



NEILA LORRIDGE



The Velebit connection

From schoolchildren and students to beekeepers and everyday citizens, the Rewilding Velebit team connected with a wide range of stakeholders in 2023, amplifying support for their nature recovery efforts.



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10,000

The documentary “A New Path for the Velebit Mountains” has now been viewed nearly 10,000 times online.


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Capturing hearts and minds

In the Velebit Mountains of Croatia, a 145-kilometre long massif that lies parallel to the country’s Adriatic coast, the Rewilding Velebit team are working to create a large wildlife corridor across the beautiful and biodiverse landscape. Having purchased five hunting concessions – encompassing 30,000 hectares of forest and grassland in the heart of the Velebit Nature Park – they are now overseeing a transition from traditional hunting-based management towards wildlife watching, which is supporting a gradual resurgence in wildlife. Five newly constructed hides became

operational in 2023 and are attracting growing numbers of visitors.

Developing and nurturing positive attitudes towards nature and nature recovery among stakeholders is essential to the success of these rewilding efforts. Last year, the Rewilding Velebit team carried out a wide range of activities to engage with various parts of society – from children and students to beekeepers, hunters, and everyday citizens. By connecting people of all backgrounds with the majestic nature of the Velebit Mountains, the aim was to inspire them to want to protect and enhance it, and to build support for rewilding.

- **Country**
 Croatia
- **Focal landscape**
 Velebit Mountains
- **Size of landscape**
 300,370 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



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 “I was informed and inspired in equal measure by this beautiful documentary.”

Popular premiere

One of the engagement highlights of 2023 for the Rewilding Velebit team was the premiere of “A New Path for the Velebit Mountains”, an enthralling 15-minute documentary shot by award-winning French filmmaker Emmanuel Rondeau. In March, the short film was screened for the first time in the local town of Gospić, drawing a large and diverse audience of over 100 people. These included dignitaries from the Lika-Senj County Development Agency and Velebit Nature Park, representatives of other NGOs, professors from the University of Zagreb, local entrepreneurs, hunting concession managers, and local residents of all ages. Following the premiere, the documentary has now been viewed online more than 8000 times.

“A New Path for the Velebit Mountains” portrays the efforts of the Rewilding Velebit team and the gradual resur-

gence of the area’s spectacular wildlife. It shows how this recovery is enabling a fresh and sustainable approach to wildlife management – based on wildlife watching, rather than hunting – which is driving the development of a burgeoning nature-based economy. Featuring a range of interviews, it also shows how the team are reaching out to the local community to raise awareness and establish relationships, and working to ensure that as many people as possible benefit from rewilding.

“I was informed and inspired in equal measure by this beautiful documentary,” says Jasenka Svetić, a resident of Gospić who attended the premiere. “Seeing the power and diversity of nature in Velebit really surprised me. If I hadn’t seen the film, I wouldn’t have known that so many lynx live in the landscape here. I believe rewilding can help people and wildlife to live alongside each other here, and bring benefits through nature-based tourism.”

Generating buzz

Promoting human-wildlife coexistence in the Velebit Mountains is particularly important as species such as brown bears are present in the landscape.

In October, the Rewilding Velebit team organised a seminar for seven beekeepers in the village of Jablanac.



▲ The premiere of the new film.



◀ Rewilding Velebit
Communications Officer
Kruno Bošnjaković.

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“The Velebit Mountains are incredibly valuable – both for the nature they contain, and for the people that live here and visit.”

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Apiaries, in particular, can attract bears searching for food, which means protecting hives can help to increase acceptance of bears in the landscape.

“We talked with local beekeepers about how they can prevent damage from bears themselves, as well as what we can do for them, including repairing existing fencing and installing new electric fences,” explains Rewilding Velebit Communications Officer Kruno Bošnjaković. “Beekeepers in Velebit often have protective fencing in place already, but it isn’t set up correctly or well enough. We also discussed rewilding in general and ways of living alongside wildlife.”

“The seminar in Jablanac was useful and interesting,” says Hrvoje Spodnjak, a beekeeper who owns an apiary inside Velebit Nature Park. “I suffered a lot of bear damage to my hives two years ago, and I think an electric fence, which the rewilding team will install soon, will help to prevent this. I have nothing against bears – with today’s knowledge and technology people and wildlife can coexist in Velebit, and the Rewilding Velebit team are doing a great job of making this happen.”

