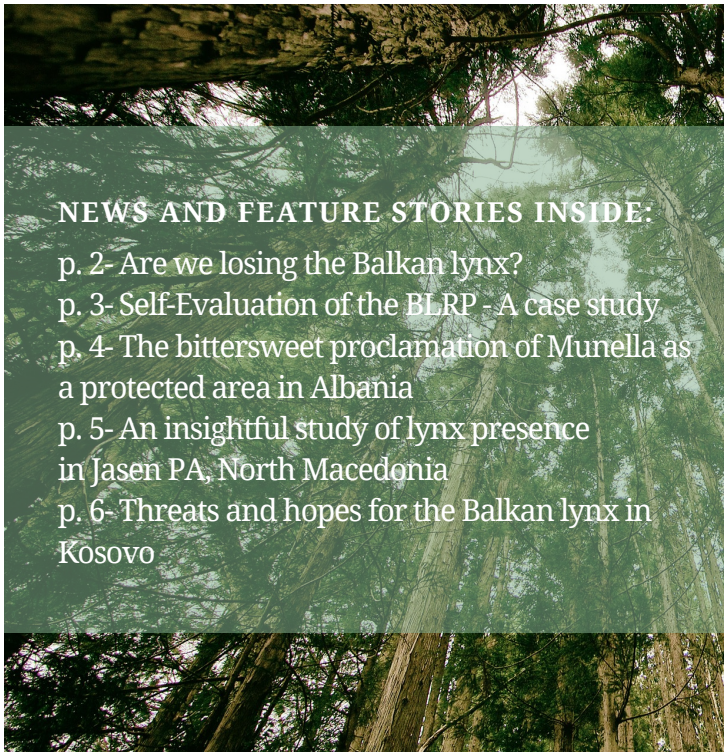


BALKAN LYNX RECOVERY PROGRAMME

Newsletter

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15 YEARS BALKAN LYNX RECOVERY PROGRAMME

Written by Lisa Leschinski

For 15 years, the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme (BLRP) team has been working to protect the Balkan lynx (*Lynx lynx balcanicus*). The Balkan lynx is assessed as a Critically Endangered subspecies of the Eurasian lynx and listed in Appendix II of the Bern Convention, which leads to a stronger protection in the range countries. The population is currently distributed only along the Balkan Green Belt in the border region between North Macedonia and Albania and western Kosovo. Overall, the range is very restricted and the population consists of much less than 50 animals according to current estimates. In addition to the high risk of extinction due to the extremely small population size, the Balkan lynx is also highly threatened by poaching of the animals themselves as well as their main prey (roe deer and chamois) and the destruction of its habitat by e.g. deforestation.

This biannual newsletter is intended to give a regular insight into the work of the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme. We will report on the successes and challenges faced by all the organisations involved and take you to the regions where the few individuals of these fascinating cats still roam. However, to ensure that this will still be the case in a few years' time, we must join all our forces to protect this species and their habitat, otherwise the call of the Balkan lynx will soon be silenced!



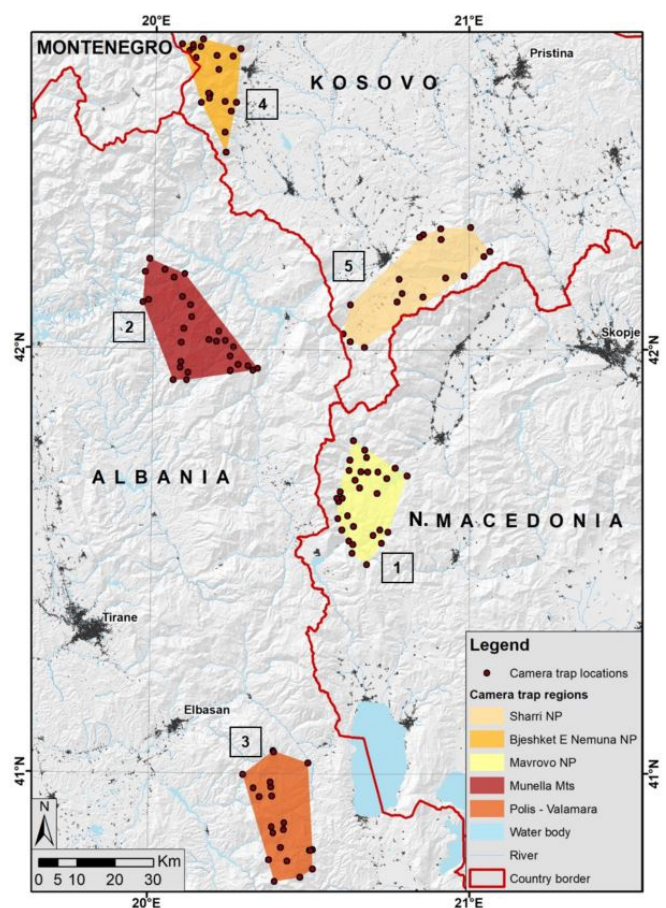
INTENSIVE CAMERA-TRAP SURVEY: ARE WE LOSING THE BALKAN LYNX?

