



# Making Europe a wilder place

ANNUAL REVIEW 2023

## LANDSCAPES

Learn more about the wild places where Rewilding Europe operates

## PEOPLE

See how rewilding is benefitting society, communities & businesses

## WILDLIFE

Dive deeper into the recovery of important and exciting European species

## UPSCALING

Be inspired by the amazing growth of the European rewilding movement





Rewilding Europe is a proud beneficiary of the Dutch Postcode Lottery

The Supervisory Board of Rewilding Europe formally approved this Annual Review 2023 in its meeting on 3 April 2024.

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# A bumper year for rewilding

**A**s a progressive approach to nature recovery, rewilding is one of the best ways of simultaneously addressing climate change, reversing biodiversity decline, and delivering a more liveable and prosperous world for future generations. Over the course of 2023, rewilding's status as a holistic solution provider resonated with an ever growing number of people, helping it to gain increasing traction and momentum.

Offering a conservation narrative that is both hopeful and profound, rewilding has shown that there is every reason to turn up the volume on real action that enhances wild nature across Europe. During 2023, this is exactly what we did. Collaborating as an agile and well-integrated network, our teams at both central level and across our 10 rewilding landscapes delivered another bumper year for rewilding in Europe.

This Annual Review presents an overview of our work throughout 2023 – a year of both consolidation and further growth of our initiative. These achievements were made possible by the hard work and dedication of well over 200 people, based right across Europe. From the team leaders in each of our landscapes and their local boards, to all the staff in these landscapes that work tirelessly to make things happen. From our central team colleagues and leaders to our Supervisory Board.

We would like to thank all the partners, donors, investors, advisors, scientists, photographers, and filmmakers who each provided invaluable support to Rewilding Europe in 2023. We are also grateful to the increasing number of private individuals who supported us with donations. To all those who helped us move forward, we truly appreciate your support and look forward to continued cooperation and burgeoning impact in the years to come.

We hope our latest Annual Review inspires you.

Wild regards,

*Frans Schepers*




**Frans Schepers**  
*Executive  
Director*



**Marc  
van den Tweel**  
*Chair of the  
Supervisory  
Board*





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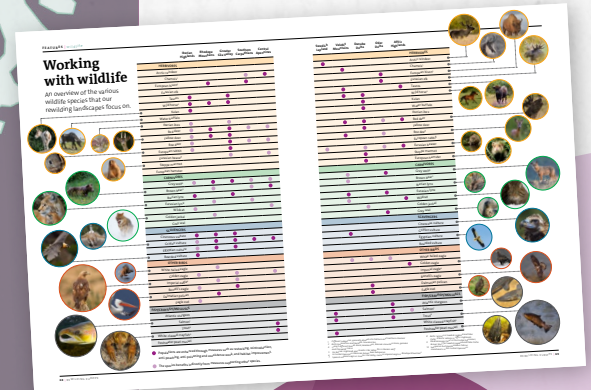
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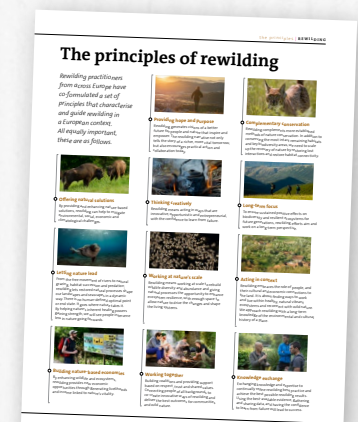
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OUR VISION



Wild nature is valued and treated as an essential element of a prosperous and healthy society, with far more space provided for wildlife and natural processes.



OUR MISSION

We want to demonstrate the benefits of wilder nature through the rewilding of diverse European landscapes, and to inspire and enable others to engage in rewilding by providing tools and practical expertise.





## WHAT WE DO

# Making Europe a wilder place!

Rewilding Europe **proposes a new conservation vision for Europe**, with natural processes playing a vital role shaping biodiversity-rich landscapes. We understand that nature is fully capable of taking care of itself. This concept should become the main principle for many of Europe's natural landscapes in the future.

