

UNBEARABLE SLOVAKIA

By Sam Mittmerhahn

“Don’t panic, don’t run, don’t approach”. On a volunteering project in search of bears, wolves and lynx in the Carpathian mountains of Slovakia

“I think it’s best to turn around now”, Tomas murmurs, half to himself, half to the group, bent over a track. Even before I can ask “why?”, he answers the question himself: “It is close, very close.” Jesus, I think to myself, turn on my heel and sign for the three people behind me to stop. The urgency of my gesture and probably the look in my eyes brings them to an abrupt halt. Three faces question me silently as I approach and whisper “We had better turn back”. Nobody asks a question. They all know that Tomas knows what he’s doing and that I am merely translating. As we turn around as quietly as we can, I follow Tomas’ gaze up the hill – and see it. A cave. A cave with frozen tracks in the mud in front of it.

It’s the beginning of February and it’s far too warm for this time of year. We’re in Slovakia, more precisely in the Vel’ká Fatra National Park in the

Carpathian mountains. The Vel’ká Fatra is where the Carpathians rise out of the Eastern European plains, starting their arching journey through the lands of Dracula, who has his castle in neighbouring Romania. It is a land of hard winters and hot summers, of high peaks and formidable forests, of misty mountain meadows, lore, hardy people and strange creatures. And it is a land where Europe’s three big carnivores still survive – the wolf, the bear, the lynx. And I am here to play a small role in making sure that this stays just so.

I am on a volunteering expedition with Biosphere Expeditions, a non-profit conservation organisation, helping Tomas Hulik, our Slovakian scientist, gather data on Slovakia’s “Big Three”. “Conservation is not very high on the agenda here in Slovakia,” he bemoans “and there is not much funding, so you are my helpers on sev-

eral levels,” he explained to us a couple of days ago during our initial training sessions. “Us” is a motley crew from all over the world. Kate, the nurse from Australia, Martyn, a Biosphere Expeditions veteran of ten expeditions from the UK, Anna & Frank, IT tech buffs from Silicon Valley in California, Peter, the bricklayer from Germany with a wolf “obsession” as he admits freely, Helene, the lawyer from Austria, Sergii from warn-torn Ukraine and David from Singapore. Our ages, 23 – 68, are as varied as our backgrounds and home countries. But it has not been an issue ever since we first met each other in a cold and windswept train station in the Slovakian capital Bratislava to start our journey into the mountains.

Our interest in wildlife, travel and the world at large binds us together. But how could such a ragtag crew of laypeople possibly be of use to a

mountain man like Tomas? He is as clear as he is appreciative when he first meets us in our cosy mountain lodge base. “You are my eyes and ears in the forest,” he explains, “and you bring much needed funding”. It turns out that anyone can learn how to set up a camera trap, operate a GPS, photograph tracks, document carcasses (the remains of animals killed by the Big Three predators), etc. “The beautiful thing about biology is that much of it is stamp collecting,” Tomas explains. “But there is no technology to do it. I cannot ask a satellite to tell me how many wolves or bears or lynx live in the Vel’ká Fatra. I need foot soldiers like you to look for their tracks, catch them on camera traps, find their kills.

It’s very labour-intensive and I can’t do it all by myself. But with all of you, I can cover ground in two weeks that would take me a year or more all by myself. And you bring funding to pay for the camera traps, batteries, fuel, analyses and all the other things I need to conduct my research and conservation work. And last but not least, you make it fun to be out there, in the wild, in the snow or mud, sunshine, rain, wind or driving snow.” I was skeptical when I came, but within half an hour Tomas has won me, and the rest of us, over. People nod to themselves and each other. There is a stir in the room and a real feeling of joint purpose. We have begun to form an expedition team.

A couple of days later it snowed in the night. When the went to bed, the hills outside faded into darkness as a sea of green and brown, dusted only very lightly on the tops, like a dark cake sprinkled with icing sugar, looking sad in the greyness of the low clouds - lost, uninviting. When we awoke the next morning, the world had changed. Half a metre of snow had turned the mountains into a picture postcard scene of brilliant white devoid of sharp edges. A soft, fluffy blanket of pure whiteness had lain itself across the earth framed by the most perfect, cloudless blue sky. We were raring to go out!