Honeybees can have a negative impact on wild bees by competing for food. However, in some of our rewilding landscapes, such as the Velebit Mountains, we work with beekeepers to prevent damage caused to their property and livelihood by wildlife. Rewilding embraces the role of people, and their cultural and economic connections with the land, so this aligns with one of our stated rewilding principles.

The hunting perspective

The Rewilding Velebit team also held numerous discussions with local hunters in 2023. With hunting still widely practised in Velebit, the need to engage hunters in constructive dialogue is essential. The team regularly warn

people about the health risks of lead ammunition, and offer non-hazardous, lead-free ammunition to hunters as a preferential alternative.

“I support lead-free ammunition,” says Dragan Perkić, hunter from the island of Rab, which lies just offshore from Velebit in the Adriatic Sea. “I see rewilding as something positive here because the team work hard to protect nature and foster a spirit of cooperation. I’ve learned a lot from them.”

In late 2022, Rewilding Velebit signed an agreement with representatives of six 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. In 2023, an important milestone in the transition towards wildlife watching across the Velebit landscape was reached when the Rewilding Velebit team helped to set up a wildlife watching hide on a neighbouring concession.

Educational outreach

Inspiring and enabling young people to join the burgeoning rewilding movement is critical for the future health of the planet. Connecting children with nature is not only beneficial for their health and development, but can help to create a generation of eco-conscious individuals who want to take an active role in nature recovery.

The Rewilding Velebit-designed “When I grow up I want to be a wildlife ranger” workshop is intended for children of higher nursery school age and primary school students. Its goal is to introduce the younger generation to the wildlife of Velebit, and inspire them to be active nature guardians. In 2023, the Rewilding Velebit team held a series of these workshops in various locations around the landscape.

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electric fences installed around apiaries and vegetable gardens in 2023.

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NEIL ALDRIDGE

▲ Spectacular view of the Lika Plains, with the Velebit escarpment in the background.

► Davor Dundovic and Nino Salkic from the Velebit team installing electric fences around beehives to protect them from bears.

►► Schoolchildren from Gospić learning about wildlife in the Velebit Mountains.



REWILDING VELEBIT



REWILDING VELEBIT

“Our aim was to encourage participants and their families to protect the wild animals of Velebit, and we sent a message to over 500 homes about the importance and uniqueness of Velebit wildlife,” says Kruno Bošnjaković.

“I think it’s very important to teach children about nature, environmental protection, and sustainable development from their early years,” adds Nikolina Trošelj, a teacher from a nursery school in Starigrad where the Rewilding Velebit team held a workshop. “The children loved the event and learned a lot. We have a new generation of nature lovers here!”

The team also organised a large carnivore field trip for students at the Karlovac University of Applied Sciences.

“During the visit, I learned more about tracking animals, their behaviour, and taking samples, and generally became better acquainted with fieldwork,” says Sara Polojac, a student of wildlife management and nature pro-

tection. “I believe the needs of people and wildlife are equally important in the Velebit landscape. As a way of promoting coexistence, education is vital. Seeing the work of the rewilding team first-hand was a real eye-opener for me.”

Beyond Velebit

The Rewilding Velebit team also stepped up their efforts to reach people beyond the landscape in 2023. The launch of a new English-Croatian Rewilding Velebit website will allow people from Croatia and across the world learn about the

team’s mission, vision, achievements and activities, and also about rewilding in general. A photo exhibition in the Croatian capital Zagreb, showcasing the beauty of Velebit nature, also drew a significant audience, and helped the team establish new relationships. Last but not least, a range of Rewilding Velebit branded merchandise – featuring the brown bear, grey wolf, and Eurasian lynx as the three iconic carnivores of the Velebit landscape – saw rewilding promoted on the streets and in homes right across the country.

Moving forwards, the Rewilding Velebit team will continue their efforts to scale up outreach in 2024.

“The Velebit Mountains are incredibly valuable – both for the nature they contain, and for the people that live here and visit,” says Kruno Bošnjaković. “Through rewilding and our ongoing engagement efforts, we’re committed to enhancing that value.”

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children participated in educational activities in 2023.

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