Rewilding Europe wants to **make Europe a wilder place, with far more space for wildlife and natural processes**. Wild nature is an essential element of a prosperous and healthy society. When applied at scale across Europe, rewilding can be one of the most significant and cost-effective means of delivering positive outcomes for both nature and people.

Rewilding Europe is working to **rewild 15 landscapes across Europe** – these act as practical demonstrations of rewilding principles, models and tools. By showing what rewilding can achieve, these new wilder landscapes inspire others to engage in rewilding.

Rewilding Europe **demonstrates rewilding as a critical nature-based climate solution**. By enabling nature recovery, rewilding can play a game-changing role helping us to mitigate the scale and impact of climate change, while simultaneously enhancing biodiversity. As a nature-based solution, rewilding is practical, inspirational, cost-effective, and available now.

Rewilding Europe **aims to provide a viable business case for wild nature across Europe**. The landscapes we select have the potential to become world-class destinations for nature tourism. They also offer a range of additional nature-based economic benefits.

Rewilding Europe **supports the comeback of large carnivores** – which have a crucially important ecological role – together with smaller predators, raptors and scavengers. Brown bears, wolves, lynx, vultures and a wide range of other species are essential for the natural functioning of the ecosystems in which they live.

Rewilding Europe **demonstrates that natural grazing is one of the key ecological factors** for creating and maintaining naturally open and half-open landscapes. We want to allow our native herbivores to return in significant, naturally balanced numbers to the lands where they once belonged and where they can play their vital ecological role.

Rewilding Europe **is building an extensive network of rewilding initiatives across Europe** as part of its European Rewilding Network (ERN). Together we establish best practice by sharing knowledge and experience.

Rewilding Europe **works with scientific and policy partners to ensure rewilding is recognised in European policy** as a relevant conservation approach, contributing to the achievement of conservation targets as set out in international and national policy documents and agreements.







# Working together for a wilder Europe

The extent to which Rewilding Europe can achieve its ambitious vision and mission is very much dependent on how we work together across Europe. Our Strategy 2030, together with a newly signed Network Agreement between our landscape partners, will help us to work as one European team, following an aligned and coherent approach as we move forwards.

## Our Strategy for 2030 in a nutshell

Our Strategic Plan for the period 2021-2030 – called ‘Advancing Rewilding in Europe’ (‘Strategy 2030’) – has seen Rewilding Europe recommit its efforts towards realising a future for Europe that is richer in wild nature, with all the benefits this provides to people and nature. The strategy is focused on maximising the impact of Rewilding Europe’s twin demonstration and catalysing roles, as we work to deliver wilder nature at landscape scale across Europe.

Based on our Theory of Change, Strategy 2030 is broken down into four main components, each with its own objectives and targets for 2030: Wilder Nature; Nature for People; Building Engagement; and Scaling Up Rewilding.

The components ‘Wilder Nature’ and ‘Nature for People’ capture the essence of what Rewilding Europe is about, with a focus on our rewilding landscapes. ‘Building Engagement’ and ‘Scaling Up’ are primarily cross-cutting, though both have stand-alone components too. They both support the delivery of the other two components, and are equally essential for success.



### WILDER NATURE

Increasing the amount of land where natural ecosystem processes function freely without intervention, as well as enhancing the overall ecological health of rewilding landscapes.

Simultaneously focusing on wildlife comeback by increasing populations of keystone species, either by supporting their natural recovery, or through reintroduction and restocking, as well as measures to maintain and enhance human-wildlife coexistence.



### NATURE FOR PEOPLE

We recognise that there can be important economic benefits from rewilding – for example, the jobs and revenues generated by nature-based enterprises, or the provision of cost-effective climate change mitigation. But for large parts of society the benefits of wilder nature go far beyond the economic, involving aspects of mental and physical health, recreation, identity, and culture.



