

Transcript

00:00:00:02 - 00:00:25:04

James Shooter

I'm stood on the Lika Plains in central Croatia, taking in the scenery. The skies above are an angry shade of grey. If I were a more evocative man whose job it was to come up with titles for paint colours, I might call it 'Midnight's Supper' or 'Elephants Breath'. Sunlight keeps trying to peek through the clouds and a rainbow momentarily shimmers above the impressive mountain range stretching out above. The skies aren't the only thing acting moody though...

00:00:25:04 - 00:00:57:06

James Shooter

This rather intimidating noise quickly gaining ground towards me. And the reason why I'm currently questioning my life choices is a grunt of a Tauros bull. He's part of a program to cross ancient domestic cattle breeds to emulate as closely as possible the long lost aurochs, an extinct wild bovine that once spread across Europe, North Africa and into Asia.

00:00:57:08 - 00:01:22:24

James Shooter

Am I getting a bit twitchy as he paces towards me? Yes, but I have to keep my nerve as the two Croatian cowboys accompanying me aren't yet showing any signs of flinching. This is a standoff between man and beast. My chance to get accepted as one of the gang. I must not show any signs of weakness. Okay! Time to go.

00:01:23:01 - 00:01:39:22

James Shooter

I'm James Shooter, host of the Rewild podcast. And this is Velebit Mountains.

00:01:39:24 - 00:02:04:04

James Shooter

After a night of lightening and hailstorms hammering down on the roof of our camper van, we've woken up to a glorious morning. Mist rises out of the valley like steam from a teapot. The early morning sun burns off the top layer of cloud, allowing glimpses of the impressive mountain range towering over us. It's late autumn, and as this part of Croatia sits on the coastline of the Adriatic Sea, there's been plenty of wind, so most of the leaves have blown,

00:02:04:06 - 00:02:25:08

James Shooter

save for the beech. They light up on the hillside like flickering orange flames. We'll come back to higher ground later on, as this morning, I'm getting picked up by Marijan, one of the Rewilding Velebit team members, who's taken me to see one of his colleagues on the Lika Plains to see their natural grazing scheme. Marijan speaks just a few words of English, and I've picked up about the same in Croatian.

00:02:25:10 - 00:02:35:03

James Shooter

But we manage the half hour trip with conversation through my phone. Thank you Google Translate. We pull up on the edge of the plains just as Blazenko is arriving in his pickup too.

00:02:35:05 - 00:02:35:19

Blazenko Buneta

I'm Blazenko.

00:02:35:19 - 00:02:38:15

James Shooter

Nice to meet you, I'm James. Are you good?

00:02:38:19 - 00:02:39:12

Blazenko Buneta

Yeah, I'm fine.

00:02:39:14 - 00:02:40:09

James Shooter

Yeah.

00:02:40:11 - 00:02:44:19

Blazenko Buneta

I'm not actually fine. I had already some problems in the morning.

00:02:44:20 - 00:02:45:12

James Shooter

Oh, really?

00:02:45:14 - 00:02:47:18

Blazenko Buneta

I had no electricity in the wires.

00:02:47:19 - 00:02:48:13

James Shooter

Oh, really?

00:02:48:15 - 00:02:51:17

Blazenko Buneta

No, no. Something happened. Now I must go and drive all around.

00:02:51:20 - 00:02:53:08

James Shooter

All round the fence?

00:02:53:10 - 00:03:03:14

Blazenko Buneta

Try to see something. Maybe the rain had filled the creeks and the water is up and if the wires are in the water. There are no.

00:03:03:20 - 00:03:04:12

James Shooter

Yeah. No. Good.

00:03:04:14 - 00:03:18:15

Blazenko Buneta

Yes and no. So this is our main spot. Hot spot. This is the place where all the cattle is released. Okay. It was brought here. Okay, We call it.

00:03:18:20 - 00:03:22:03

James Shooter

Okay. This place here. And how big an area is this?

00:03:22:05 - 00:03:27:02

Blazenko Buneta

This area is total 1600 hectares.

00:03:27:03 - 00:03:33:15

James Shooter

Oh, so big. Yeah. And you have a cattle and horses in here?

00:03:33:15 - 00:03:44:08

Blazenko Buneta

Yeah, they are all are together. There are around 120 horses and 130 cows and bulls.

00:03:44:09 - 00:03:45:01

James Shooter

Okay.

00:03:45:03 - 00:04:10:04

James Shooter

I've touched on the Tauros program in previous episodes, but this is the first time seeing some of the individuals for myself. This is a Dutch led initiative to develop an aurochs 2.0. The original primeval cattle were killed off directly and indirectly by humans, with the last survivor hunted out of a Polish forest in 1627. Prior to that, large herds would have been shaping grasslands for a couple of hundred thousand years.

