

Deer People Work Placement

Learning about wildlife management across 3 European countries

By

Nicola Williamson



Supported by

The Association of Deer Management Groups

And

Rewilding Affric Highlands

Introduction

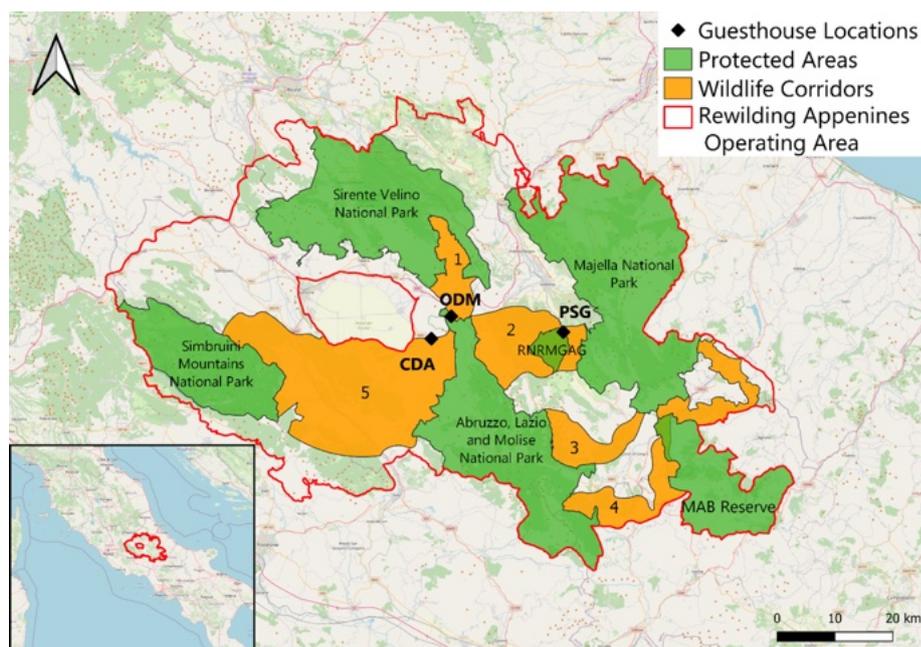
The Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG) created a fund through the sales of Richard Cooke's book *Deer People* to support young people involved in deer management by providing the opportunity to learn to about wildlife management in a different context by spending up to three months overseas.

I applied for this internship due to my passion for wildlife and my evolving thoughts about hunting and wildlife management. I currently work for a Rewilding charity Affric Highlands, (previously Trees for Life) as a field officer and I spend much of my free time learning about the practical aspects of deer management by getting out stalking. I have passed my DCS1, have my FAC and I'm working towards my DSC2. I have a strong passion for sustainable deer management and there is a wealth of knowledge to be learned from our deer stalking community. I would also love to see a future where Scotland is richer in biodiversity and maybe one day has a top predator back in the landscape.

I was allowed to create an internship that would develop my interests and knowledge, using a range of contacts I already had. I decided that I wanted to learn more about the different hunting models in Europe, about wildlife management, conflict and co-existence. I believe hunting has its place in wildlife conservation and has proven not only to protect but increase numbers of species, if done correctly. It was not my intention to take part in any hunting whilst on this internship unless the opportunity arose. Open season for most species would be after my visit to the three countries anyway; it was more important to me to have the time to speak with people and to learn.

I used contacts from Rewilding Europe to visit three European countries, Italy, Romania and Croatia. My plan was to meet with hunters, farmers and conservationists and learn about how wildlife is valued by these different groups. I wanted to understand the mechanisms behind the hunting models including how count and cull targets are set and achieved, what species are protected, and which species are managed. My personal view prior to the internship was that some species do need management and although I am comfortable with the reasons I cull deer, I would, for example, never want to hunt a bear. There are also many conflicts between wildlife and people, but I believe we all have a right to exist. Learning about how conflict is managed was also an important part of the internship and I wanted to find examples of positive coexistence. We need to enhance our relationship with wildlife, reconnect and value nature better than we have in our recent past. Species are in decline, habitat loss increasing, our climate less predictable, and we need to ask ourselves "how do we live with nature now and ensure we protect and enhance it for the future?"

Italy – Abruzzo region



I travelled to the Abruzzo region of Italy and was based in a small village named Ortona (ODM on the map above). It's a stunning village nestled on a small hill, surrounded by large mountains, where farms, forests and alpine grasslands support many species and a traditional rural way of life, however the youngest person in the village was 42! The Rewilding Appenines team has a volunteer house here, where they host volunteers 10 months of the year to help them collect data, remove fences, and learn about 'bear smart' communities. The team works with the local hunting groups, the National Park authorities and the local communities, focusing their efforts on the corridors between the National Parks.

The National Park has a strict no hunting policy (except for some boar hunting) and employs an armed ranger service with the legal authority to arrest any person breaking the law. The surrounding areas are split into hunting concessions which are mostly managed for wild boar as, in this region of Italy, red deer are protected. This is due to the current population coming from a re-introduction after the species was eliminated in the region by the mid 1900s.

81 individual red deer were re-introduced to three areas across Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Park back in 1972 – 1987 and they were protected by law. Although there is some evidence of poaching within the corridors outside the National Park authorities, it is not a common occurrence. Red deer numbers have increased, even in the presence of predators, including wolves and the Marsican brown bear (a local sub species), to the point that the hunting association and local farmers are applying to the local municipality to allow a quota of deer to be hunted. In 2024 an application was put to the authorities, but this was denied based on reasons including uncertainty over actual deer numbers and whether they are causing a negative effect, and pressure from animal rights groups, including rewilding/conservation organisations.