### BUILDING ENGAGEMENT

Building engagement places great emphasis on reaching out to people and capturing hearts and minds.

Engaging content will promote the benefits of rewilding, showcase the impact of the work being carried out together with partners in our rewilding landscapes, and influence the target groups that are key to scaling up rewilding across Europe.



### SCALING UP REWILDING

To enable rewilding to scale up across Europe we engage, inspire, and empower others to adopt and apply rewilding principles, models and tools. This applies to both rewilding landscapes and in new landscapes.

Core tools include strategic partnerships, networks, training, mobilising youth, removing policy obstacles, applied research, and work on a range of financial mechanisms.





BRUNO DAMICIS

### Theory of change and overarching goals

When applied at scale across Europe, we believe that rewilding can be one of the most significant and cost-effective means of delivering ‘win-win’ outcomes for nature and people. Making more space for nature and restoring properly functioning ecosystems, for example, can reduce vulnerability to both drought and flooding, greatly increase carbon

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We believe that rewilding can be one of the most significant and cost-effective means of delivering ‘win-win’ outcomes for nature and people.

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storage, and provide more high-quality habitat capable of supporting richer, more abundant wildlife, including some of Europe’s most iconic species. At the same time, rewilding can also generate burgeoning opportunities for nature-related enterprises and for society at large to benefit from increased access to wild nature – something that is now more widely recognised than ever before as crucial for physical health and mental wellbeing.

We believe that by trialling, monitoring, and evaluating the practical application of rewilding across diverse European landscapes, we can build an increasingly effective and robust range of rewilding tools, know-how and learning. However, we can only ever have a limited impact if our work is restricted to our rewilding landscapes and our local partners working in these regions.

We therefore work to identify, engage, inspire, and motivate others who have the capacity and means to embrace our concepts, principles and models, and to apply our rewilding

experience across Europe – in other geographical areas and diverse sectors, at a progressively larger scale. For such scaling up to succeed, we are proactive in making our tools, rewilding models, and know-how as scalable, accessible, financially viable, and relevant as possible, and to be ready to provide additional information and advice.

We have therefore defined two overarching goals for 2030, which are split between our rewilding landscapes and the wider European continent:

- By 2030 the application of rewilding principles, models and tools are having measurable, demonstrable, and sustained benefits for nature and people in all of our rewilding landscapes.
- By 2030 rewilding is being widely practiced – at scale, across Europe, and by many different actors from both private and public sectors – as a means of realising a Europe that is richer in nature and more resilient to climate change.



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We are working to expand the number of rewilding landscapes in which we are demonstrating the practical application of rewilding from 10 to 15, including marine and coastal ecosystems.

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### Building a coherent network of Rewilding Landscapes

Our rewilding landscapes are at the forefront of European rewilding. These are the places where we work, demonstrating how rewilding at scale can be a lever of change for nature and people in these regions. We are working to expand the number of rewilding landscapes in which we are demonstrating the practical application of rewilding from 10 to 15 – including marine and coastal ecosystems. For 2024, we are planning to add a new landscape in France – the Dauphiné Alps – while we have started scoping and exploring additional landscapes in various parts of Europe.

At the same time, we will intensify the work being carried out in our existing 10 landscapes and focus even more strongly on measuring progress and assessing the impacts of specific initiatives in relation to both nature and people.

As we grow our portfolio of rewilding landscapes, we need to ensure coherence and alignment. For this reason, we have established a Rewilding Europe Network Agreement, which binds all the entities driving rewilding in our landscapes with the central organisation. This agreement, which was signed in early 2023, enhances the ability of all local partners and the central team to work collectively to implement our unifying European mission and strategy, sharing expertise and resources, and combining actions to amplify impact. It is also meant to ensure good governance at all levels, empowering current and future directors of local partners to lead the development of national and regional entities, while remaining part of an international network that has a clear and consistent brand.