Written by Manuela von Arx

Camera trapping has become a standard method to census elusive species – especially for spotted cats, which can be identified individually from good pictures, like the Balkan lynx. The principle of the method is to take as many pictures of the species as possible within the study area during a pre-defined period of time. The aim is to get information on lynx distribution and - by comparing the lynx pictures - on the minimum number of lynx in the areas surveyed. When there are enough pictures taken from several individuals, the number of specimens present in the study area can be estimated by means of capture-recapture statistics. Since 2008, the BLRP applies latter every two to three years in the Mavrovo National Park (N. Macedonia), core area of the Balkan lynx, whereas in the other range countries (Albania, Kosovo) we are restricted to the minimum count of individuals as the presence of lynx is too scarce.

From February to May 2021 60 camera-traps were set at 30 locations in Mavrovo National Park, North Macedonia (area No. 1 in the map) using the same design as ever. In Albania, 29 camera-traps were installed in the Munella Mts. (No. 2) and 20 in Polis-Valamara (Elbasan region; No. 3), usually one per location. In Kosovo, 23 camera-traps were spread in Bjeshket e Nemuna National Park (No. 4) and 19 in Sharri National Park (No. 5).

The survey is now completed and the results so far are very alarming: In Mavrovo National Park, only 19 photos of lynx were taken compared to 73 during the last survey in 2018. The photos are of 4 different individuals (2018: 10 individuals pictured, the estimate revealed 14 individuals).





In Albania, there are 5 lynx pictures in Polis-Valamara where 2 different individuals were identified. In the Munella Mts. 17 lynx pictures were taken of 2 different individuals (in previous surveys there were at least 4 lynx present in this region). In Kosovo, one lynx was photographed in Bjeshkët e Nemuna National Park while none in Sharri National Park.

We will yet have to analyse all photos and take into consideration the lynx individuals that were pictured in North Macedonia outside the Mavrovo National Park during the past few months before we can draw final conclusions. However, it seems that the Balkan lynx is not doing well and we are very much concerned.

SELF-EVALUATION OF THE BLRP - A CASE STUDY

MAVA Foundation together with FOS (Foundations of Success) Europe and CCNet (Conservation Coaches Network) Europe were interested in using the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme in some learning materials as an example for a conservation project that went full cycle (reviewing and evaluating past activities and planning future ones) using the Conservation Standards. FOS Europe therefore elaborated and published the document “Self-evaluation, A powerful tool for improving conservation impact” where the BLRP serves as case study:

<https://mava-foundation.org/blog-self-evaluation-a-powerful-tool-for-evaluating-impact/>

Self-evaluation

A POWERFUL TOOL FOR IMPROVING CONSERVATION IMPACT

True impact in conservation is not achieved by scoring achievements and writing success stories, but by critically assessing effectiveness and adapting strategies accordingly.

By relying on a process of genuine self-reflection, the MAVA Foundation helps its grantees boost their effectiveness and strengthen the partnership of collaborating teams. As grantees can rest assured of continued funding independently of the evaluation outcome, they have a safe space to draw their own conclusions.

MAVA strongly believes in this approach of approving funding and asking for internal evaluation, as it leads to transparent communication with grantees and the assurance that the grant is used in the best way possible. The approach provides a way of simultaneously evaluating and improving the impact of the conservation projects MAVA funds.