00:04:10:06 - 00:04:33:18

James Shooter

Open and semi-open grasslands are among the most diverse ecosystems in Europe, but have been disappearing at an alarming rate. Nowadays, we're probably used to seeing artificial grass fields ploughed, seeded and stocked with a monoculture of single species

grass grown to feed modern day domestic farm animals in high densities. Natural grassland can have as many as 80 different species of plant in a single square meter world.

00:04:33:19 - 00:04:54:22

James Shooter

Worldwide, they support an array of specialist species of wildlife from the impressive great bustard, the world's heaviest flying bird to the delicate marsh fritillary, whose caterpillars are solely dependent on devils bit scabious, a purple flowering plant found on extensively grazed grasslands. It's this diversity of life the Tauros are challenged to help save. No pressure then!

00:04:54:22 - 00:04:57:12

Blazenko Buneta

So do you want to drive around?

00:04:57:13 - 00:05:00:12

James Shooter

That would be great. Yeah. I'll just get my bag from the car.

00:05:00:12 - 00:05:09:12

Blazenko Buneta

Its best to have a chauffeur so I can concentrate on translating and talking.

00:05:09:14 - 00:05:17:00

James Shooter

Yeah, No, that's fair enough. Turn off.

00:05:17:02 - 00:05:20:23

Blazenko Buneta

The grass is green even now in the November.

00:05:21:00 - 00:05:22:18

James Shooter

Is that just because so much rain?

00:05:22:20 - 00:05:33:14

Blazenko Buneta

Yeah. It was a good year. It was not so hot in the summer. So it isn't dried up in the summer and so summer raining.

00:05:33:16 - 00:05:34:19

James Shooter

So that's good for the animals.

00:05:34:24 - 00:05:37:13

Blazenko Buneta

Yeah. They had much more grass.

00:05:37:13 - 00:05:40:05

James Shooter
Yes.

00:05:40:07 - 00:05:43:11

Blazenko Buneta

Even though they always have grass here because it's a big area.

00:05:43:17 - 00:05:44:13

James Shooter
Yeah. Okay.

00:05:44:17 - 00:05:48:02

Blazenko Buneta

Huge area for them.

00:05:48:04 - 00:05:51:11

James Shooter

So they have free reign over the whole area.

00:05:51:12 - 00:05:58:06

Blazenko Buneta

Yeah. They can go all around if they like but the cows only sticks to a certain place.

00:05:58:07 - 00:05:59:00

James Shooter
Okay.

00:05:59:02 - 00:06:20:11

James Shooter

Marijan drives us across the plains in his 4x4, an extensive area of flat ground at the base of the Velebit mountain range. Well, it should be flat, but he tells us as craters everywhere from when the Yugoslavian army used the area a few decades ago as a firing range for tank training. I'm glad he's driving as we'd definitely be upside down by now if I was trying to navigate!

00:06:20:13 - 00:07:16:03

Blazenko Buneta

Lika Plains actually do really need rewilding because of this area in the past was used for grazing. People brought their cattle here to graze and so in that way they maintained the area from not being, uh, forested. And now there are less people all around in the villages, so it's not, uh, used anymore for cattling. So actually this is a very good opportunity to have this cattle here to prevent that, uh, foresting in this area, because by grazing, by destroying the, uh, branches, the all kinds of bushes and the forest, the species, it's there protecting it from the foresting.

00:07:41:19 - 00:07:47:13

James Shooter

Our first herd of Tauros appear over the ridge, and I'm keen to see them up close and personal.

00:07:47:15 - 00:07:49:13

James Shooter

They're big animals. I mean, this one's huge.

00:07:49:15 - 00:07:51:13

Blazenko Buneta

That's a cow, that's a bull.

00:07:51:15 - 00:07:52:12

James Shooter

Of course.

00:07:52:14 - 00:07:56:03

Blazenko Buneta

It's only bull around here. This one is a young bull.

00:07:56:09 - 00:07:56:23

James Shooter

This one here.

00:07:57:04 - 00:07:58:16

Blazenko Buneta

This one last year.

00:07:58:16 - 00:08:04:19

James Shooter

This one's absolutely huge, though.

00:08:04:22 - 00:08:12:07

Blazenko Buneta

Yeah, that's a cow, But it's huge. Yeah, there are also bigger than this one.

00:08:12:09 - 00:08:13:02

James Shooter

Really?

00:08:13:04 - 00:08:18:08

Blazenko Buneta

Speaks Croatian.