The signing of the Network Agreement by the directors of the landscape partners and the Executive Board of Rewilding Europe means all the partners have committed to Rewilding Europe's Strategic Plan 2021–2030, our Rewilding Principles, several policies and guidelines (e.g. the Code of Conduct and Brand Manual), and other specific documents such as long-term landscape visions. A Network Executive Team, comprising all the executive directors of the central and local organisations, has been formalised based on specific terms of reference, and meets at least three times a year (of which one meeting will be physical). This will allow us to build and strengthen the coherence and co-production of our network, with the Network Agreement as a legal base. This represents a major milestone in the development of our joint initiative.

### Signatories of the Rewilding Europe Network Agreement

#### Signed in 2023:

Rewilding Apennines  
Rewilding France  
Rewilding Rhodopes  
Rewilding Romania  
Rewilding Portugal  
Rewilding Spain  
Rewilding Sweden  
Rewilding Ukraine  
Rewilding Velebit

#### Expected signing in 2024:

Rewilding Affric Highlands  
Rewilding Oder Delta









# The principles of rewilding

*Rewilding practitioners from across Europe have co-formulated a set of principles that characterise and guide rewilding in a European context. All equally important, these are as follows.*



## Offering natural solutions

By providing and enhancing nature-based solutions, rewilding can help to mitigate environmental, social, economic and climatological challenges.



## Letting nature lead

From the free movement of rivers to natural grazing, habitat succession and predation, rewilding lets restored natural processes shape our landscapes and seascapes in a dynamic way. There is no human-defined optimal point or end state. It goes where nature takes it. By helping nature's inherent healing powers gaining strength, we will see people intervene less in nature going forwards.



## Building nature-based economies

By enhancing wildlife and ecosystems, rewilding provides new economic opportunities through generating livelihoods and income linked to nature's vitality.



## Providing hope and purpose

Rewilding generates visions of a better future for people and nature that inspire and empower. The rewilding narrative not only tells the story of a richer, more vital tomorrow, but also encourages practical action and collaboration today.



## Thinking creatively

Rewilding means acting in ways that are innovative, opportunistic and entrepreneurial, with the confidence to learn from failure.



## Working at nature's scale

Rewilding means working at scale to rebuild wildlife diversity and abundance and giving natural processes the opportunity to enhance ecosystem resilience, with enough space to allow nature to drive the changes and shape the living systems.



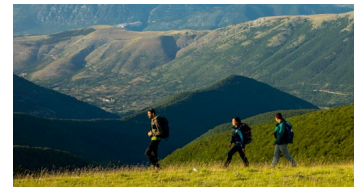
## Working together

Building coalitions and providing support based on respect, trust and shared values. Connecting people of all backgrounds to co-create innovative ways of rewilding and deliver the best outcomes for communities and wild nature.



## Complementary conservation

Rewilding complements more established methods of nature conservation. In addition to conserving the most intact remaining habitats and key biodiversity areas, we need to scale up the recovery of nature by restoring lost interactions and restore habitat connectivity.



## Long-term focus

To ensure sustained positive effects on biodiversity and resilient ecosystems for future generations, rewilding efforts aim and work on a long-term perspective.



## Acting in context

Rewilding embraces the role of people, and their cultural and economic connections to the land. It is about finding ways to work and live within healthy, natural vibrant ecosystems and reconnect with wild nature. We approach rewilding with a long-term knowledge of the environmental and cultural history of a place.



## Knowledge exchange

Exchanging knowledge and expertise to continually refine rewilding best practice and achieve the best possible rewilding results. Using the best-available evidence, gathering and sharing data, and having the confidence to learn from failure will lead to success.







# Letting nature lead

Rewilding Europe saw another year of significant growth in 2023, helping us to gain more traction as we promote and practice our approach to nature recovery across the continent.

