

Habitats

the places that nature calls home

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Everything on our planet, from the largest animals and birds, through amphibians, reptiles and plants, right down to mushrooms and micro-organisms, needs somewhere to call home, just as people do. Each organism needs a place to live that provides food, water, space, shelter and the right conditions to reproduce. We call these home places 'habitats' and each of them provides a particular place, with particular conditions, for all kinds of species to live. Different species have adapted to live in quite different places - imagine a rabbit in the sea, for example, or a polar bear on a tropical beach, neither would be able to survive. Within a forest you won't see the same things living in the tree tops as under the leaves beneath the tree, or on the bark and in the soil around the roots - each separate part has its own community of organisms living there, and that's how we can recognise it as a distinct place.

Habitats are important to all of us, but they are especially important to what we call 'biodiversity', the vast range of living creatures and organisms that share the planet with us. Life on Earth, in every place, depends on this great biological variety, it gives us resources for food and medicine and ensures that the places we live in are 'resilient'; that they can survive changes and catastrophes.

Looking more closely - habitat types

When it comes to studying and mapping the places that species use for homes and food, however, we think about them in a different way - we look at the different plants that grow there and classify them according to the combinations of particular species. We use these combinations to describe what we call 'habitat types', in other words to say what sort of a place it is. We are able to do this because certain sorts of plants prefer particular sorts of conditions to grow, and therefore tend to be found together in what are called 'plant communities' - these combinations of species tell a story that plant specialists are able to read to the rest of us, telling us what habitat type they live in. When a habitat type is important it is usually protected by national, European or international law, so that it is kept in good condition for the benefit of nature and people alike, and in the EU the Natura 2000 network fulfils this role.

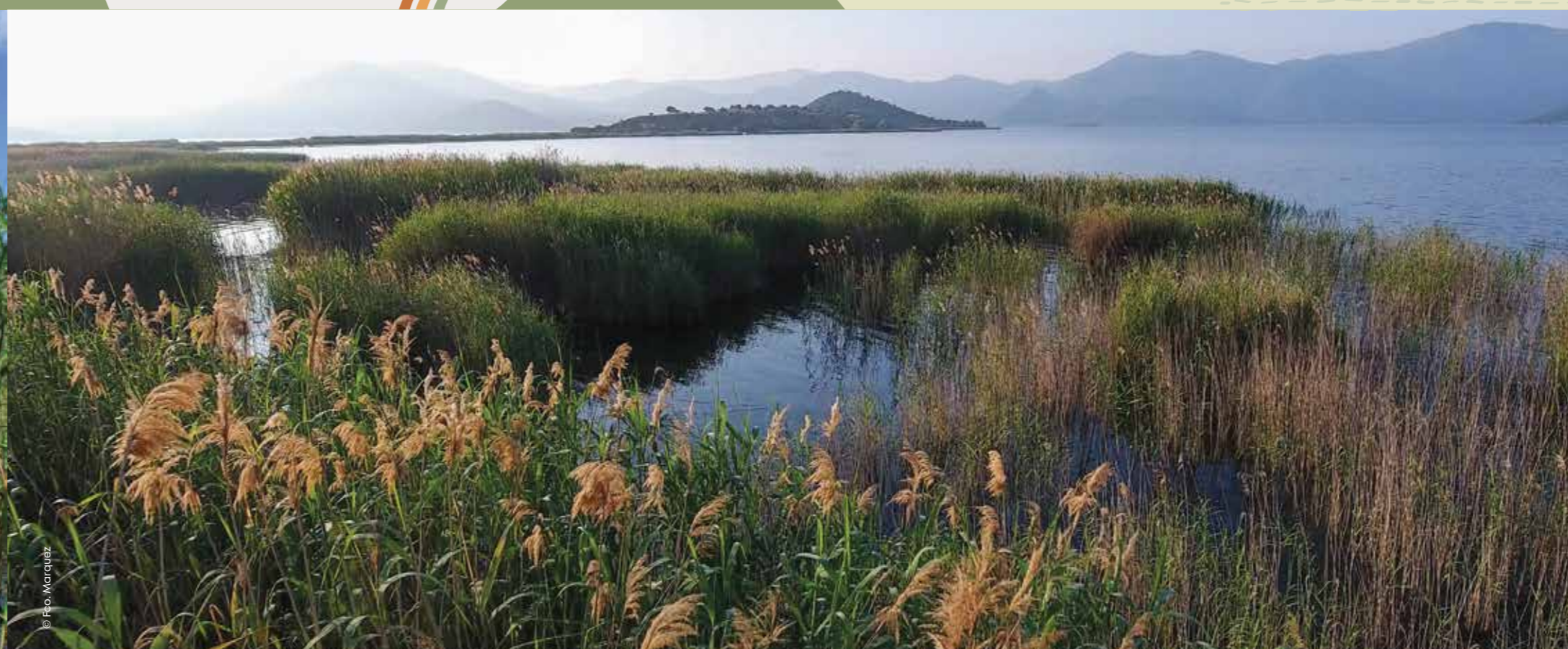
The most important habitat types have particularly special associations of plants, perhaps because the species are unusual or perhaps because there are not many of them left due to changes made in the landscape. Under the Natura 2000 system the most significant plant communities are known as 'priority habitat types', and Prespa has examples of these on all three sides of the lakes. Of course, scientific significance is not the only measure of the importance of plants and habitats, we all also value our favourite field for finding ingredients for lunch, our secret spot for medicinal herbs or the paths we roam in search of exercise and inspiration, as well as the leafy wilds our children explore at play.

