vultures breed in Greece but come to feed in Bulgaria, and Griffon Vultures breeding in Bulgaria often look for food in Greece. A significant number of immature and non-breeding birds has been recorded here, including Griffon Vultures from other populations, for example those in Croatia and Serbia. The project area includes seven Special Protection Areas of the Natura 2000 network in Bulgaria and five in Greece.
23 vulture species in the world. These are relatively adaptable birds found in a range of habitats, including suburban regions, but even so, 14 species are considered either threatened or endangered.
The Eastern Rhodopes provide opportunities for observation and photography of rare and endangered animal and plant species and their popularity as a destination for wildlife tourism grows. The picturesque landscapes and the pristine nature only add to the picture – quite literally. Today there are five photography hides that allow eager photographers to 'hunt' for the best shot.
В Източните Родопи от години се работи за възстановяването на елена лопатар и на благородния елен. До този момент в района са освободени над 120 елена лопатара и над 30 благородни елена. Увеличаването на числеността на дивите травоядни ще допринесе за мозаичната структура на местообитанията и за поддържането на популациите на лешоядите.

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Efforts for the recovery of fallow and red deer populations in the Eastern Rhodopes started years ago. Over 120 fallow deer and more than 30 red deer have been released in the wild here recently. The increased number of wild herbivores will contribute for the mosaic structure of the local habitats and it will support the vulture population in the area at the same time.

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In October 2013 Studen Kladenets Protected Area welcomed one of the symbols of the rewilding efforts in Europe: the wisent, or European bison. The species is similar to its North American cousin; it is the largest herbivore in Europe and plays a key role for the preservation of open forest habitats. European bison grew extinct in the wild in Europe in the beginning of the 20th century due to hunting and habitat loss. Its extinction in Bulgaria took place much earlier: in the Middle Ages.
Черният щъркел е повсеместно разпространен в по-ниските части на Източните Родопи. За оцеляване той се нуждае от водоеми със запазено биоразнообразие, където се храни почти изключително с риба. Гнезди както по скали, така и по дървета, като най-голямата му скалогнездеща популация в страната, а може би и на Балканите, е съсредоточена по поречието на река Арда.

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The Black Stork is widely distributed at lower altitudes in the Eastern Rhodopes. Its diet consists mainly of fish for which it depends on water basins with preserved biodiversity. Black Storks can be both cliff- as well as tree-nesting; the largest cliff-nesting population in Bulgaria – and probably on the entire Balkan Peninsula – is concentrated along the course of Arda River.

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Modern technology gives us a peek at the life of the majestic lords of the sky. Griffon and Black Vultures are tagged with satellite transmitters to track their movement; the device allows us to fly near and far with them in real time. This modern research methodology provides a great opportunity for conservationists to reveal more about the life of the vultures.

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Several thousand years ago wild horses roamed free across Europe, and in Bulgaria too. In 2011 the European wild horse (tarpan) was released back into the wild in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains; at present more than 70 individuals live there. Their task in the local ecosystems is the same as it was millennia ago: together with other herbivores they maintain the natural ecosystems by grazing.
ВЛАСТЕЛИНИТЕ НА РОДОПИТЕ

LORDS OF THE RHODOPEAN SKIES

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This year we mark the 25th Anniversary of the LIFE Programme and of the Habitats Directive, both approved on 21st May 1992. Since then they have contributed enormously to the preservation of Europe’s priceless natural heritage, and in the last ten years to the conservation of nature in Bulgaria too. With this exhibition we would like to express our recognition and to raise the public awareness about the considerable achievements of both the EU nature conservation legislation, as well as the LIFE Programme in protecting Bulgarian nature and the Rhodope Mountains in particular. The Rhodope Mountains are a true treasury of biodiversity, and a large part of their eastern range is included in Europe’s network of protected areas, Natura 2000. The exhibition presents the wildlife in one of the last surviving wilderness areas in Europe. The Eastern Rhodope Mountains are also the last Bulgarian stronghold of the Black and the Griffon vultures – the protagonists of the LIFE project Conservation of Black and Griffon Vultures in the Rhodopes area.