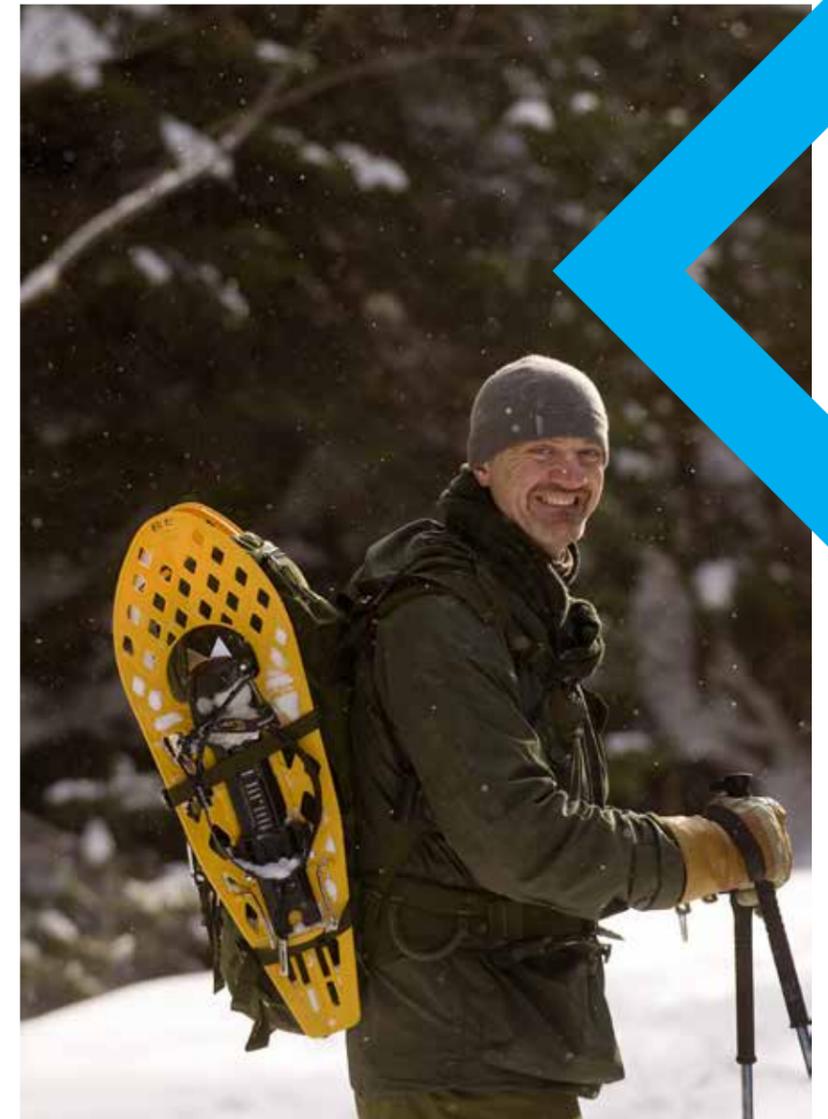
A few hours later we are in L’ubochňa Valley, standing knee-deep in the snow. Ahead of us are the last remnants of a roe deer carcass. We have hit the jackpot, for Tomas at least. Of the roe deer, only the head, the slightly twisted spine and the two hind legs remain. Clear paw prints of lynx surround the

carcass. They must have enjoyed a veritable feast here last night.

The L’ubochňa Valley is 25 kilometres long. It is the longest valley in Slovakia and forms the spine and core of the Vel’ká Fatra National Park. One of the typical signs for national parks indicates the entrance to the local protected area. Built of long, sturdy wooden planks, it was so inconspicu-

ous that I noticed it only the third time we drove past.

Each morning we drive into the valley and then continue on foot to look for traces of the great hunters of the woods. In groups of three to five we roam the park for several hours each day together with Tomas and our expedition leaders. We help Tomas to gather evidence of the presence of





predators and their prey so that he has reliable data on the wolf, lynx and bear populations for his conservation work.

Slovakia is one of a handful of European countries, where the Big Three survive in their natural habitats. However, official estimates of their numbers by “bureaucrats in their warm offices” (as Tomas describes them) are almost always much higher than the numbers the experts working on the ground come up with. For wolves, for example, the figures vary from 2,000 according to the “pen pushers” to 400 as estimated by the “real field biologists”. For bears the discrepancy is 2,400 vs. 800. The lynx — Europe’s biggest feline predator — is endangered across the continent. Yet another reason for us to check at the populations in the valley, year after year, resulting in a great dataset, as Tomas is quick to emphasise with a wry smile of satisfaction on his face.