Prespa's special places and habitat types

We all know that Prespa is exceptional, for many reasons, and it's no different when it comes to habitat types, because Prespa is home to several very special ones. This is due to its location - partly towards the Mediterranean and partly towards Central Europe - as well as its geology, which mean that all kinds of different species are able to live here in a relatively small area. We can easily see this as we go from place to place; here we have beech trees, there junipers, while in other places we cut oak for our woodstoves in winter, for example. If we add into this mix the different climate we have because of the lakes, and the great range in height between the wetlands and the mountain peaks, it's no wonder that we have a wide variety of habitat types. Some of these can be found in all three countries that share the lakes, while others are specific to different parts of the area, depending on the particular conditions that exist there.



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People, plants and Prespa - PrespaNet's work on habitat types

PrespaNet has been working to find out more about the lakes basin in the last few years, mapping the special habitat types around the lake and sharing this knowledge with the national parks and managers of our protected areas. Efforts have already begun to restore some of these vitally important places and give our biodiversity a boost, notably in the alder forests of Ezerani Nature Park.

Habitats and habitat types have also been at the heart of our environmental education programmes and activities for young people too, with a programme all about the ecology of wild plants and how important they are to all Prespa's special places. Meanwhile the Wild Side of Prespa programme has got teenagers in Resen out in the field, hooked on nature and keen to join our volunteer teams.

When it comes down to it, habitats and habitat types are essential for lots and lots of reasons, but perhaps most of all because they are always a home for something, whether animal or plant, insect or bird, or even for people - and we can all agree there's nothing more important than home!



PrespaNet is a network of environmental NGOs for Prespa: The SPP, based in Agios Germanos, and working in the area for almost 30 years; MES, based in Skopje with a local office in Resen and one of the country's oldest NGOs; and, PPNEA, Albania's first environmental NGO, based in Tirana with a local office in Prespa and working with stakeholders in the area since the mid-1990s.

The three NGOs are working together on a three-year project, 'Strengthening NGO-led Conservation in the Transboundary Prespa Basin', funded by the Prespa Ohrid Nature Trust and the Aage V. Jensen Charity Foundation, with support from EuroNatur. The project aims to boost transboundary conservation and collaboration in the Prespa basin.



This map shows some of our favourite Prespa places and the species that can be found there – why not make time to go and experience some of them for yourself and then add your own at #presaplantplaces!



Juniper woods can be found on all three sides of the lakes, flourishing on the dry limestone western side of the basin. There are several groves of magnificent ancient trees, especially by the church of Agios Georgios in Greek Prespa and on the island of Golem Grad in Great Prespa Lake. Golem Grad is also home to hundreds of Hermann's tortoises, the males of which outnumber the females by a surprising 10 to 1, while some of the junipers provide a hospitable nesting place for great cormorants.



Around the eastern side of the lakes in North Macedonia, and on the isthmus between them in Greece, lies a belt of the EU priority habitat type, 'Pannonic sand steppes', which is significant due to its rarity. This rolling sandy landscape is covered in colour in spring and summer; amongst others, it is home to a plant endemic to the Balkan Peninsula, *Silene frivaldszkyana*, which blooms from June to September.



Throughout the basin there are fragments of alder forest, another EU priority habitat type, with stands in Albanian Lesser Prespa and the Mikrolimni stream in Greece, for example, as well as a grove of old trees, which are a rare sight, in Ezerani Nature Park. Traditionally used to build furniture in North Macedonia, *Alnus glutinosa* is now falling victim to clearance for agriculture there. PrespaNet is restoring this forest type, using seeds gathered in Ezerani, which will hopefully save and spread the genetic diversity of these venerable old trees.

For more detailed information before visiting any of these areas, please contact the offices of the local PrespaNet partner.

PPNEA (AL)
(0355) 562 8954
contact@ppnea.org

SPP (GR)
(0030) 23850 51211
spp@line.gr

MES (MKD)
(0389) 2 2402 773
contact@mes.org.mk



Prespa is home to an amazing array of wetlands around the lakes, with vast dense reedbeds on all three sides. In Greece these reedbeds are home to rare breeding waterbirds, such as pygmy cormorant, many heron species and ferruginous duck, as well as the largest colony of Dalmatian pelicans anywhere in the world! With their almost three-metre wingspan these pelicans are a sight to see as they soar on the thermals above the reeds.



The rocks and cliffs around the lakeshore, although mostly quite bare of vegetation, provide a home for the Dalmatian Algyroides, a lizard normally found on the Adriatic and Ionian coasts of the Balkan Peninsula. Assessed as Endangered on the National Red List of species in North Macedonia due to its relative isolation here, the rich red colour of the lizard's belly is well worth keeping an eye out for.



The mountains surrounding the lakes are home to towering forests of beeches, especially on the eastern side of the basin, but notably also on the slopes of Mali Thate in Albania, where they are interspersed with Bulgarian and silver firs. In summer these forests are cool and dappled with sun through beech leaves, perfect for escaping the heat!



High above the lakes the mountains of Prespa are blanketed in grasslands. The sub-alpine meadows on the eastern granite peaks are a riot of colourful wildflowers in late spring and early summer, which in turn attract a rich diversity of butterflies. Their counterpart meadows on the karstic uplands of the western side of the basin are similarly blessed, and also where much of the region's 'mountain tea' is gathered.

