



JELLE THAMMS / REWILDING EUROPE



From guns to cameras

In the Velebit Mountains of Croatia, the recovery of nature is enabling a transition from traditional hunting practice to a wildlife watching economy.



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1530

1530 different animal sightings over 140 days in the rewilding landscape in 2022.

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Paradigm shift

How many times can you profit from the life of a beautiful animal, such as a brown bear or a Eurasian lynx? If you sell a permit to shoot it, just once. But imagine, instead, letting that animal live and breed, and people paying to observe it, to capture it on film, and to revel in its very existence as part of a thrilling and increasingly wild landscape, over and over again. From an economic perspective, as well as an ecological and ethical one, the latter option would appear to be a hands-down winner.

In the Velebit Mountains of Croatia, a dramatic and nature-rich 150-kilometre

long massif that runs parallel to the country's Adriatic coast, this is what the local rewilding team is now proving through practical action on the ground. By showcasing a new way of managing wildlife – within a collection of hunting concessions – they are working to scale up the transition from traditional hunting operations to wildlife watching across the landscape. This, in turn, will ensure that a growing number of people and communities benefit from the wildlife comeback that rewilding is bringing about.

For Nino Salkić, a rewilding officer attached to the Rewilding Velebit team, it's all about treading a new path.

○ Country



Croatia

○ Focal landscape

Velebit Mountains

○ Size of landscape

300,000 ha

○ Work started in

2012

○ Larger landscape

Velebit Mountain range, connected with Slovenia in the north and Dalmatia in the south; including the marine coast and islands.

○ Main habitats

Temperate and Mediterranean forest, sub-alpine grasslands, coastal marine, cliffs, and canyons.

○ Focal species

Grey wolf, brown bear, red deer, Balkan chamois, Eurasian lynx, wild horse, Tauros, and griffon vulture.

○ Team leader

Marija Krnjajić

"When you mention the words 'hunting concession', everyone naturally thinks about the commercial hunting of wildlife. But we want to show people, in Croatia and beyond, that it's possible to do things differently. We want to turn the hunting concession model on its head and show that you can earn significant, reliable, long-term income through tourism based on wildlife watching."

Resurgent wildlife

If there was a symbol for Croatian nature, it would surely be the Velebit Mountains. Extending from sea level to peaks of 1750 metres, and studded with beech and pine forests, underground canyons, alpine meadows, caves, and waterfalls, the region's eclectic mix of habitats are home to some of Europe's most rare and elusive wildlife, such as Balkan chamois, brown bear, grey wolf, and Eurasian lynx. There are over 100 bird species here too, including the golden eagle, peregrine falcon, Ural owl, and white-backed woodpecker.



▲ Rewilding Officer Nino Salkić and Rewilding Europe Head of Landscapes Deli Saavedra set up a camera trap to monitor wildlife.

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Rewilding Europe's work in the Velebit Mountains is focused on transforming the management of four hunting concessions totalling 29,905 hectares, situated in the heart of the 2200 square-kilometre Velebit Nature Park, Croatia's largest protected area. These are flanked by two national parks – the Northern Velebit and Paklenica National Parks (which are themselves part of the nature park). A number of ponds in the area have been restored by the Rewilding Velebit team, with access to water critically important for local wildlife populations.

"As a corridor between the two parks, the rewilding landscape is a natural paradise," says Nino Salkić. "Apart from the beautiful landscapes, visitors could

encounter anything from lynx and wild boar to brown bear and red deer. Wildlife being wildlife there are no guarantees, but I've never known anybody to come away disappointed."

The thriving condition of wildlife in the Velebit Mountains rewilding landscape was confirmed by a camera trap survey carried out in 2022.

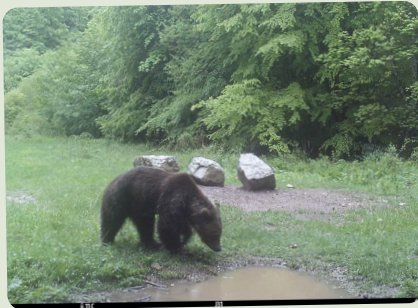
"Over the course of 140 days, we recorded 1530 different animal sightings from five wildlife watching hides, with bears recorded many times," says Rewilding Velebit enterprise officer Marin Rončević. "That averages over two sightings per day at each hide. Nearly a third of the sightings were recorded during the day, which is remarkable. When you take into account the fact that work was being carried out in the forest, and that some cameras occasionally failed to operate, the results are even more impressive."

Close encounters

The development of wildlife watching as a business frequently depends on the construction of suitable infrastructure. Over the course of 2022, the Rewilding Velebit team constructed five new wildlife watching hides in the Ramino Korito hunting concession. While these are primarily designed with bears and



◀ Camera trap images demonstrate the diverse wildlife of the Velebit Mountains.



birds in mind, photographers lucky enough to hunker down in them stand a good chance of spotting a host of other species, including the elusive Eurasian lynx, wildcat, wolf, wild boar, golden jackal, roe deer and pine marten.