The view across the landscape from Ortona

To understand more about the current conversation around red deer I spoke to Franco Recchia, who has worked as Director of the regional hunting office for the Abruzzo region for 30 years. He himself has never hunted but is a lover of all wildlife, and he respects hunting as a management tool, not as a sport. Where some species are in good numbers like boar, woodcock and deer, he believes they can be sustainably hunted, with the meat being a valuable local product. In fact, he invited me along to a butchery course he had organised for the hunting community but, unfortunately, I was due to leave Italy before it took place. Franco is very passionate about eating game meat as he says it's environmentally sustainable, ethical, free, healthy and is good for the habitats and encourages better animal welfare. His understanding is that the red deer numbers are getting too high as they are starting to push other species including chamois and bears out of some areas. They compete for the same food source, Buckthorn *Rhamnus alpinus*, a favourite for the bears and alpine grasses, (Lovari, 2014). Currently he says numbers are around 2 – 4 per km² and he near about fell off his chair when I told him the average number in Scotland was around 12 per km². "Impossibile!", he exclaimed.

He is supportive of the National Parks for protecting wildlife in the past, but now he says they need to manage and conserve wildlife for the future.



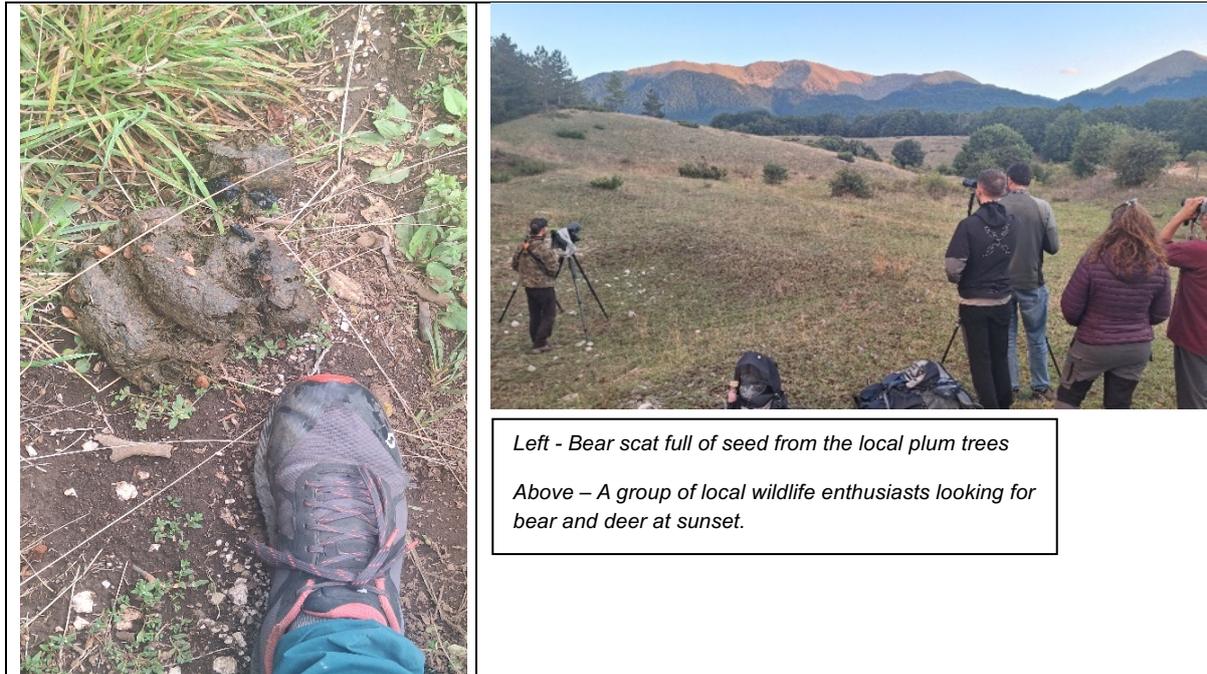
I next met with local hunter and concession manager, Ennio. Young and knowledgeable and full of ideas and passion for red deer, we drove around the hunting concession he manages. Clad in a baseball cap, shorts and t-shirt and smoking a cigarette, he showed me where boar drives take place and areas where guys go out collecting cast antlers. We even came across a vulture feeding on the carcass of dead cow; the size of these birds is incredible. We then parked up in his beautiful hometown, Scanno, on an old and narrow cobbled street. He popped into the local shops for some cigarettes and then we walked through an archway off the main street and stopped outside an old rustic door. Ennio open the door to his treasure trove of cast antlers, I have never seen antlers so impressive, 8 points, beautiful colour and texture, a sign of deer with a healthy diet and good habitat.



A red stag found after the rut by Ennio – and my close encounter with a young Marsican bear as he crosses the road.

Ennio explained to meet how the hunting concession works. He manages one of three in the Abruzzo area, covering 1,300km², and scale is needed, he says. This land is owned by the State and the hunting concession must fulfil an annual count and cull programme for boar. The current estimate of deer of the wider concession is 2 - 4per km², however they tend to concentrate in areas pushing this density up. In March Ennio explains to me how they do a coordinated count over four days, using hundreds of local volunteers from the hunting association and conservation organisations. They tried to cover 900 set points in the landscape with volunteers taking a count at set times, sunset and sunrise over three days. This data is used to inform local government about the numbers of deer, including red, roe, and fallow and they also count chamois. Ennio believe in the Abruzzo region where the red deer were reintroduced their numbers have increased from the original 81 to over 15,000 and he is in favour of a quota. This is not to fulfil a thirst for sport shooting but to manage a species in harmony with its habitat and to respectfully and skilfully go hunting.