The National Park authority estimates that around 500,000 tourists visit the Vel’ká Fatra annually. But only a fraction is likely to be out and about in

the L’ubochňa Valley. And particularly during the winter, only a handful of visitors find their way here as the narrow road that twists like the branch of an old, gnarled oak through the valley is closed to motor traffic, except us with our 4x4s and special permits. The only other vehicles we see are those of the timber workers, for in Slovakia timber is a major industry that does not stop, even at the borders of a national park.

Every day we see large timber trucks with their heavy cargo leaving the valley, filling it with the roaring noise and smelly smoke of industry that seem quite out of place in this tranquil winter wonderland. But once round the corner, stillness descends once again, muffled by the thick blanket of snow everywhere and interrupted only by the sounds of our own crunching steps in snow-shoes and the chirping of birds and creaking of ancient, towering trees around us. And yet Tomas explains that over the past few years logging has almost doubled. The timber is mainly sold to Poland and Scandinavia. I struggle to reconcile the concepts of

logging and national park in my head. Tomas agrees. “It’s a very powerful lobby and a rich industry,” he says, shrugging his shoulders.

So we soldier on through the snow, tracking, recording, setting and checking camera traps, finding kills, moving camera traps around them to catch the wolves coming back for a second helping or the bears coming to scavenge. It’s tough, but rewarding work and the sense of achievement (and exhaustion) at the end of the day is palatable. At the end of one week we have walked a total of 228 kilometres on 17 different routes, found 10 lynx tracks and 23 wolf tracks, taken camera trap photos of wolves and lynx. Only the bears can now no longer be tracked or caught on camera. With the snow, they have retreated into their caves and dens and hiding places for their winter hibernation.

And each year, after the expedition’s work is done, the results of our research will be summarised, analysed and interpreted by Tomas. One part will show in detail where our money went, the



other will make recommendations for conservation and what should be done by the expedition next year. “Unfortunately very few volunteer organisations do it this way; in fact I think Biosphere Expeditions is the only one with such a direct one-to-one feedback loop for participants — one expedition, one report,” says Tomas. “And to be honest I was skeptical about how laypeople could help me out here. But I’ve come round 100%. Now they are an invaluable part of my work and absolutely essential to gather the large amount of data I need. Now I think the more, the merrier. And this is even before I talk about the fun we have and the satisfaction I get from showing people from all over the world my work and my country, and seeing their eyes light up.

But the ‘industry’ is unregulated and since profit-driven companies have moved in a few years ago, it has changed. Now you have to be careful to avoid the charlatans that run fake orphanages and get gullible tourists to walk lions that only end up in canned hunts! It’s hard for people nowadays to tell the good, from the bad, from the downright ugly!”. The passion in Tomas’ eyes is obvious. As is the indignance about the charlatans. (see information below for more details on how

to avoid the charlatans).

Out in the forest, we spend few thoughts on those topics. Instead, we walk behind each other in our snow-shoes, creating little “highways” through the snow to save energy. Another trick Tomas and the expedition leader have taught us. “In nature, it’s all about life and death” were the expedition leader’s words. About not wasting and conserving energy reserves. And so wolves and lynx prefer to move on the highway too, or rather, tracks that are already there instead of creating a new trail each time through the snow-covered landscape. This conserves the energy that is so important for survival through the harsh winter.

And so we create our highways and re-visit them a few days later recoding deer, wolf and lynx tracks. And sometimes thinking we are, for being misled by a wrong track is part of the experience too. On one of the many surveys, we were proud to have discovered a wolf track on our 70 cm wide snow shoe highway from the previous day. We saw the paw print and with all diligence went through all the steps we had been taught: mark the position on the GPS device, take photos, measure the print (8.5 x 11 cm) and then write it all down on the data sheet with a

pencil (not a biro). For just about five minutes, we basked in our success. It ended abruptly when Tomas told us that he was doubtful. Some evidence indicated that it was not the footsteps of Isegrim. A few more minutes later it was certain: No, those were only the traces of a big dog that accompanied a ski mountaineer.

More promising was the news that reached us via radio transmission from the valley. Two groups had been successful in finding fresh carcasses this afternoon, surrounded by countless lynx or wolf tracks respectively. This set the scene for work the next day. Starting from the carcass, we split into groups and followed the tracks leading away. Anything that the lynx and wolves had left on the way was collected: Urine enters little test tubes, scat (the clever, euphemistic science word for excrement) is put in small plastic bags, as is hair left on tree trunks.

On the last day our survey path takes us back to the bear cave. It is now a black hole in an ocean of white, beckoning us to look closer. But we won’t. And this time, for a change, we delight in not finding any tracks around. The bear is asleep. And I feel I am awake to help look after it. And that feels great. ■