00:08:18:10 - 00:08:40:12

James Shooter

The aurochs would have been a formidable animal. Bulls stood at around 180 centimetres at the shoulder and tipped the scales at around a tonne. They're had huge upturned horns reaching 80 centimetres in length. Looking at the cows surrounding me and the even larger bulls in the distance, my mind is half convinced I'm looking at the resurrected animal. This is still a work in progress though.

00:08:40:13 - 00:08:56:07

James Shooter

For now, these animals are still classed as livestock on paper. Their ear tags are a sharp reminder of that. The hopes of this ambitious initiative are that one day the Tauros will be able to move freely in wild herds across the continent as their ancestors once did.

00:08:56:09 - 00:09:10:02

Blazenko Buneta

Marijan speaks Croatian. Marijan asks me if there is a wolf moving around, but I didn't see any traces. Only two weeks ago when, uh, a horse died.

00:09:10:05 - 00:09:10:13

James Shooter

Okay.

00:09:10:13 - 00:09:18:24

Blazenko Buneta

And the Ravens came. Ravens circling around and then after the Ravens there then comes the wolf or the bear.

00:09:19:00 - 00:09:19:22

James Shooter

Oh, right. Okay.

00:09:19:24 - 00:09:21:24

Blazenko Buneta

They. They follow the Ravens.

00:09:21:24 - 00:09:25:13

James Shooter

Yeah. Yeah. They kind of signal that something has died.

00:09:25:15 - 00:09:44:06

Blazenko Buneta

The Ravens are, uh. They warn us if something has died or something or a wolf or a bear has attacked some animal. Ravens immediately see it and they circle around the. There are hundreds of Ravens at the spot.

00:09:44:06 - 00:09:47:24

James Shooter

Oh, wow. They're kind of a part of the team letting you know what's going on.

00:09:47:24 - 00:09:50:13

Blazenko Buneta

Also, they are scavengers. Yeah.

00:09:50:15 - 00:10:10:09

James Shooter

This timely reminder that an array of predators walk these lands is part of the reason the Taurus program is utilizing historic breeds that retain some of the characteristics of the original bovine. Those large horns and athletic build will come in handy when facing off against wolves. They're extremely hardy, can live outside all year round and require little to no intervention.

00:10:10:11 - 00:10:44:09

James Shooter

By the way, this is no guessing game. The scientific Advisory committee for this breeding program consists of experts in genetics, ecology, molecular biology, archaeology and ancient cattle breeding. Through genetic sampling, they now have the entire genome of the aurochs and are able to target the very best modern day specimens for the most targeted end results. From Spain, the Sayaguesa, Pajuna, Limia and Tudanca breeds are utilized; from Italy, the Marremana and Podlica; from Portugal, the Maronesa from Scotland, the Highland cattle, and from here in Croatia, the Boskarin.

00:10:44:11 - 00:10:56:08

James Shooter

Some of these breeds around us now in the liquor plains, but also fourth and fifth generation cross breeds that are ever closer genetically and morphologically to the original.

00:10:56:10 - 00:11:20:05

Blazenko Buneta

There are some Tauros here. This is the water pond we have here on the left in the summer, it's the hot spot in the summer are all together. Yeah, between noon and 2:00, every animal almost in the area will come to drink.

00:11:20:07 - 00:11:22:21

James Shooter

That makes sense. Every animal.

00:11:22:23 - 00:11:46:12

Blazenko Buneta

There are very few of them because they have water everywhere. There's some creeks around there some of the smaller. Oh cranes! Okay. I never seen so, so big. I never saw them. Marijan also didn't see them here.

00:11:46:14 - 00:11:51:06

James Shooter

Oh, that's cool.

00:11:51:08 - 00:12:07:04

James Shooter

It's time to leave the Tauros, Blazenko and the cranes on the plains as I need to meet up with Marija, the team leader for Rewilding Velebit, and Nino, the Rewilding Officer. They've been up since silly o'clock this morning on an important mission to the very north of the country.

00:12:07:06 - 00:12:19:14

Kruno Bosnjakovic

This is James Shooter. So you're tired, huh? We can really.

00:12:19:15 - 00:12:23:01

Nino Salkić

An early start, 4 o'clock - very early, even before.

00:12:23:01 - 00:12:28:09

Kruno Bosnjakovic

That. So yeah you do kind of look tired. Yeah. Yeah. Time for coffee.

00:12:28:11 - 00:12:46:16

James Shooter

We head into a restaurant in the local town as they're in desperate need of refueling. And I'll never say no to coffee and pizza halfway through the day. We have some time to kill anyway, as we are awaiting the special delivery from the north. Ten red deer are being transported from a breeding centre destined to be released into the wilds of Velebit.