Ennio prefers quality over quantity in hunting. He thinks our use of Argos is lazy, apart for just being uncomfortable, but he also understands in Scotland that we have a very different situation.



Left - Bear scat full of seed from the local plum trees

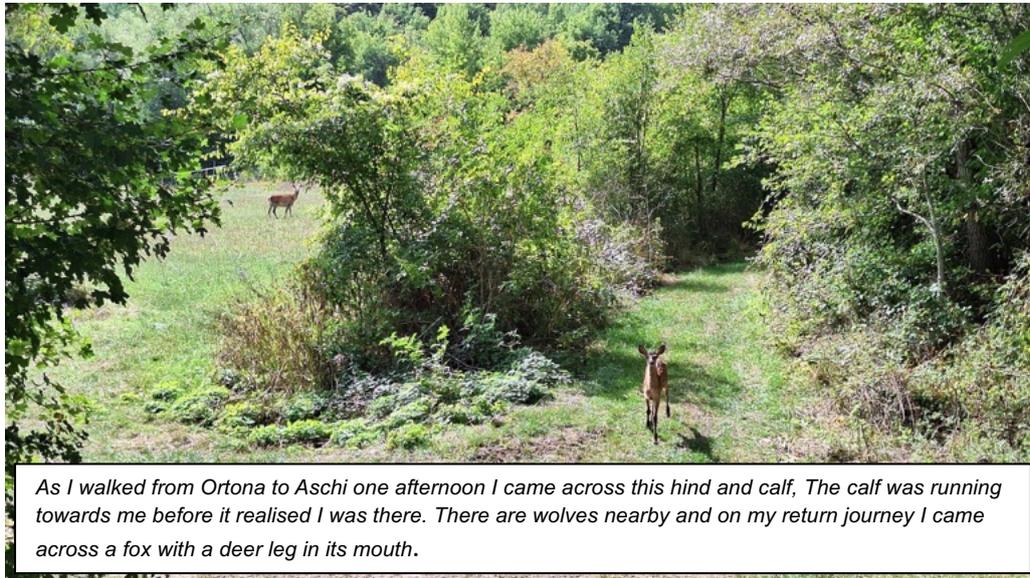
Above – A group of local wildlife enthusiasts looking for bear and deer at sunset.

Ennio would like to take a hunter out for a quality hunt and would charge at least 1000 Euros per day, plus extra for the trophy, which would be graded. A red stag in Abruzzo can weigh up to 250 - 300 kg! I would not want to be dragging that off a hill! To understand the impacts of red deer on the habitat and competition between other species, more data needs to be collected. As we drove up into the mountains we also came across the herds of cattle and horses which are allowed to graze the alpine meadows throughout the summer. However, the density of livestock and the area is left unchecked and from what I saw it was completely overgrazed, leaving little habitat for chamois, and deer.

When I told Ennio about the GPS collaring program that Affric Highlands have been running in South Ross, he was keen to learn more, "Data and science is the key" he said, and engaging with the hunting and conservation community is Ennio's focus going forward. He wants the antler hunters, the farmers, the rewilders and the boar hunters to work together to enhance and protect wildlife, but his main passion is red deer.

From the village I could see the red deer up on the hill and in late August they were already starting to bellow. There were easily 200 red deer on the hill side and one night as I watched them through the spy glasses I could see a large group of wild boar, at least 30, up beyond 1000 meters just grazing near the deer. One night I went with one of the volunteers to one of the next villages, Aschi, only 4km south, following the same hill face, as here was a pack of wolves on the lower farm ground. Sure enough, as we sat on the opposite hill watching for movement out of the thicket of trees; two wolves, then two more, then three more came out to play in the dusk light. It was amazing to watch as they chased and interacted with each other and then they were off out of view to hunt.

The next day I met with a farmer from the same village, Angelo Gentile, to understand his perspective on wildlife management. Angelo is in his late 50s, single, with no family of his own but he was raised in these valleys and loves the land and wildlife. He is a vegetable farmer, producing legumes and wheat for pasta and has his biological certification. He grew up in the area and has a real passion for wildlife, he loves to see the animals, but he says that farming is not so compatible with wildlife and fences are needed. The Rewilding Apennines team help the local community with fencing, covering the cost and installation. They use a mixture of standard and electric fencing and Angelo is happy with its effectiveness so far. He says there are lots of grazers around, boar, deer and bears - and let's not forget the porcupine which the Romans introduced to the area.



As I walked from Ortona to Aschi one afternoon I came across this hind and calf, The calf was running towards me before it realised I was there. There are wolves nearby and on my return journey I came across a fox with a deer leg in its mouth.

I asked Angelo directly if he thought the red deer should be hunted. Fabrizio, my translator and Rewilding Apennines project manager awaited his answer, and without translation I could understand there was a disagreement. Angelo said: “yes, deer need to be managed as there are no young trees growing, the area is over grazed.” Fabrizio is against the management of deer, and he doesn’t agree with hunting. He says there is not enough data to prove there are too many deer, and fences are working. But Angelo who is happy with the fences disagrees; they are good friends and although there is heated debate it is done in true Italian manner, with good wine.