## Unwavering commitment

With an unwavering commitment to delivering tangible results and lasting impact, our teams across Europe further developed the capacity and leadership to expand our work. An upward trend in our financial resources, which was evident in 2023 and is projected to continue, is enabling us to heighten our ambitions, underpinned by strong collaboration between our central and landscape teams. Driven and guided by Rewilding Europe's "Strategy 2030" – our ambitious plan for advancing and scaling up rewilding through to the end of the decade - we are now well on our way to achieving these ambitions. In 2023, our 10 rewilding landscapes made significant progress demonstrating rewilding at scale, with teams stepping up their goals and objectives, expanding their efforts, and delivering an increasingly diverse range of rewilding actions that benefit both nature and people.

## Organisational growth and development

Fuelled by our growing financial income, we developed a plan to ensure our central teams and landscape teams are fit for purpose. Building on work started

in 2022, we completed implementation of the first phase of our so-called Organisational Growth and Development Plan. Actions included: (i) an increase in the capacity of our Central Team to 28 fte, up from 20 in 2022, and 16 in 2021; (ii) significantly stepping up our upscaling work based on an operational plan to support widespread adoption of rewilding; (iii) a partial renewal of the Supervisory Board, with three members replaced due to ending of their final term, or private reasons; and (iv) the launch of Rewilding Climate Solutions as a separate entity (limited liability company), with a five-member team assembled by the end of the year.

Due to our continued growth, and the need to further strengthen our organisation, we developed a second phase of the Organisational Growth and Development Plan. This was discussed and agreed by the end of the year by both the Management Team and the Supervisory Board. Preparations for implementation began in December, with the aim of completing this phase by June 2024. Key elements include the appointment of Laurien Holtjer as a third statutory director in 2024 (Director Engagement & Public Relations), a change of our governance

structure (with an Executive Team and a Leadership Team based on new terms of reference), the creation of a separate Impact Monitoring & Research team, and a restructuring of the Finance & Operations Team. The composition of our Wilder Nature and Nature for People teams will see significant changes as a result of these actions, and the transition of staff to Rewilding Climate Solutions.

With these organisational changes we aim to effectively manage our expected growth, ensuring operations remain agile and efficient. To keep our operations streamlined and scalable, we also improved our internal processes and systems, and will continue to do so over the coming years. We have also experienced significant growth in more external factors such as brand recognition, outreach and publicity, partnerships, networks, and governance. Managing these changes has been intense and frequently challenging, yet immensely rewarding overall. The organisational growth outlined above is designed to maximise the impact of Rewilding Europe's twin demonstrating and catalysing roles, as we work to deliver wilder nature at landscape scale across Europe.





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Another highlight was the creation of a European Rewilding Coalition, with rewilding organisations from 16 European countries signing up as leading members.

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### **Landscapes at the forefront**

Most of our 10 operational rewilding landscapes saw steady growth in activities and impact in 2023. Particularly strong growth was seen in the Southern Carpathians, Iberian Highlands, and Central Apennines. Swedish Lapland had a strong year as well, aiming to define its niche and role in Swedish rewilding further. The teams in the Velebit Mountains and Rhodope Mountains achieved significant progress too, expanding and deepening their work.

The Affric Highlands developed well in its second full year, while our work in the Ukrainian part of the Danube Delta was hampered by the war. Despite this, the Ukrainian team have been doing a fantastic job as they continue much of their work.

Rewilding Romania, established as a new legal entity in 2022, became operational, encompassing both the Southern Carpathians and the Romanian part of the Danube Delta.

The creation of new, dedicated legal entities is underway for the Dauphiné Alps (Rewilding France) and Affric

Highlands (Rewilding Affric Highlands), which will help to establish and advance our rewilding efforts in these landscapes for years to come.

### **Important milestones**

To further strengthen our pan-European co-production, we signed a formal Network Agreement with all affiliated partners of Rewilding Europe (with the exception, to date, of Rewilding Oder Delta). Following a comprehensive feasibility phase, the Dauphiné Alps in south-eastern France was approved by the Supervisory Board as a new rewilding landscape – the eleventh in our growing portfolio – with a launch planned for 2024. We started a Wilder Parks initiative to begin harnessing the huge potential for rewilding in Europe's protected areas, which will identify 10 leading parks that can showcase what is possible at a far larger scale. We incorporated Rewilding Climate Solutions as a new company, which will work to finance rewilding through the voluntary carbon market, with an initial focus on restoring peatlands in six countries.