00:12:46:18 - 00:13:04:06

James Shooter

And as luck would have, it is happening on the very same afternoon as my visit. As we get the call that the truck driver is nearing, we grab the last few bites of our lunch and head into the SUVs, ready to start heading up the mountainside. You can tell there's a real sense of excitement in the air. Nothing beats a wildlife release.

00:13:04:08 - 00:13:18:02

James Shooter

The whole field team is heading up the hill to witness the Velebit Mountains get that little bit wilder. There's also a photography trio in convoy ready to capture the release onto the drone. Big lenses and a video camera and me and my little fluffy microphone.

00:13:18:06 - 00:13:26:07

Nino Salkić

So in front of us, it's the Velebit Massif. It's the biggest mountain in Croatia, not regarding the height, but by the by the length.

00:13:26:07 - 00:13:27:07

James Shooter
Okay.

00:13:27:09 - 00:13:49:19

Nino Salkić

Uh, the area that we are going in is the recently bought concession. It's called Tenadorva Metla and the location that we are going in, it's called Dava Lake. Okay. It was lake once upon a time, but now it's dried out. Uh, yeah, Basically you will see it when we go a little bit further.

00:13:49:19 - 00:14:13:19

Nino Salkić

You will see the south is on your left side. The left hand side, the north is on the right hand side, 145 kilometers of mountain. Wow. All of the mountain is protected by the Nature park and the Natura 2000 network. And we have two, National Park Paklenica, which is the oldest national park in Croatia. Sorry. Which is. Yeah, which is one of the oldest.

00:14:13:21 - 00:14:28:11

Nino Salkić

And National Park Plitvice. Yeah. National Park and the youngest National Park North Velebit. So we have two national parks and the nature park Velebit.

00:14:28:15 - 00:14:31:17

James Shooter

And are they essentially all inside the rewilding landscape or...

00:14:31:17 - 00:14:46:08

Nino Salkić

The rewilding landscape spreads throughout the range of Velebit Nature Park area, and so is the whole mountain from Vradric Pass on the north all the way to Zrmanja river to the south.

00:14:46:08 - 00:15:07:09

James Shooter

We wind our way up through stunning old growth woodland, giant beech trees and tall, slender silver firs dominate the hillside. We slowly start to switch to black pine as we climb higher up the trails. These forests are home to white backed woodpecker, Europe's smallest and largest species of owls, the pygmy owl, an eagle owl, and the last few remaining capercaillie in Croatia.

00:15:07:11 - 00:15:34:08

James Shooter

Balkan chamois cling to the rock faces, boar plough their way through the undergrowth, and the full suite of European predators are on the hunt. These woods are wild. Interestingly, the land beneath our feet is sponge like and porous. It's not the old Yugoslavian army again. It's because these mountains are made of limestone. Rainwater

that's turned slightly acidic after picking up carbon dioxide from the air, dissolves the rock along joints and fractures. Over many, many years

00:15:34:08 - 00:16:08:19

James Shooter

this process forms caves. The small ones make great places for bears to hold up in the winter months. But this part of Velebit also has some of the deepest caves known to man Lakina Jama, The 14th deepest cave in the world stretches 1431 meters beneath the Earth's surface. If you were to get into that 1,431st meter in that cave, you'd find a subterranean stream home to an endemic species of leech. A new species, genus and family to science, discovered in 1994 and only found in these deep cave systems of Croatia.

00:16:08:21 - 00:16:12:03

James Shooter

If that's not a prize worth going down for, I don't know what is.

00:16:12:07 - 00:16:29:17

Nino Salkić

This is the perfect habitat for red deer on Velebit Mountain. On the north Croatia is totally different. Flatlands, big old forest is preferred area for them in that place. But here they like this kind of environment.

00:16:29:19 - 00:16:32:17

James Shooter

So two very, very different type of ecosystems.

00:16:32:18 - 00:17:01:11

Nino Salkić

Totally, totally different, in North Velebit we have swamps, marshes also. So it's a bit different. And when you when you look at the animal like morphology, the animals are a bit higher on the ground they are much bigger in weight than here because the presence of predator here is much higher and they need to be a bit lower on the leg to jump faster and they don't have a weight.

00:17:01:13 - 00:17:02:18

Marija Krnjajić

They have bigger, better fitness.

00:17:02:18 - 00:17:07:23

Nino Salkić

Yeah, there are more athletic.

00:17:08:00 - 00:17:26:07

James Shooter

At the top of the hill. We clamber out and get ready for the truck to arrive with Velebit's newest inhabitants. I'm pretty impressed such a big vehicle can get up here to be honest,

we've driven up to over a thousand meters above sea level on winding forest tracks. I see the photography team professionally set in their corresponding positions.