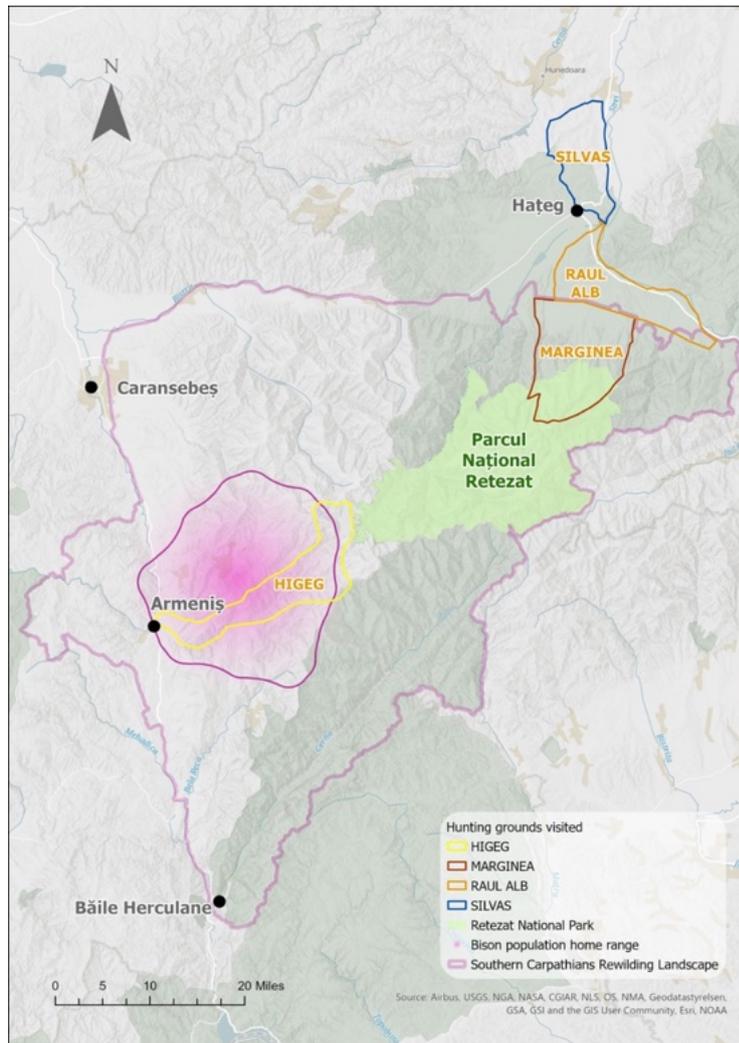
Angelo has no problem with predators, including the pack of wolves close by, but he also has no livestock. As people have left the area or simply just died he has seen the land abandoned and become unmanaged. The wolves have always been a part of the landscape here and so they know how to get along; however, he does acknowledge his livestock farming neighbours have a different perspective. He is not a hunter himself but calls on the local hunting association to help him manage the wild boar on his land, but he says they rarely show up as it is in their interest to keep the numbers high for the driven hunts. The number of wild boars however is said to be on the increase, even in the presence of natural predators. I asked if anyone had shown an interest in making a small business out of the wild boar meat, but he did know of anyone.

The Marsican bear (*Ursus arctus arctus*), a smaller local sub species of the European brown bear is the main conflict species in the area but also the species of highest conservation concern. With approximately 60 - 90 individuals left the species is critically endangered. The Rewilding Apennine team has created a programme of ‘Bear Smart’ communities across the region, based on a similar program in Canada. These are effective in terms of engagement and education. I spent some of my time helping to install fences for farmers and members of the community to protect their fruit trees. Everyone I spoke to has no ill feeling towards the bears; they have grown up with them, but they are coming into villages more often and females are having larger families, up to four cubs, which is a sign of a plentiful food resource. I was also very lucky to have an unbelievable close encounter with a young male bear one evening when out observing an area bears frequently use. There was a rustle in the bush metres to my right as I was looking downhill for him, only to turn around and watch him appear out the bushes and walk across the nearby road.

Wildlife management is complex in Abruzzo; they have also introduced Griffon vultures into the region, which are very impressive birds. However, poisoning and wind turbines are causing some deaths of these amazing ‘flying barn doors’. One day I went with the team on a chick count in the mountains and watched the adults fly on the thermals. There are conflicts for sure in this area between different stakeholders, but I got a general sense from the Rewilding Apennines team that most people are willing to look for coexistence solutions, as the people in this area have grown up with predator and prey.

Hunting of red deer is still up for debate and, in the near future, it might be a possibility. As I packed up my bags to head off for my next destination in Romania, I could honestly say that wildlife I saw in Abruzzo was unbelievable and the landscape, people and the food makes this place very special.

Romania - Southern Carpathians area



I flew into Cluj-Napoca on a wet Sunday afternoon and was picked up by Rewilding Romania operations manager Anghel Drasovean. I would be staying in Hateg for part of my trip and then further south-west to Armenis, the region where bison were re-introduced, all surrounding the Retezat National Park. As we left the airport and drove along the highway my first wildlife encounter in the country was a muster of storks, and I was very excited.

Romania is famed for vast stretches of pristine primary forest, bringing with it an almost full complement of species, from lynx and bears to chamois and beavers. I was to see a lot of wildlife in my time here but as we continued to drive, Anghel pointed out our second wildlife encounter, a golden jackal, roadkill this time. This species is on the move, migrating from their stronghold in the south-east of Europe, they are spreading through Romania and across western Europe, with sightings in Finland, Spain and Norway. They are more adaptable than a fox, canny and more confident and therefore a shoot on site policy is in force across the country - a policy with which even the rewilders are onboard.