A self-evaluation story

In 2016, after ten years of dedicated conservation work by the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme, MAVA asked the team to undergo an internal evaluation process, in order to understand the achievements and impact of their work and to bring this understanding into the design of the next programme phase. MAVA had granted the follow-up funding for the next programme period irrespective of the evaluation results. Thanks to this, the team was free to perform a truly transparent review. In the role of external facilitator, FOS Europe provided methodological and process guidance, navigating the team through the self-evaluation process described on the next page.

The Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme (BLRP)

is a transboundary conservation programme, working to recover a viable population of the critically endangered Balkan Lynx (*Lynx lynx balcanicus*). It is implemented by a partnership of NGOs:

- Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania (PPNEA)
- Macedonian Ecological Society (MES), North Macedonia
- Environmentally Responsible Action Group (ERA), Kosovo
- KORA (Game and Wildlife Management), Switzerland
- EuroNatur, Germany

... in collaboration with Center for Protection and Research of Birds of Montenegro (CZIP) and Finch from Kosovo between 2013 and 2018. The BLRP has received funding from the MAVA Foundation since its beginning in 2006.

Photo © PPNEA

THE BITTERSWEET PROCLAMATION OF MUNELLA AS A PROTECTED AREA IN ALBANIA

Written by Bledi Hoxha & Klejn Ngraçani

The ongoing efforts of declaring the Mountain of Munella as a Protected Area has faced many ups and downs, nevertheless the BLRP team within PPNEA (Society for the Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania) was determined to achieve this crucial step of securing the main shelter of the Balkan lynx in Albania.

In 2011 PPNEA managed to capture the first photo of a Balkan lynx in Albania, at the mountain of Munella, a moment which marked the beginning of a great endeavour for protecting this rare subspecies. Soon after the photo was captured, PPNEA started to gather data and information about the Balkan lynx distribution in the region. In 2015, the periodical camera trapping sessions discovered a small population of 4-5 individuals in the area of Munella, which made it clear that the area needed to get a protection status.

Immediately after this wonderful discovery, PPNEA started to prepare the Assessment of Biodiversity report, a document needed for proving the urgent need of declaring the Mountain of Munella as a protected area. This document was presented and discussed during several lobbying events with central and local authorities.

Furthermore, it was included even in the official proposal sent by PPNEA to the Ministry of Tourism and Environment and the National Agency of Protected Areas in 2018.

In 2020, the Albanian government started a process of reviewing the national network of Protected Areas. It was a great achievement for PPNEA to witness the Mountain of Munella listed among the new proposed areas for getting a protection status. What was initially a great success, in December 2020 was transformed into a big disappointment. In the approved law “Approval of the boundaries of Protected Areas” only 20.668 hectares from the 51.929 proposed by PPNEA were declared as a Protected Area, under the Category IV (Managed Nature Reserve/Nature Park) of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature instead of Category II (National Park), a much higher protection category, proposed by PPNEA.

The lack of political will and multiple experts included in the process of reviewing the national protected area, framed by an overall rushing procedure which lasted for about one year, brought the above-mentioned results. Since the Balkan lynx is a subspecies that covers a large territory, the Balkan lynx experts from the BLRP strongly believe that 20.668 hectares are not enough.



A JOURNEY INTO THE PRISTINE: AN INSIGHTFUL STUDY OF LYNX PRESENCE IN JASEN PA, NORTH MACEDONIA

Written by Aleksandar Pavlov & Aleksandar Stojanov



Autumn 2020 saw the new lynx project kick-off in Jasen, a Category VI (Multipurpose Area) protected region in North Macedonia. This UNDP-funded project, forthrightly named Ris Jasen ('Lynx Jasen'), was implemented by the Macedonian Ecological Society (MES), in collaboration with the management authority of the area, the Public Enterprise for Managing and Protection of the Jasen Multipurpose Area. And just as intended, research efforts provided novel and exciting data on lynx distribution in this rarely visited area!

MES has previously conducted such research in the area, albeit with different intensity and continuity throughout the years. The very first camera-trapping study in Jasen was conducted in the period 2010–2011, resulting in 2 lynx individuals captured on camera-trap. During this period, attempts were also made to box-trap a lynx, but without success.