### Building a European movement

Another highlight was the creation of a European Rewilding Coalition, with rewilding organisations from 16 European countries signing up as leading members. In addition, we celebrated the tenth anniversary of the European Rewilding Network. With five new members joining in 2023, membership now totals 91 rewilding initiatives across 29 European countries. In early 2023, the European Young Rewilders was launched to empower young Europeans interested in becoming involved in rewilding. Over the course of the year, the network blossomed into a vibrant and well-connected community of more than 500 passionate and skilled young Europeans from 50 different countries, eager to drive the rewilding movement forwards and scale up nature recovery.

### Fundraising success

In 2023, we made significant progress in our fundraising efforts, with Rewilding Europe receiving several major grants. The single largest partnership in our history was established with the Ecological Restoration Fund (UK), which will contribute GBP 9 million over the years 2024–2026. In addition, we received a EUR 2.4 million contribution from a private foundation, and a EUR 900,000 commitment from Augmentum Foundation (CH). We also grew our private donor income further, with several new contributors committing for five years. In addition, we rolled out a scheme enabling people to leave legacies to Rewilding Europe, which saw the first legacies registered. Corporate donations were received from HSBC Bank (Fr), Hogan Lovells (NL), Earthkeeper (DK), EnviroSustain (Ger), and various other organisations.

As a result of all these efforts, our central level income grew from EUR 8.6 million in 2022 to EUR 16.3 million in 2023 – a substantial increase of 90% – which means we have achieved more stability and long-term security in our

structural income (both restricted and unrestricted).

In 2023, total expenses amounted to EUR 11.2 million, with work towards Rewilding Europe's four main objectives accounting for 81% of total expenditure. Furthermore, 2% was spent fundraising and 17% on management and development of the initiative. Work carried out in our rewilding landscapes and by other external partners accounted for 65% of expenditure, with the central level accounting for the remainder, largely for work carried out to support the rewilding landscapes. Expenditure levels in 2023 were significantly (60%) higher than in 2022, mostly due to the growing size of teams in the landscapes and at a central level. More information about our financials in 2023 can be found on page 92–93.

### Corporate engagement

Rewilding Europe recognises that the corporate sector has an important role to play in advancing our rewilding mission. Working with companies who want to become involved in nature recovery is a tremendous opportunity to create real rewilding gains across Europe.

In all of our corporate collaborations and partnerships, we seek a direct connection with our mission, and clear rewilding benefits with lasting, measurable outcomes. With this in mind, our Corporate Engagement Principles are designed to ensure the right partnerships are established and developed between Rewilding Europe and the corporate sector. These principles include a meaningful contribution to achieving our objectives, alignment with our mission and values, a significant commitment to nature recovery as part of the company's sustainability agenda, and a requirement for transparency.

We invite companies who have set relevant ambitions in their sustainability strategies and want to become nature positive, to work with us to achieve our mission. Let's join forces to make Europe a wilder place!

## By the end of 2023, we had:

- ➔ **10 rewilding landscapes** operational, comprising at least **5.8 million hectares** of land and water
- ➔ **65,125 ha** of land and water under our own rewilding management (19,192 ha added in 2023)
- ➔ Around **296,000 ha** of land and water under rewilding through partnerships inside the 10 rewilding landscapes, and 50,000 ha outside
- ➔ **28 fte** central team capacity (+29% year-on-year)
- ➔ **11<sup>th</sup> rewilding landscape** under preparation (the Dauphiné Alps in France)
- ➔ 10 local teams boasting a total of around **100 fte** (+25% year-on-year)
- ➔ **Three new members** of the Supervisory Board, and one new statutory director appointed
- ➔ Total income of **EUR 16.3 million** (+47% year-on-year)
- ➔ **38 donors and partners** each contributing more than **10,000 euros** to our work
- ➔ Total expenses of **EUR 11.2 million** (+60% year-on-year)
- ➔ **81% of funding** spent on our four main objectives
- ➔ Management and development costs accounted for **17%** of expenditure, and fundraising costs **2%**

\*1 fte = 1 full time equivalent i.e. one full-time job position (five days per week).