My first meeting was with hunting concession manager Mr Romanescu, with thanks to Catalin, Rewilding Romania's Bison Ranger, for his translation. He explained the way hunting concessions operate in Romania; he manages three concessions, two neighbour each other covering 14,000 ha, one on high ground, another on low ground. The estimated populations of red deer are 200 - 300 as they move around a lot. He has another concession which is 14,000 ha and supports mainly fallow deer which have been reintroduced with the help of the Rewilding Romania team and around 40 roe deer all on lower ground. Catalin and I walked out to this concession early one morning and sat in a high seat. It was a beautiful morning and, as the sun rose, we were lucky enough to see a rare black fallow buck in a group of deer, its mother the same colour.



The morning light across the hunting concession, looking for fallow.

All land in Romania is divided into concessions; some are private and some are state run. His concession is private, but the state sets the quota per species. Therefore, each year a census count is needed, and the government usually sets the quota at 10% per species, although the Ministry of Environment rarely joins in the census counts or audits the cull records on site. There is an obligation to fulfil the quota; however, it is rare for the female deer to be shot. Mr Romanescu does not shoot females, he says they have a hard enough time as it is with predation from bears, wolves and packs of wild dogs, which frequently leave their shepherding posts to go on a hunt. He also wants the numbers of females to increase and so it is common practice for the quota on paper to be filled but not completed in reality.

There is conflict with the deer in the low ground as they damage crops and people's gardens; there are also less predators on lower ground and so more control needs to be done by the hunting managers. He runs a tight ship on his hunting concession - all members pay fees and are expected to give up to five days a year of their time to help maintain infrastructure on the hunting grounds, put out feed, help with census counts and patrol for poaching and bad hunting practices.

There is no longer a healthy wild boar population as African swine flu has hit numbers badly and although they are starting to recover it will take a few years to build back up. The quota per deer species is usually divided between big trophies which are sold to foreigners at a higher price, and then that money is re-invested into the concession. The rest of the quota is awarded to the members who put the most effort into managing the concession. Although bears are currently protected in the region their numbers are increasing and 'problem bear' are making it possible for hunting associations to apply for a quota. Mr Romanescu says a bear can be sold for 7,000 – 8,000 Eur, and although he has himself has shot bears in the past, he has no interest now. Most local hunters he says are interested in the boar and the social aspect, but he cares for the deer and all wildlife. He has no problem with predators except the semi wild dogs. He does believe that a small hunting quota increases the value of some species and can therefore reduce poaching as the industry becomes more self-regulating. Sadly, bears are poached, and later in my trip I was to come across a dead bear in a river while looking for bison. Maybe if the bear had a hunting value, then they would get more local protection and not ended up rotting in the local river.



The Rewilding Romania team is in the process of setting up their own hunting association, which requires three individuals to create. They all must pass their hunting exams which firstly requires a six month internship with a hunting association and also pass their firearms exam and join a hunting association. Paula, the enterprise manager at Rewilding Romania, has passed all these exams and is on the board of the newly created association. Her mother was one of the first female local hunters and is passing on her beautiful wooden stock rifles to Paula. However, Paula is still to use them and has not yet shot an animal; she says she knows she should but is slightly resistant. The main purpose of the association is to gain a concession and run it in a way that protects species, reduces sports shooting and increases the opportunities for people to going hunting with a camera, using the skills and knowledge of the local hunters.

The team has been working with the hunting community to help re-stock red and fallow deer into hunting concession ground. In early 2025, 60 red deer from a farm in Poland were released in the foothills not too far from Hateg. They doubled the current population, but unfortunately instead of heading up in the hills and mixing with the wild deer, the mixed group stayed in the lowlands amongst the farms and woodland and caused a bit of problem. The team believes a smaller group release next time would be better, but it will take a few years for some breeding with the wilder deer for these farmed deer to acclimatise to a wilder way of life.

I was privileged enough to spend some time out in the woods and in the mountains with Catalin, a skilled wildlife guide. We took a walk up into the Retezat Mountains; it is a beautiful vast area of forested glens climbing up into the mountains, giving way to alpine shrub and grassland. We stopped for a break above the treeline and listened for marmots. Now, in my ever-learning ecological brain I thought these were smaller 'gopher like' mountain rodents but I was wrong. First you hear them - they call out in a high pitch squeak, helping you to spot them and they are more like mountain beaver in size, and are a joy to watch. They are social animals that live in amongst the rocks in burrows, sleeping six months of the year after eating for the other six months. An ideal lifestyle! I fell in love with them and could watch them for hours. Catalin was spying the hills around us when he suddenly but quietly said "bear". I looked round and there on the grassy slopes not 500 metres up the hill was a big brown bear and, as it happened, a 'mumma bear' as two small cubs came out of the undergrowth playing as they wandered, snacking on the vegetation. I was just in awe of how beautiful and happy the scene was unfolding in front of me. My eyes did fill up as I had never been so close to something so precious. As the mother bear lifted her head and sniffed in the air she knew we were near, and off she jogged, encouraging her babies into the shrubs. Away they went - a very special moment.



Marmot in Retezat National Park

As we climbed we watched and heard the marmots running between dens, calling out or just sitting and watching the world go by. After a scenic lunchtime spot, we retreated down the mountain when Catalin spotted a chamois, such a beautiful creature, with their distinct facial marking and short horns, they are very agile on the steep rocky slopes. What a day full of amazing wildlife in a protected National Park.