The second camera-trapping study was done in 2014, providing no lynx photos. In the following period, 2014–2016, camera-traps were set opportunistically in the area, with the last lynx captured on camera in 2014. Latest lynx study was spurred by the occurrence of several lynx photos from the area taken after 2016, suggesting a viable lynx population in Jasen.

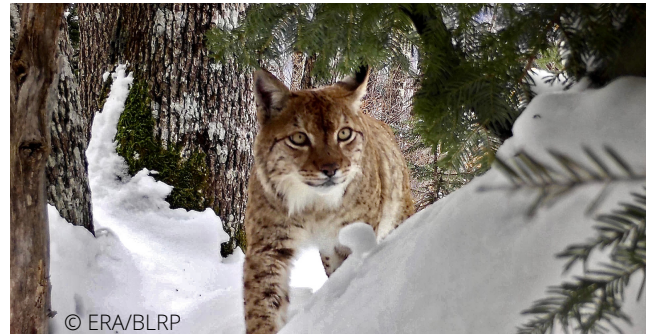
The most recent lynx study in Jasen PA was implemented from November 2020–June 2021 using camera- and box-trapping methods. Twenty camera-traps were set at twenty different sites in the area, while two box-traps were set at 3 different sites (one being relocated). The camera-trapping resulted with 24 lynx photos from 8 different sites. Visual comparison of photos revealed the presence of at least 3 different lynx individuals in the area. Two lynx individuals were captured using box-traps – one male (Noni, photo), captured on 21 February, and one female (Nela), captured on 28 March. Both individuals were fitted with GPS/GSM collars in order to follow their movement. Satellite fixes reveal curious movement patterns: trips covering large areas, swimming across Kozjak Lake in Jasen, and even occasional sallies to Vodno Mountain in Skopje! This project was also successful in terms of the established cooperation between MES and the rangers from Jasen. Besides the cameras from MES, rangers have installed their own cameras in the field and provided us with additional lynx photos and other information on lynx presence in the area.

THREATS AND HOPES FOR THE BALKAN LYNX IN KOSOVO

Written by Bardh Sanaja

Poaching and infrastructure development are activities that push the extinction of the Balkan lynx. In 2021, illegal hunting became a bigger problem in Bjeshkët e Nemuna, because the hunting associations took the liberty outside their jurisdiction to allow hunting inside the protected area. Against this backdrop, the Environmentally Responsible Action Group (ERA) addressed this issue to the Ministry of Environment, Spatial Planning and Infrastructure (MESPI); through the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), they sent an official letter to the hunting associations to clarify their responsibilities, which revealed that their activity is illegal inside the protected area. Nevertheless, the effects in the field remain to be seen.

Additionally, a very big development is that after four years of fighting the construction of the road Lumebardh - Milishevc, which was started to be built inside the proposed strict zone in Bjeshkët e Nemuna, is now finally stopped under the arguments of error in procurement and lack of legality.



In order to sustain the monitoring and conservation efforts of the Balkan lynx and wildlife in Kosovo, an efficient collaboration between ERA and State Authorities is required. The good news are, that ERA has managed to arrange a meeting with the new government representatives of the MESPI regarding a National Monitoring Concept.

The aim is to develop a concept for the data collection of wildlife, such as the Balkan lynx, in Kosovo. Looking into the future, ERA and MESPI are planning to sign an agreement regarding the follow up steps that are needed to develop this idea further.



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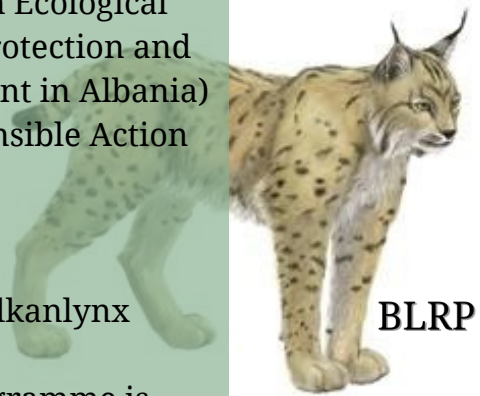
Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme

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>

The Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme is financially supported by MAVA Foundation, Switzerland.



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