00:17:26:09 - 00:17:41:23

James Shooter

I've wedged my microphone somewhere near the trailer, balanced my phone on some sticks to capture a video and of hiding in a bush with my camera to try and grab a few pictures as they come out. When you're a one man band, you learn to multitask fairly well. It's a bit of a bodge, but it does the job.

00:17:42:00 - 00:18:11:21

James Shooter

As the trailer doors come down, I momentarily think back to the couple of wildlife releases I've been privileged to join. The white storks in England, awkwardly reversed after their crates, the beavers in Scotland waddled out to theirs. I wonder how these deer will taste freedom. Ah, explosively! All ten sprint out of the back and run past me and my camera to head into the trees behind me.

00:18:11:23 - 00:18:18:03

James Shooter

I hear them thundering out of sight as the team celebrates this hopeful sight.

00:18:18:05 - 00:18:26:20

James Shooter

Okay. So first and foremost, how did that make you feel, seeing what we've just seen?

00:18:26:20 - 00:18:34:20

Marija Krnjajić

At least I have been in the words a limited is beautiful. This is something very special.

00:18:34:22 - 00:18:42:19

Nino Salkić

Every time. Every time is a special moment when we open the gates and the animals are free in the nature every time. It's a very special moment. It's something that.

00:18:42:21 - 00:18:45:22

James Shooter

Knowing that Velebit just got a little bit wilder, it's quite exciting thought.

00:18:46:02 - 00:18:47:08

Nino Salkić

Yeah exactly.

00:18:47:10 - 00:19:10:14

Marija Krnjajić

They have come from a corral, a farm actually in the northern part of Croatia called Chasma. And we have brought ten red Deer. Seven of them are females and three of them are males. Some of the some of the individuals are 3 to 4 years old.

00:19:10:17 - 00:19:36:07

James Shooter

These ten individuals are part of an ongoing reinforcement of Red Deer, making the grand total of 56 released over the past few years. Several of them have GPS collars so the team can learn about where they choose to go, which habitats they prefer, and if any, end up becoming prey for the species. Nino tells me the first data points will come in at 1 a.m. After being up since four this morning I fear he might not get to bed before those first insights are delivered.

00:19:36:09 - 00:19:41:14

James Shooter

The data will help inform the team on whether they need further translocations or if it's reaching stability.

00:19:41:16 - 00:20:12:15

Marija Krnjajić

So this is important. If you if you have increased number of predators, you need to the prey species. But the fact that we release these ten deers, it's not only due to the fact that the high number of predators here, which is also one of the reason, but it is also this we have established at the beginning of this year that the number of red deer in this area was extremely low, and that was actually our first initiation.

00:20:12:15 - 00:20:37:11

Marija Krnjajić

Why we decided to do that. So after the several method of monitoring that we've done here so far, the numbers were low and only that was already a reason. So the reason why this number is low can have many, many, many, many things can cause this thing. It can be predators like Nino say, but it can also be human impact, hunting pressure.

00:20:37:13 - 00:20:49:13

Marija Krnjajić

Mm. You make us some kind of disease. Lots of lots of for lots of ecologic factors. Can, can cause these low densities.

00:20:49:17 - 00:21:10:21

James Shooter

It's an impressive sight looking up the natural surroundings where the deer have gone to make their new home. Wooded hillsides as far as the eye can see with limestone pinnacles towering out of the canopy. Just before the release, one of the rangers was telling us he had a mother lynx with three cubs in the forest earlier in the week and five wolves on the ridge above us the week before.

00:21:10:23 - 00:21:14:19

James Shooter

If it didn't feel wild before that disclosure, it certainly did afterwards.

00:21:15:00 - 00:21:46:03

Nino Salkić

What makes Velebit unique is that in the middle of the Europe, you have a mountain range which is fairly small in comparison to Alps or Dolomites or I don't know, Carpathian mountains, but on 145 kilometer and and 30 kilometer of wide mountain, you have three big predators, brown bear, Eurasian lynx and grey wolves. You have more endemic species of plant than whole of Great Britain.

00:21:46:05 - 00:22:01:24

Nino Salkić

Many, many geological phenomenons and and cave systems. So we can say that Velebit is a diamond in the central of Europe, actually, regarding the nature, diversity and richness.

00:22:02:04 - 00:22:33:07

James Shooter

I'll let that competitive comment about British endemic plants slide, Nino. Its not a competition after all. And just you wait until I show you the wonders of our Scottish primrose if you come and visit the Orkney Isles with me. Anyway, the endemic specialties of Croatia's rich nature are restricted to the bottom of the deepest, darkest caves. There are 79 endemic plants found here, the most famous of which is the Velebit degenia, a low lying yellow flowering plant which was immortalized in the 50 lipa coin until the euro took over at the start of this year.