European brown bear and cubs, Retezat National Park. Credit: Catalin Josan

I was to spend the next week in Armenis, a small village to the western range of the Retezat mountains. It was here that nearly 100 individual bison have been released over multiple years, back into the forest they once roamed after extinction from over-hunting in the late 18th century. Rewilding Romania worked with the local communities and authorities to release the bison into this area, and local people are employed as bison rangers to monitor and protect these massive beasts, along with providing education activities to the local schools. The local area promotes the bison for tourism which is encouraging and supporting small local businesses. The bison are currently protected by law, but I do wonder if at some point in the future there may be a hunting quota for old bulls, with the profits re-invested back into the concession and bison programme.

Unfortunately, during my time tracking bison in the area with the rangers I would find more dead than alive. A strand of unconfirmed (for local political reasons) blue tongue had hit the herd and dead bison were being discovered in the rivers, as the disease creates an insatiable thirst. I was to find five dead bison as I searched with the ranger team, who are all also local hunters. In total the team lost around 30 bison to the disease, out of a herd that had reached an approximate population of 250.

It was a hard and devastating time for the team, but hopefully the bison are building more resilience and will only get stronger. I was also lucky to come across a cow and calf in the woods, again



Catalin, the bison whisperer, spotted them. How a creature so large can move so quietly through the forest is amazing. It makes a walk in the woods a completely different experience than back home in Scotland. Your senses are heightened, with bear, lynx and bison walking unseen and unheard around you. Catalin would say to me: "you can be quiet and maybe bump into something - or be loud and know you will not."

Local farmer, Iancu Mihai, met us one evening to show us around his farming enterprise. We toured around his grazing leases in an old 4 x 4 that was used to the abuse of the rough tracks (while I tried to write legible notes). He has dairy and beef cows, grazings, cuts hay, grows wheat, barley and some potatoes. He runs 30 Galloway and 10 Romanian dairy cattle on 110 ha and also works full time in another job - but his son is planning to take on the farm full time very soon. Iancu was very proud of his cattle and how he uses them to graze protected daffodil wetlands. He is relaxed about the wildlife damage to crops and has lost two calves to a bear and a cow to a lynx he thinks. He takes it all in his stride saying that it just nature and the predators have a right to exist.

Not all his neighbours who farm have the same attitude about the damage or loss of livestock, but he loves seeing the wildlife. He believes the hunting association should pay compensation to the farmer for damages to their crop. The state pays compensation for loss of livestock but it's a very slow and bureaucratic process. He doesn't hunt himself but has noticed that bears are coming closer to village as old orchards and farms have been abandoned. He says the biggest predator problem is the jackal and it needs managed.



We spent some time with Mr Stoicanescu, a local hunter and gamekeeper employed by the National Forestry Department, Rom Silva. They manage large tracts of forest on behalf of the State and most of the hunting concessions associated with them. Mr Stoicanescu lives with his wife and family in the mountains in a beautiful log cabin. He has his own small herd of fallow deer enclosed near the house and has worked and lived his whole life in the area. He has a kind and calm nature and a knowledge of the local nature that only comes from years of interaction and experience. Regarding concessions he has quota for boar, red deer, chamois and roe, with quotas set by the forestry guard. They decide the quota based on numbers counted, the quality and productivity of the hunting ground and the number per species they would like to have. Mr Stoicanescu said an accurate count is difficult in this terrain of forested mountains, but the use of camera traps and co-ordinated counts would provide better data.

That evening before dark we left his home to walk out to a wildlife hide. Parking the pickup at the bottom of a steep track we walked quietly up to the raised hide overlooking an open area in the woods. As we climbed inside and settled in, binoculars and camera at the ready, I reflected on what Mr Stoicanescu was saying on the drive up. He said he loves to just come here and wait to see wildlife, and that he has no interest in shooting anymore. He told how many times he was lucky enough to encounter lynx, the most elusive of woodland creatures. He values all wildlife, deer and predators and, as I gazed out, honing my bad eyesight into the trees, we all reacted to the crack and snap of branches breaking. Catalin whispered "bison" and there in the trees the shape started to take form, a young male wandered out slowly and started to graze in front of us, unaware or uncaring of our presence. Slightly underweight he browsed for a while and suddenly in the woods behind him another shape, this time a young bear. He circled the outskirts of the forest clearing and loped off into the woods. My brain was taking it all in but at the same time not truly believe the encounter, bears and bison so close! Would I see a lynx?

