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# BALKAN LYNX RECOVERY PROGRAMME

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*Newsletter*

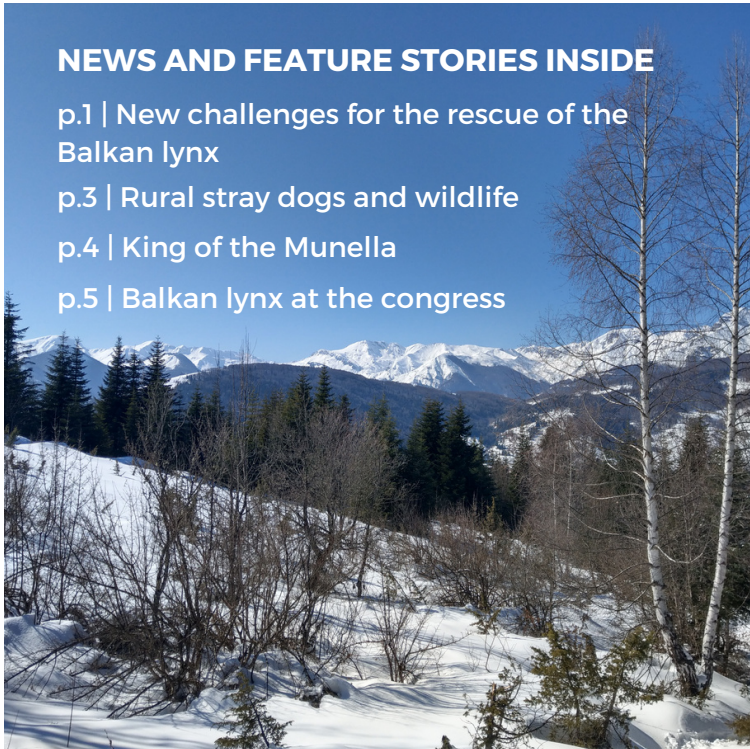
## NEWS AND FEATURE STORIES INSIDE

p.1 | New challenges for the rescue of the Balkan lynx

p.3 | Rural stray dogs and wildlife

p.4 | King of the Munella

p.5 | Balkan lynx at the congress



## NEW CHALLENGES FOR THE RESCUE OF THE BALKAN LYNX

*Written by Manuela von Arx*

In September, the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme kicked off a new project. As we have reported in the past Newsletters, despite our efforts, the conservation status of the Balkan lynx remains dire. Over the next five years, the aim is therefore to find a turn-around by further analysing and counteracting the factors impacting its small population size.

Improving the living conditions for the lynx in terms of habitat and prey base is one line of action, reducing human-induced mortalities through awareness raising and law enforcement is another one. It goes without saying that we can't achieve all this on our own but need the competent authorities, local communities, the broad public and other relevant stakeholder groups on board.

Furthermore, given that the population size of the Balkan lynx has been very small for decades already, the resulting low genetic variability is an issue we are concerned about. We are confronted with a lot of questions regarding the genetic status of the Balkan lynx and what it actually means for its recovery.



As we lack the expertise in our team, we organised a workshop inviting a group of geneticists working on lynx or on topics relevant to our questions. This workshop took place on 2–3 November 2022 in the Emmental, Switzerland (see photo). The programme consisted of several input presentations with enough time for discussions after each of them.

In summary, due to long-term isolation and small numbers, the Balkan lynx population has the lowest genetic variability of all Eurasian lynx populations. The number of individuals contributing to reproduction (the so-called effective population size  $N_e$ ) might be as low as 11 lynx. The population already displays a high level of inbreeding (mating of closely related individuals) compared to other lynx populations in Europe and it is suspected that it might already suffer from inbreeding depression (which can, for instance, manifest as a decrease in disease resistance and/or reduced fertility of individuals). We therefore consider a reinforcement of the Balkan lynx population, a pathway we investigate further during the project.





## RURAL STRAY DOGS AND WILDLIFE

*Written by Aleksandar Pavlov*

When left in the wild, stray dogs profoundly impact wildlife. Stressed and afraid, survival instinct kicks in, driving them to become feral. Their ecological “pawprint” is actualised in several ways. Firstly, the dogs, in search of food, depredate wild animals, either individually or in packs. Secondly, they often scavenge on kills of forest predators. This also affects the Balkan lynx, putting additional pressure on this critically endangered animal. Thirdly, stray dogs tend to mate with wolves. Such hybridisation compromises the gene pool of the wolf, an animal which is crucial in maintaining the natural balance between predator and prey. An additional effect is the overall disturbance on wildlife, causing forest-dwelling animals to avoid areas where dogs are present.

The situation with stray dogs in the rural areas of North Macedonia is a pressing issue that needs to be addressed urgently. On the ground we witness dogs in nature become a common sight. It is not rare that one can see abandoned dogs at the mountain passes in the regions of Prespa, Mavrovo and Shar Mountain.

In an attempt to tackle the problem, this year in August the Macedonian Ecological Society (MES) organised a Forum on Stray Dogs in the Rural Areas. The aim was to initiate a wider debate among the Macedonian institutions and NGOs on the impact of stray dogs on wildlife.