00:22:33:09 - 00:23:07:24

James Shooter

There are two main reasons why it's so good for Endemics here. One, the region was not so affected by the last ice age. So many of the existing plants survived that period whilst elsewhere they died off. And two, you have three different climates colliding here. Continental, Mediterranean and montane on the high tops. Sure enough, if you were to climb the peak of Velebit mountain itself, you'd be staring down at the Adriatic Sea on one side with Mediterranean scrub clinging to its slopes and on the other that lovely mix of fir and beech sweeping down inland. It's quite the combination of worlds.

00:23:08:01 - 00:23:43:16

Nino Salkić

By the look of the eye Velebit is a wild mountain. But the only thing is that people need to get rewilded. And of course rewilding is letting nature take its course. But by the small changes that we do in the landscape, we help the nature regenerate and be complete as it should be. Velebit is, I would say, crisscrossed with the smaller forest roads and the main roads which are mostly connected with the continent.

00:23:43:18 - 00:24:13:04

Nino Salkić

And the point is that due to the migration of the wildlife through the area, the roads are the points where the accidents are happening and collisions are happening. Now we are working on securing the roads with the light prisms to reduce the to to reduce the collisions and to prevent any casualties in the in in both in both ways and human and wildlife.

00:24:13:06 - 00:24:36:01

James Shooter

Whilst light prisms can deter animals from crossing - tunnels, viaducts and green bridges offer them a helping hand. The A1 highway connects the capital of Croatia, Zagreb to the southern city of Split and is a serious barrier to both migrating wildlife and those with territories on either side of the road. Croatia is fortunate to have a number of crossings, including six green bridges.

00:24:36:03 - 00:25:02:05

James Shooter

Roe and Red Deer frequently utilize them, but also bears and wolves. During a five year study in 2016, wolves popped up 132 times on camera traps on green bridges in Croatia. Over in Canada, where 44 wildlife crossings were constructed in Banff National Park alone, they reduced the number of large mammal collisions by 80%. They cost millions but designed well and implemented in key locations.

00:25:02:07 - 00:25:27:22

James Shooter

They allow wildlife to share our increasingly human world. Away from the roads. One of the best ways you can affect change for wildlife in Croatia is to be the leaseholder of a hunting concession. This is to hold the rights of hunting activity over an area of state owned land. That may sound counterintuitive, but Rewilding Velebit now holds over 30,000 hectares of concessions connecting key ground between two highly protected national parks.

00:25:27:24 - 00:25:57:24

Marija Krnjajić

We are managing this hunting concession, in this area and with according to Croatian legislation. So you have a hunting management plan for ten years and according to that you have to manage the area that you were given for. And we have been given from the government the trust to manage this the lease for ten years to manage wildlife here.

00:25:58:02 - 00:26:37:11

Marija Krnjajić

According to law we you have to, of course respect some kind of quota. And we do that we, we we we are allowed to to have minimum quota, which is really not such a strong impact on the wildlife. But it is not just th,e we are not the only one here. So what we are building here is to showcase we are building here different type of management and we want to transform the way hunting is managed, not just in Croatia or everywhere in Europe.

00:26:37:13 - 00:27:03:07

Marija Krnjajić

We want to boost much more and to and to prove the economic value of non-hunting activities towards the hunting activities and that they can be similar as same as profitable like hunting activities. And this is what we are building here, actually a showcase that can be beneficial for not just for us, but also for the others.

00:27:03:09 - 00:27:27:00

James Shooter

By having skin in the game and being leaseholders of hunting concessions, it means that the Rewilding Velebit team has some sway in the overall direction of travel for wildlife populations here. Yes, they have to abide by some of the hunting legislation, but it's also the reason why they've been able to increase the Red Deer numbers here and why Lynx have been released and why they're able to map bear dens and lower the impact of forest harvesting near to those sites.

00:27:27:02 - 00:27:42:13

James Shooter

In a complicated world, we've got to find the best imperfect solutions to start tipping the scales back the other way for our precious wildlife. Working with hunters in Croatia instead of working against them is proof that involving key stakeholders can bring benefits for all sides.

00:27:42:18 - 00:28:12:04

Marija Krnjajić

I must say on my very positive experience, even though we were expecting some kind of, you know, distrust and the conflict. But it didn't happen so far. So we are trying to work together, not just with hunters, but with all at all stakeholders involved, which is also two ministries and which are agencies, another stakeholder county on the county level.

