





Hunting *the* Hunters

RUDOLF ABRAHAM JOINS A SMALL VOLUNTEERING PROJECT MONITORING LYNX, WOLF AND BEAR POPULATIONS IN THE WINTER SNOWS OF VELKÁ FATRA NATIONAL PARK.

A few years ago, Miloš Majda, a ranger from Slovakia's Malá Fatra National Park, undertook a project to raise two lynx cubs, with the aim of introducing them into the national park. The sibling cubs grew, at the home of Majda and his wife, and were gradually released for short periods into the surrounding forests in preparation for setting them free for good. Shortly before this was due to happen, one of them escaped and didn't return. So begins the story of monitoring lynx and other large carnivores in Veľká Fatra, a national park just south of Malá Fatra, deep in the Carpathians.

The train glides east from Bratislava, travelling alongside the River Váh, the landscape covered with an increasingly heavy blanket of snow. Castles spring up on every crag, low, rounded hills press closer from the north, and birds of prey swoop down over frozen fields.

I have joined a one-week volunteering project run by Biosphere Expeditions, an international, non-profit wildlife volunteer organisation, which involves monitoring three large and elusive European carnivores – the Eurasian lynx, grey wolf and brown bear – as well as wild cat, wild boar, red and roe deer and other prey species.

The expedition is based in Ľubochňa, a small village on the edge of Veľká Fatra national park, from where the forested slopes of the study area stretch south. The Veľká Fatra range is a huge tract of largely unspoilt wilderness with extensive areas of well-preserved Carpathian forest, and ridge-top cattle pastures dating back to the 15th century. Almost twice the size of Malá Fatra to the north, it covers an area of over 400km², and was declared a national park in 2002 – one of nine in Slovakia – having already been listed as a Protected Landscape Area for 30 years. Though less well-known than the Tatras mountains, it is easily accessible, and makes a great area



An area recently dug out by a bear



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both for hiking and for watching wildlife.

The train pulls into Vrútky, from where we drive to Lubochňa, where members of the expedition team are staying in an old hunting lodge, and briefing takes place surrounded by an assortment of maps, GPS units and diagrams of animal tracks. As you might expect on a conservation project such as this, it's a fairly eclectic, international team with diverse backgrounds, some members having been on conservation trips before, some not, but all of them in search of a different 'holiday' experience, something where they felt they were giving something back.

As well as ascertaining the total population of lynx, wolves and bears in the study area, and learning more about the dynamics, movements and activities of these iconic species, the expedition aims to increase our knowledge of the numbers of prey species within the area, and to assess the impact of large predators on these prey populations.

Before the Biosphere Expeditions program was launched, comparatively little research had been done on these species in Slovakia, so the data collected is making a valuable contribution to our understanding of these animals, and their place in local ecosystems. For example, the impact of predators such as wolves on prey species – in particular game stocks, and sheep and other livestock – is often cited by hunters and sheep farmers as an argument for culling. Obviously the Biosphere Expeditions program with its placement of volunteers on the ground also allows a far larger area to be surveyed, and a greater amount of data to be collected – in the three weeks around the time of my visit, over 330km of trails were covered.

After a morning's training at the hunting lodge in the use of GPS and other equipment, data recording and learning how to identify different animal tracks, we drive down the valley into the national park, to put some of this knowledge into practice, surrounded by deep snow and icicles. The team (consisting, on my visit, of seven members – the maximum team size is twelve, plus expedition leader and one or two scientists), is split into small groups, each with a specific area to cover, and record any evidence of the species being monitored – in the form of tracks, scratch marks etc. Then we don snowshoes and set off up a broad forest track, with increasingly open views of the surrounding wintry landscape as we climb higher. In the evening, after returning to the hunting lodge, we shuffle down a slippery path for dinner at a cosy little restaurant in the village.

The next morning we set off wrapped in down jackets and wearing snowshoes again, the deep late January snow crunching underfoot, in the company of expedition scientist, photographer and filmmaker



Lynx tracks

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Tomáš Hulík. Hulík made a documentary on the story of Majda and his lynx cubs, and has been involved with the Biosphere Expeditions project here in Velká Fatra from the start. Another team member sets off for a different area with Majda.

The sky is beautifully clear and blue, but the temperature actually measures a biting -20°C . Almost immediately, we discover the tracks of a brown bear. Bears should of course be hibernating in late January, but this one obviously isn't, for reasons unclear. Its tracks are measured and photographed – from the tracks, it appears to be a young adult – then we move on, following the left bank of a small, mostly frozen stream, trudging over deep snow.

To Hulík's surprise – the discovery of so much bear activity is highly unusual – we soon cross another set of bear tracks, almost certainly from the same individual.

Gradually we hike deeper into the forest, following a frozen 4WD track through the trees. In the afternoon, shortly before we are due to turn back, we discover a large area dug out by a bear beside the 4WD track, its powerful claw marks still clearly visible in the hard packed snow and frozen earth. The tracks disappear down the hillside in the direction of the stream where we encountered the first set of tracks, but there are no sign of return tracks, yet.

We move on along the 4WD track, then following Hulík we cut down through the trees to check a camera trap, which we soon find strapped onto a tree trunk. We open the camera to check for images, replace the memory card with a new one and close the case up again.

The light is beginning to fade with the approach of dusk, the snow turning a familiar blue in the evening light. We meet with another group from the expedition team further down towards the valley floor, and strike up a side trail – there's some excited talk of someone having maybe discovered our first lynx tracks here, and Hulík confirms this.

By the end of the day, along with the other two groups making up this expedition team, we had recorded the tracks of bear, wolf, lynx, wildcat and several other species. More wolf and lynx tracks were found over the following days, indicating the presence of a five-member wolf pack in the area (forestry reports had previously concluded there were currently no wolf packs here), a female and juvenile lynx travelling together, and a lone male lynx. Could one of these be one of the individuals introduced into the national park? Then we make our way back to the hunting lodge, to go through the day's data, before heading into the village for dinner again.

Biosphere Expeditions was founded in 1999 by Matthias Hammer - one of those ideas that was born in the shower, as he puts it. Two

years later, the first expedition took place – a project to study wolves in the Carpathian mountains in Poland, which was later instrumental in establishing a wolf hunting ban there. The Biosphere Expeditions project in Slovakia has now been running for several years, and continues to be popular.

At the end of my stay in Velká Fatra, I take the train back to Bratislava, returning through that landscape of snow and castles. I found Biosphere's one-week volunteering project in the Slovakian Carpathians to be a rewarding and memorable experience.



FIND OUT MORE

Biosphere Expeditions' Slovakia project runs for 7 days in February and costs £1290 including accommodation, meals and ground travel in Slovakia, excluding flights (www.biosphere-expeditions.org).

Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) flies direct from the UK to the Slovak capital Bratislava, the assembly point for the expedition, from where there are direct trains to Vrútky, near the expedition base.

If you're spending time in the lovely Slovak capital before or after the expedition – and you really should, it's a beautiful city – good places to stay include the Mercure Centrum (www.mercure.com) which is very close to the railway station, and Loft (www.lofthotel.sk). Prašná Bašta (www.prasnabasta.sk), housed in a 16th century tower, is a good place to try traditional Slovak dishes, and Wolker (www.wolker.sk) serves up tasty, unpretentious Slovak favourites and good Slovak beer.

Tomáš Hulík (www.tomashulik.com) has made a 50-minute English-language documentary on the story of Miloš Majda and his lynx cubs, *Návrat rysov* (see <http://bit.ly/1T3r8r1>).

Bradt publish an excellent guidebook to the wildlife of Eastern Europe (www.bradtguides.com).