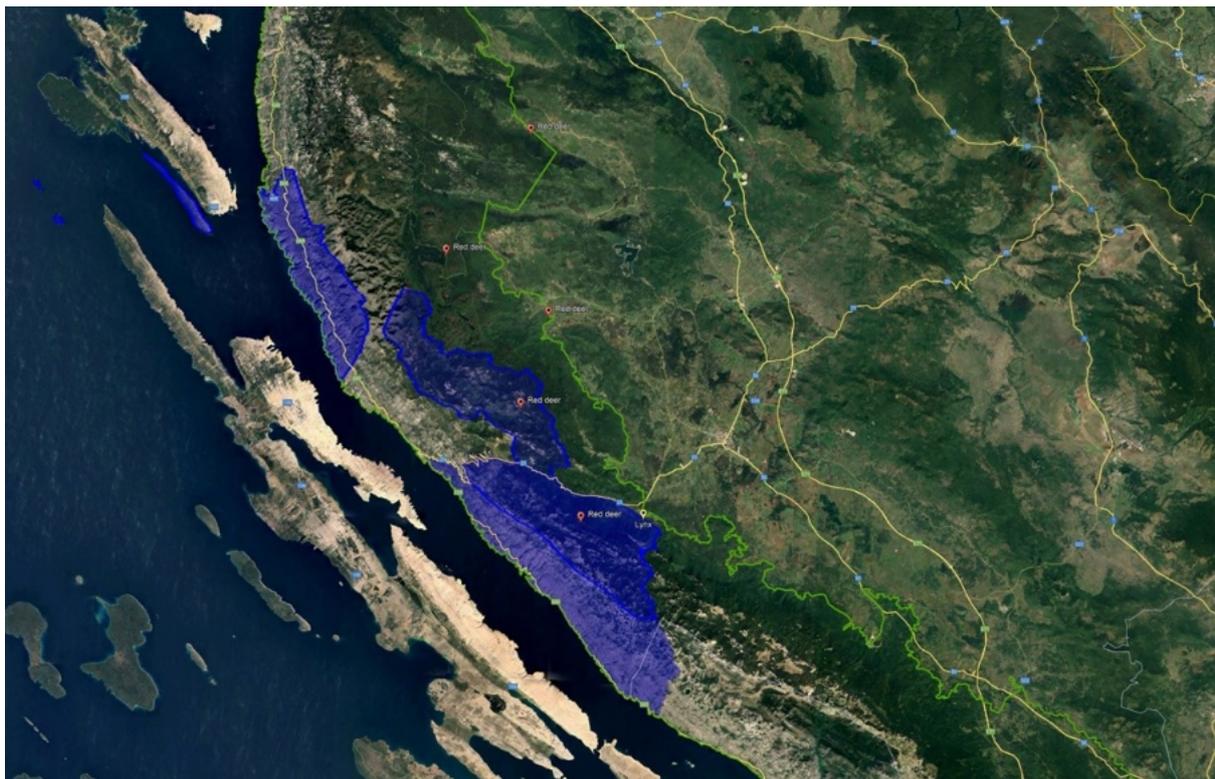


In the last year Mr Stoicanescu had taken guests hunting for four chamois, three red stags, 10 wild boar and two roe. Most hunters are foreign as they will pay a higher price, and he can charge £800 - £5,000 for chamois based on the trophy. When he had a bear quota some eight years ago, he charged £3,000 - £4,000. Is that a fair price for a bear? Again, the female quota is never actually fulfilled, except on paper. The lodge they use for guests is large enough for 20 people and would be a great location to take a group of Scottish stalkers to to experience a different wildlife management situation. I was informed that the Austrian hunters are the best hunters he has met, and they have the best ethics when it comes to animal welfare, respect and management. When I asked what he thought should change in the current Romanian system, he replied that poaching is a bigger problem now, people have access to cheap 4 x 4 trucks and therefore can access open forest track and with thermals can poach wildlife more easily. More funding needs to be invested by the public owned concession, and private concessions, he says, operate better as there is more financial support and interest in good game animals, although bad owners can pressure staff to shoot protected species. He also said hunters need to have better knowledge and understanding of all wildlife, that sustainable management is important and might have also suggested that we need lynx in Scotland.

My time in Romania was ending, two weeks and I had seen so much, including, bee-eaters, purple heron, great egret, red deer, fallow, fox, more chamois and beavers on the local river outside the town! The rural landscape still supports hay-making, orchards, and small mixed crops which create a dynamic and mosaic of species rich habitats. I will definitely return. Next stop, Croatia.



Croatia - Velebit Mountains



I flew into Zadar on the northern part of Croatia's long coastline, with the Velebit mountains a very close back drop. Within 2 km of the coast this mountain range increases from sea level to over 1,000 metres, creating a natural divide between coastal and interior climates and associated habitats. The wind drops so quickly off the mountains toward the sea that some islands are completely devoid of any vegetation.

To the east of the Velebit mountain range which runs parallel to the Adriatic coast north to south lies the town Gospić. I arrived off the bus in heavy rain and was greeted by a member of the Rewilding Velebit team, Igor, who kindly with his little English took me to my accommodation. The next day rewilding manager Nino picked me up for a whistle stop tour of part of the rewilding area.

A knowledgeable and skilled ecologist, mountain leader, mountain rescue member and all-round good guy, Nino took me to some of the wildlife hides they have on the hunting concessions that are now managed by members of the Rewilding Velebit team.

The team now manages over 30,000 hectares over five hunting concessions, transitioning them from traditional hunting concessions to wildlife-based economy, in the hope of bolstering more photography hunting and increasing the monitoring and data collection of wildlife in this area. Through EU LIFE funding the team have released five lynx into these areas to increase the genetic health of the current endangered Dinaric populations. 65 red deer have also been released in areas across the landscape, with a temporary ban on hunting species such as red, roe and chamois until numbers recover.

The team employs four wildlife rangers, most of them hunters, to manage and monitor the concession areas to ensure no poaching is taking place. Again, there is easy access for people with 4 x 4s into the forest and mountains. I spoke with ranger Marijan's brother, Ivan, who works full time in forestry but keeps a herd of 10 native Busa cattle on 15 ha. We met in a busy cafe one morning, an important cultural part to Croatian life. Nino would translate as Ivan and Marijan smoked and drank coffee. He hunts wild boar, usually taking 10 a year; he likes to go alone not in a driven hunt. He has his own dogs and, as in Italy and Romania, the season opens on 1 October for selective hunting, and 11 October for driven hunting with dogs. He pays 300 Euro a year for his membership and gives five days a year to the association. He has hunted red deer, stags only; again, nobody wants to shoot the hinds as they are in low numbers from over-hunting. For chamois a trophy can be anything from 750 - 2,000 euro. Marijan showed me a book that is used to score all trophies of all game animals.

