



# THE REALLY WILD SHOW

There's nothing more weird and wonderful than Mother Nature's creatures. Follow the seemingly impossible tracks of Bigfoot and the elusive Bengal tiger, sling a ride on a husky sled in Greenland, and tour the wetlands of Argentina in search of black caiman and pythons, as we take you on an unforgettable tour of the unfamiliar, the terrifying and the beautiful.

Images: Tim Flach/Getty



## VEL'KÁ FATRA NATIONAL PARK, SLOVAKIA BEAR NECESSITIES

**W**e set off on a biting cold morning, with the mercury hovering around  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ , our snowshoes crunching into the deep, late-January snow, and almost at once stumbled on the tracks of a brown bear.

I'd joined a small Biosphere Expeditions team, monitoring lynx, wolf and other large carnivores in Slovakia's Velká Fatra National Park, deep in the Carpathians. Stretching south from the village of Ľubochňa, the forested slopes of Velká Fatra are easily accessible and a great place to see wildlife.

We soon crossed another set of bear tracks — almost certainly from the same individual — and in the afternoon discovered a large area dug out by a bear beside a forest road; the marks from its powerful claws still visible in the hard-packed snow and frozen earth. The bear should, in theory, have been hibernating at this time of year, so discovering evidence of so much activity was highly unusual.

Little research has been done on the brown bear in Slovakia, and the data collected by this year's three Biosphere expeditions will make a valuable contribution to our understanding of these animals and their place in local

ecosystems. Photographer, filmmaker and scientist Tomáš Hulík — the man who set up the park's monitoring project — says one of the key advantages of involving Biosphere volunteers is that a much larger area can be surveyed: 300km of trails in three weeks, to be precise. "More pairs of eyes means that more animal tracks are recorded," he adds.

By the end of the day, along with the other two sub-groups making up our expedition team, we'd also recorded the tracks of wolves, wildcats and — as dusk fell — our first lynx. More wolf and lynx tracks were found over the following days, indicating the presence of a five-member wolf pack (forestry reports had previously concluded there were no wolf packs here), a female and juvenile lynx travelling together, and a lone male lynx.

We may not have found bears, but this was altogether more unforgettable.

*Words by Rudolf Abraham*

**Clockwise from left:** Tomáš Hulík monitors wolf and lynx activity; Inspecting brown bear marks; Hiking through Velká Fatra National Park National Park

## EUROPE

### 1. EUROPEAN BISON, POLAND

The old-growth forests of Białowieża National Park, in northeast Poland, are one of the best places to see European bison in the wild.

### 2. MARBLED POLECAT, BULGARIA

Head to the dry steppeland along the northeast part of Bulgaria's Black Sea coast for a chance to see marbled polecat.

### 3. GREAT WHITE PELICAN, ROMANIA

The vast wetlands of the Danube Delta in Romania form the breeding grounds of the largest number of white pelicans in Europe.

### 4. REPTILES, CROATIA

Velebit and other limestone mountain ranges in Croatia are a great place to see reptiles, including the nose-horned viper and Balkan green lizard.

### 5. RED DEER, SCOTLAND

Castaway from the Scottish mainland, the Hebridean Isle of Rum is home to a handful of red deer with sightings almost guaranteed. >>