00:28:12:06 - 00:28:42:01

Marija Krnjajić

So with hunters up to now, we have been have good support and communication, but we still have to work. As I said, we are in the middle of Velebit. Velebit has 200,020 hectares, so it's 2200 square kilometers. So is this 30,000 hectares that we have is it is a huge area, but there are also other neighbours that we want to actually work on.

00:28:42:01 - 00:28:47:13

Marija Krnjajić

We want to affect on them and to to use the same model like we are. We are using,

00:28:47:17 - 00:28:48:18

James Shooter

To expand your effect.

00:28:48:18 - 00:29:14:19

Marija Krnjajić

Yes, to expand our effect and to be recognized and for them also to recognize and to use the rewilding principle in their in their way of management. Up to now, we have built this 5 wildlife watching hides where we are boosting nature tourism and we have visitors from all over to Europe. We are hoping much more to have from Croatia because the visitors are mostly from from Europe.

00:29:15:00 - 00:29:47:16

Marija Krnjajić

We have several products that are connected with photo Safari, with wildlife, watching hides, with hiking and many things and we have from this year we are starting to to get first, you know, incomes and profits and and that's it. So the idea is also for our neighbours to to have similar highs and also to work on the photo shooting instead of shooting..

00:29:47:18 - 00:29:51:14

James Shooter

If I sat in one of those hides all day. What kind of species would I see here in the Velebit Mountains?

00:29:51:15 - 00:30:14:20

Nino Salkić

I would say any species is very special because from the wildlife watching hide you have opportunity to see the the life of the animals and their in their everyday life without disturbing them. But I would say every time people are very happy to see Brown Bear, which is always a cherry on top of wildlife experience and wildlife watching hides experience.

00:30:14:22 - 00:30:25:17

Nino Salkić

But for me I would say in my opinion, the Lynx is one of the most interesting species on the Velebit Mountain.

00:30:25:19 - 00:30:28:17

James Shooter

And have you had any experiences yourself with lynx?

00:30:28:17 - 00:31:02:22

Nino Salkić

Yes. Yes. I am fortunate to work on Rewilding Velebit initiative and we are cooperating with many partners who are working also on the reintroduction and boosting the population of Lynx in the area. Because of that, I had the opportunity to release the Lynx to be present on the release of the Lynx to monitor their movement through the area and to get inside their very, very, uh, I would say, um, hidden world.

00:31:02:24 - 00:31:07:02

Nino Salkić

Yeah. Sorry to get inside. They very, very hidden world. Yeah.

00:31:07:06 - 00:31:09:12

James Shooter

Fantastic. I mean, that's not a bad day at the office, is it?

00:31:09:16 - 00:31:28:07

James Shooter

With Lynx Wolf and Bear in the region it makes a tantalizing location for some but equally brings challenges for others. Whilst the team are helping with practical co-existence measures like electric fences for farmers and beekeepers, they're also on a mission to change mindsets, to win hearts and minds.

00:31:28:08 - 00:31:58:14

Marija Krnjajić

Yeah, but for the co-exist also it's important that we try to sense sensibilise local local people for the presence of wildlife and to improve their their joint life. So to join living, what does it mean? So we try to we are educating them and trying to, you know, not to be afraid of this and how to behave in presence of them, not to have the same reaction.

00:31:58:14 - 00:32:12:15

Marija Krnjajić

Because when you when you are familiar that they are they are here from ever. So this is their habitat as well. And when you were you already know in your conscious you need to share then at once the approach is different.

00:32:12:17 - 00:32:36:06

James Shooter

A shift in mindset can be a powerful tool to utilize. In 2017, Rewilding Velebit worked with the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Forestry to make the Romino Kirito Old Growth Beech Forest a designated site. This is an area untouched by human infrastructure or past harvesting, a natural forest allowed to evolve over many thousands of years into a resilient biodiversity hotspot.

00:32:36:08 - 00:32:43:19

James Shooter

Old growth forests are vitally important to protect and expand, but currently make up just half a percent of Europe's total forest areas.

00:32:43:21 - 00:33:16:22

Marija Krnjajić

And we supported that. And now this. This area will be declared as a special purpose forest, meaning that only some part of the scientific activities will be allowed there. Nothing. No harvesting, no logging, nothing. Other priorities and our focus is also on carbon sequestration project, where we are planning also in future with the with one of the most important beneficiaries, which are the same company, Croatian Forest.

00:33:16:22 - 00:33:47:10

Marija Krnjajić

We want to work together with them where we will monitor the benefits of carbon instead of logging and hoping also to adjacent doors close to our area, part of the forest area where a logging will be forbidden. And where where the well well, the area will be protected. And I would say end product will be then carbon.