In-depth field surveys were undertaken in the mountains and plains of the rewilding landscape to pinpoint the best locations for each hide. They were then designed by SKUA Nature – one of Europe's leading wildlife photography organisations dedicated to promoting sustainable nature tourism – with a focus on natural materials and blending in to the landscape. Accessibility was an important consideration, with two of the hides usable all year round, and all are equipped for overnight stays.

Max Biasioli, general director and founder of the SKUA Nature Group, is excited about the potential viewings the new hides will offer.

"The experience of being able to observe a bear a few metres away while sitting comfortably in a structure equipped with mirrored glass is simply incredible. Everyone, not just experienced photographers, is awed by this kind of close encounter.

"While bears are undoubtedly the primary attraction for now, wildlife watching in Velebit is just starting out. I'm convinced that in the coming years we will be able to offer various other locations, species and experiences. We want local communities to benefit from and be proud of the growing number of tourists drawn here to see the animals

that are thriving here as a result of rewilding and the different approach to management."

Tourism based on the new, fully operational hides has kicked off in the spring of 2023, with a growing number of booking made through Rewilding Europe Travel – Rewilding Europe's exclusive travel partner – and local travel agencies. SKUA Nature will begin selling photo safaris when wildlife abundance has reached a certain threshold.

"The hides are already starting to have a positive socio-economic impact," says Marin Rončević. "Last year Nino helped to train up two guides from the local area – Ilija Vukelić and Hrvoje Škrlin Vučina – and they are now taking visitors on various hiking tours and photo safaris. In addition, we pay local people to clean and maintain the hides. On top of this, wildlife watching visitors generate income for the local community through things such as food, accommodation and transport. We estimate that revenue created from the direct use of the hides (which contributes to the rewilding efforts), will, at the very least, be matched by income received by local people."

Scaling up

The Velebit Mountains rewilding landscape is surrounded by many other hunting concessions, all of whom currently follow the traditional commercial wildlife hunting model. Ensuring that wildlife comeback continues at scale

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means showing the managers of these concessions that the transition towards wildlife watching, away from hunting, makes economic as well as ecological sense.

"Tourism is one business activity open to the owners of all Croatian hunting concessions," explains Rewilding Velebit team leader Marija Krnjajić. "Yet nobody has attempted to do what we're doing before. We want others to adopt our model, which means they need to see the benefits of making the transition and want to follow in our footsteps."

In December 2022, Rewilding Velebit signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with several neighbouring hunting concessions, as a first step in establishing good relations and best practice on issues such as respecting borders, poaching prevention, wildlife management, and informing others about plans to establish activities such as photo safaris.

"Maybe the second step will involve suggesting the establishment of wildlife watching operations," says Marija Krnjajić.

Regardless, the MoU is already starting to bear fruit. In January 2023, the Rewilding Velebit team helped Mišo Zalović, an MoU signee and owner of the Vrebac hunting concession – which is located adjacent to the Velebit Mountains rewilding landscape – to construct his first wildlife watching hide. Nearly 2000 hectares of Zalović's 12,640-hectare concession will be put aside as a protected area for wildlife.

"Velebit's wealth is its biodiversity", says Zalović. "There must always be enough food and peace for predators, such as bear, wolf and lynx, and also for roe deer, red deer and chamois. I have been a hunting concession owner here for 26 years and I support the option of tourism without hunting because I can see it has a bright future."



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The path ahead

Building momentum behind the new, regenerative approach to wildlife management in the Velebit Mountains is about showing as well as doing. Moving forwards, getting as many people on board and supportive of the transition will be critical – this includes not only hunting concessionaires, but members of the public and politicians too.

In March 2023, "A New Path for the Velebit Mountains", a beautiful

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29,950

hectares of hunting concessions managed by Rewilding Velebit within the 2200 square-kilometre Velebit Nature Park.

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15-minute documentary by Emmanuel Rondeau (with financial support from international law firm Hogan Lovells), drew a large and diverse audience when it premiered in the local town of Gospić. Featuring a range of inspirational interviews, it showcased the work of the Rewilding Velebit team in enabling the transition, as well as their efforts to reach out to the local community to raise awareness, foster dialogue, and build engagement.

"In Croatia our efforts mean we are moving away from a decades-old model and attempting to change entrenched mindsets," says Marija Krnjajić. "This is undoubtedly a challenge, but we're moving in the right direction. Ideally, we would like the Croatian government to appreciate what we are doing and provide legislative support. But these things take time."

"My personal view is that more and more people will see the value of what we are doing and accept this new approach," adds Nino Salkić. "You can only shoot an animal with a gun once, but you can shoot it with a camera a thousand times – plenty of protected areas in Africa have demonstrated this concept, and the wide-ranging benefits it can deliver. If the shift from guns to cameras can happen in Velebit, then it can happen everywhere in Europe."