The event was attended by representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy, State Environmental Inspectorate, Food and Veterinary Agency, Laika Public Enterprise for the Welfare of Stray Animals, Anima Mundi Animal Protection Association, and MES. In the audience there were also other representatives from animal welfare organisations, who joined the discussion and asked questions. The participants recognised the far-reaching impact stray dogs have on wildlife and agreed that more needs to be done. Everyone acknowledged that major contributing factors for this multifaceted problem are irresponsible dog ownership and the flawed animal rescue system. After the mutual exchange, it was concluded that the problem requires a systematic solution involving all key players. In that regard, there needs to be an action plan laying down concrete measures, implementation time frame and responsible institutions.

The forum was but a first step towards a more comprehensive approach in addressing the stray dogs’ issue. It is no secret that the impact on wildlife is significant and, therefore, conservation efforts should also consider this aspect when designing the monitoring and recovery of the Balkan lynx.

# KING OF THE MUNELLA

*Written by Marianne Graf  
President of "Austria-Albania Partnerschaft"  
Honorary Consul of Albania in Austria*

*A Balkan lynx statue was recently placed on top of a tower, in the village of Gurth-Spac, in Mirdite region, Albania, where an inauguration ceremony took place on 4th November, joined by PPNEA, local authorities, tourist guides, and local population. The Balkan lynx statue is an initiative of the philanthropist Ms. Marianne Graf, President of the "Austria-Albania Partnerschaft". She worked in partnership with Turi Nikolli, local sculptor to design the lynx in an imposing size worthy of a ruler and in a sensitive execution.*

Moreover, scientists, researchers and those interested in nature and biodiversity, employees of nature conservation organisations use the place to exchange professional and technical knowledge about fauna and flora, to develop protection strategies and to choose the place as a meeting place for cross-border cooperation. Lastly, the sculpture invites to visit our new "Eco-Nature Destination NATURA MAGICA GURTH-SPAC", which provides income for the village's small farmers and creates sustainable livelihoods.



And if the shy mountain dweller can't be seen, PPNEA experts can show you photos from the camera traps and its presence can be sensed as you climb the nearly 2000 m high Munella mountain, over storm-tossed grassy plateaus, through some still intact old venerable pieces of beech forest and bizarre karst formations. Anyone who ends the day in the round hut with delicious, traditional regional dishes and by the firelight in order to experience the sunrise on the Mirditas natural balcony in the morning has certainly found their heart and longing place in "NATURA MAGICA GURTH-SPAC".

Which king can boast of knowing his likeness on a lookout tower high above a wildly romantic mountain scenery? Solely the king of the Munella, the Balkan lynx, *Lynx lynx balcanicus*, one of the rarest cats on earth.

The sculpture should fulfil several tasks. Firstly, it is a reference to the animal whose population is threatened with extinction due to poaching, deforestation, recent massive forest fires and other habitat-damaging interventions. Secondly, it is to point out that the area of the unique animal has been designated by the government as a new "Munella Protected Area" and urgently needs an increase in the protection status for the wild Munella Mountains, which are unique in Europe.



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# Balkan lynx at the congress

*Written by Aleksandar Pavlov*



This year in October the Macedonian Ecological Society organised the 6th Congress of Ecologists of the Republic of North Macedonia with International Participation. The Congress, coinciding with the celebration of the 50th anniversary of MES's establishment, hosted more than 100 guests from 12 countries from the region and beyond in Ohrid. The event offered a forum where scientists presented their research findings in an array of topics, including biodiversity and nature conservation.

The BLRP team took part in the Congress, presenting the conservation work on the Balkan's most endangered cat. Saving the Balkan lynx, the plenary lecture by our team member, Dime Melovski, provided an overview of the current situation, starting off with the short history of the animal and continuing to the current threats, population trends and the field research of its prey and habitat preferences. Furthermore, the oral presentation titled "Connecting the dots: Abundance estimations and turnover rate of the Balkan lynx and other mammals" gave a view into the population trends of forest mammals, resulting from the 14-year fieldwork with camera-traps.

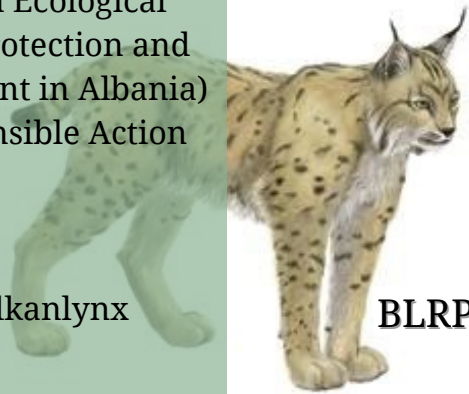


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# Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme

The Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme (BLRP) is jointly implemented by EuroNatur Foundation, KORA (Carnivore Ecology and Wildlife Management), MES (Macedonian Ecological Society), PPNEA (Society for the Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania) and ERA (Environmentally Responsible Action Group, Kosovo).

More Information:  
<https://www.facebook.com/balkanlynx>



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