He has not and will not shoot bears as he respects them, but if it were legal he would hunt lynx and wolves as they can cause damage to his cattle. There is a general grievance against wolves from livestock farms, but again I believe that data and mitigation efforts should be improved first before any quota should be put in place. Ivan has lost a calf to predation in the past but also says some farmers need to do more to protect their livestock from predators. There was a shared opinion amongst the group that bigger farmers get a lot of subsidies and get lazy, and so they lose livestock. He says there is a growing feeling in the hunting community towards shooting wolves as they predate on boar and deer, although there are more lynx than wolves around.

Marijan, who didn't speak much English, drove me north one day to help him and Nino secure a new wildlife hide built on the windswept coast. They were concerned the current fixtures wouldn't hold in the 200 km per hour winds! The hide was placed at a vulture feeding station and was surrounded by a bear-proof fence. As we walked the perimeter to cut back any vegetation, we were stepping over white smooth rocks, made of carbonate and limestone which characterise the Velebit range. "Perfect habitat for vipers," Nino proclaims with much enthusiasm. I would have loved to see one, at a safe distance, but it was too cold that day.

After the manual labour a much-needed feast was required. Davour, another ranger, took us to his home where he prepared freshly caught fish, fried in breadcrumbs, with salad and local bread and cheese. He grew up on these coastal mountains; he loves nature and is an ambassador for sustainable hunting and repopulating the area with young people. We went for a drive to look for chamois and mouflon, the latter I had never seen before.

One evening Nino, Marijan and my friend and colleague Sian, went in search of wildlife in the mountains. We walked out to a raised wildlife hide after an off-road drive through the steep mountains. We walked out into the alpine zone where grasslands and rocky scree meet shrubs and forest. We were lucky, first we heard the roar and then saw a beautiful stag come into view. We watched him until the last light from around 800 metres, looking across the vast mountain range as the sun set. It was stunning.

Marijan invited me over for lunch one day to meet some hunting friends and try some of the local produced meats and cheese, including wild boar, venison and chamois. A lot of the local hunters prepare cured meat from wild boar and share it with friends or sell it locally to the butcher. One of the local hunters told me he has dogs and likes to go out to hunt boar for the social and community aspect. He enjoys being out in nature; his father often took him out in nature, hunting and just to spend time. He was born in this rural and beautiful place, he said, and he respects it and is always in nature.

He is not a huge fan of predators as they predate the game and, although he respects their importance in the natural system, he believes they need to be managed. If there was a quota, he would be happy to shoot a wolf, I asked why, to which he said he “would feel pride and have the trophy.” He believes in the quota system, wants predators in the landscape and is opposed to poaching as it is not helping with sustainable game species.

I was lucky enough to spend some time hiking through the forests and mountains of the Velebit National Park, with information boards describing the diverse flora and fauna, including bears, wolves and lynx. There is a different feeling to walking alone through a forest where predators roam freely. As much as I was hoping to have a lucky encounter my nerves got the better of me, and I took Catalin’s advice and would occasionally sing to myself as I wondered through the beautiful habitat.

On my last day out with Nino we installed a wildlife camera at a small waterhole in the forest. It works off 5G and a small solar panel. The AI technology filters through the non-wildlife images and the footage can be watched live from your phone! We talked about the conflicts between wildlife and humans and the hunting concession management approach from Rewilding Velebit. Nino says that of course there is conflict between livestock farmers and predators, but most people respect the predators right to exist, with lynx and wolves protected under the law. One of the problems he says are the livestock farmers, who have become rich on subsidies and will leave their livestock unguarded and unchecked. He also is huge advocate for engagement and education to promote the importance of wildlife conservation. The hunting concession he says is going well as they have worked with hunters and have built up trust and good relations. They have supported re-stocking of red deer and are employing local people. Marijan is very protective of the hunting grounds and promoting sustainable hunting and good hunting practice. He says that poaching and bad practice help neither people nor wildlife.

On my last night in Croatia I stayed overnight in a wildlife hide, and Marijan had left a little feed out for wildlife in hopes that I would see a bear. I stayed up until I could no longer see through the darkness, sleeping lightly in case I heard movement in the night. Alas, I was to see nothing – but to know they are out there is enough. I will just have to come back again to this beautiful spot.

Reflections

Every person I spoke to across these European countries referred to the need to promote sustainable and ethical wildlife management practices including robust count data for each species, understanding their ecological needs, as well as increased engagement with all stakeholders to mitigate conflicts. They aim to promote collaboration and opportunities to share skills, knowledge and resources. All hunters/farmers I spoke to respect the right for predators to exist and management to be used where needed. Education is also vital to promote the importance of healthy ecosystems to the wider community.

Humans have fundamentally altered so much of our natural environment that restoration is not simply a case of throwing some species out in an area and walking away. Re-introductions and bolstering of species need to be done with respect to the animals and an understanding of their future management. I see the value in the sustainable hunting of game species where the money generated goes back into wider conservation needs and supports local people.

In Scotland, I believe that land or natural resource management needs to happen at landscape scale, involving communities and relevant interests as well as the owners of the land, with management objectives set at local and regional scales, as indeed many existing Deer Management Groups seek to do. Quotas should be set and delivered locally, based on robust census data and population models, with the responsibility for delivery being shared by stakeholders. I liked what I saw of the hunting systems in Europe and believe they offer lessons for us.

Scotland is my home, her landscapes, nature and culture are unique, but we have a lot of work to do to restore and enhance the nature we have lost and are losing on land and at sea. We all need to work together to protect and enhance species, restore habitats and ensure we can still rely on the land for our livelihoods. I hope that the future of wildlife management in Scotland can bring multiple stakeholders together to support this mission.