00:33:47:10 - 00:33:49:13

Marija Krnjajić

This, this is let's say for future.

00:33:49:15 - 00:34:22:09

Nino Salkić

I can say well I'm here seven years and already I can see some changes but there will need still it needs to be and it needs to be much more years to see, to see the real change. But I can see the Velebit in 50 years as one of the best places for the for the wildlife watching one of the most riches in biodiversity areas in the Central Europe.

00:34:22:11 - 00:35:07:20

Marija Krnjajić

We are living our hope. So every day. You know, we are we are actually I strongly believe that this area also we are seeing shift into into the people's minds here and which is which is without that, you cannot do anything. But I see this place will thrive. So this is how I see Velebit, because not only with our presence, you know, people have started to recognize the importance of of nature and importance of of all of us actually in some kind of harmony to to balance the the area and to balance the territory that we are all living.

00:35:07:20 - 00:35:12:21

Marija Krnjajić

So I think that we will continue going in this direction.

00:35:13:00 - 00:35:38:08

James Shooter

I thoroughly enjoyed my all to brief time in this part of Croatia. The vast forested hillsides of the region would have you believe this is an untouched part of Europe. But beneath the canopy, through forestry and hunting, humans still managed to shape the land and the array of animals that call it home. Along the edges in the valley bottoms, roads and railways cut through habitats and restrict the animals that would naturally roam and spread to neighboring mountain ranges.

00:35:38:10 - 00:36:16:15

James Shooter

But rewilding brings with it opportunities for change and opportunities for people too. It's great to hear that the Rewilding Velebit team is starting the transition from hunting tourism to wildlife tourism, and not just on their own ground, but neighboring concessions too. This shows that others are open to the idea of non extractive nature based economies. So if you're listening to this and you want to do your bit for rewilding, come to Croatia and book a place in a wildlife hide or higher a Mountain Guide to the day,

I quite often hear the argument that we should boycott countries that partake in activities like whaling, for example, but that's not what to do at all.

00:36:16:17 - 00:36:43:03

James Shooter

What you should do is go to those countries and put your money into whale watching trips, boycotting them. Just leave the existing value of whaling in place with zero competition. By putting your money into tourism, you put a monetary value on living wildlife and that matters. Equally, if a shift in emphasis can be driven here from logging to the ever growing carbon market, you suddenly looking at a dual purpose economic driver for keeping these Croatian wilds in tip top condition.

00:36:43:04 - 00:37:01:06

James Shooter

It'll be interesting to see how the Taurus Initiative plays out here with the ecological effects of these next gen aurochs working their magic on Lika Plains. They look the part too. I didn't think I'd be overly impressed by seeing some cattle munching on grass. But perhaps I just needed a change in mindset too. These aren't just any cattle after all.

00:37:01:08 - 00:37:20:08

James Shooter

Maybe one day in the not so distant future they'll be allowed to take their role as a true replacement for the aurochs, and get free roam in landscapes across the continent. I can genuinely imagine an excitement about seeing these large animals in impressive herds working their way unimpeded through the natural grasslands of Europe. But should you come across them.

00:37:20:10 - 00:37:49:15

James Shooter

Just remember, their horns are 80 centimeters long. They can weigh up to a tonne and you probably won't have a Blazenko to keep you safe. So be careful. Thanks for joining us for episode ten of the Rewild podcast. This part of Croatia really is stunning, so do stick it on your list of places to visit. It's always more exhilarating when you have those lynx, bears and wolves in the woods around you.

00:37:49:17 - 00:38:13:02

James Shooter

I'm very grateful to the Rewilding Velebit team for showing me around and allowing me along for the Red Deer release. It's brilliant to see these stunning landscapes getting wilder first hand. So thanks to Marija, Nino and Blazenko for speaking with me and to Kruno, the Communications officer for setting up the whole thing. As always, many thanks to Andrew O'Donnell of Beluga Lagoon for the music and Gemma Shooter for the artwork.

00:38:13:04 - 00:38:32:09

James Shooter

The biggest of thanks goes to Rewilding Europe for collaborating with me on this series. The Velebit Mountains is one of ten inspiring rewilding landscapes across the continent,

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By James Shooter
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Velebit Mountains



set up with local teams on the ground. If you're enjoying the series, please do consider giving us a rating or review. It always helps us reach new people and it's great to see what you guys think.

00:38:32:11 - 00:38:46:20

James Shooter

Next month we'll be taking a wee break, as is apparently some holiday season called Christmas. I'm sure it won't take off, but don't worry, we'll be back in January with stories of lynx, reintroductions from the forests of Slovenia. Catch you next time.