▲ Signing of the European Rewilding Coalition in Vienna.



# Heads in the cloud, feet in the mud

Rewilding Europe has evolved from a visionary idea into an organisation that oversees a portfolio of groundbreaking, landscape-scale rewilding initiatives across Europe.



IBERIAN  
HIGHLANDS

SPAIN



RHODOPE  
MOUNTAINS

BULGARIA



GREATER  
CÔA VALLEY

PORTUGAL



SOUTHERN  
CARPATHIANS

ROMANIA



CENTRAL  
APENNINES

ITALY





Across our rewilding landscapes we work to demonstrate rewilding as one of the best ways of enabling the recovery of nature – both for its own intrinsic values, and as an effective, practical solution to the challenges we face at the intersection of biodiversity loss, climate change, and the needs and aspirations of human society.

Rewilding Europe has set a pioneering and ambitious course for the future to deliver a Europe that is richer in wild nature, with all the benefits this brings for people and planet. It plays a vital

role in demonstrating how rewilding works in different geographical and socio-economic settings and cultures, and encourages and enables others to engage in rewilding.

Our local partners are bringing back river dynamics, and naturally regenerating forests and mosaic landscapes with the support of large grazers, which are interacting with predators and scavengers. With key species reintroduced and supported in their natural comeback, communities are seeing windows open onto a prosperous future, with

growing opportunities for the development of sustainable nature-based economies. Thanks to rewilding, people in these communities are enjoying an increasing sense of pride, new identity, and connection with their natural environment.

By demonstrating that rewilding can be carried out at landscape scale, and that it can deliver a wide range of benefits for both nature and people, we work to encourage others to act and adopt rewilding, thereby increasing the scale and impact of rewilding across Europe.



SWEDISH  
LAPLAND

SWEDEN



VELEBIT  
MOUNTAINS

CROATIA



DANUBE  
DELTA

UKRAINE  
ROMANIA  
MOLDOVA



ODER  
DELTA

GERMANY  
POLAND



AFFRIC  
HIGHLANDS

SCOTLAND





# Landscape lift-off

Having launched in October 2022, the Iberian Highlands rewilding landscape developed strongly last year, with the rewilding team working hard to deliver positive impact across the board.

Located in eastern Spain, the vast and sparsely populated Iberian Highlands became Rewilding Europe's tenth rewilding landscape in late 2022. Rewilding has huge potential here, both to restore wildlife populations, and to offer local communities – who face many challenges as a result of long-term rural depopulation – new opportunities.

During 2023, the Rewilding Spain team made significant progress as they built on previous groundwork. We caught up with Rewilding Spain team leader Pablo Schapira to find out how rewilding really took off in the Iberian Highlands during the year, and how it is already delivering benefits to people and nature across the landscape.

## **What are your overall reflections on your first full year of rewilding in 2023?**

It was a very intense but ultimately highly rewarding and productive year for rewilding in the Iberian Highlands. Starting a new initiative like this always comes with a lot of challenges, with a new team coming together in a new landscape. Living in a rural area, where winters are tough and the distances between rewilding sites are huge, can also make logistics difficult. But I'm very happy with the progress that we've made. We've managed to build a strong, skilled, and committed team





#### Country



Spain

#### Focal landscape

Iberian Highlands

#### Size of landscape

869,952 ha

#### Work started in

2022

#### Larger landscape

Located in the provinces of Guadalajara, Cuenca and Teruel, the Iberian Highlands are part of a range of mountains known as the Iberian System (Sistema Ibérico).

#### Main habitats

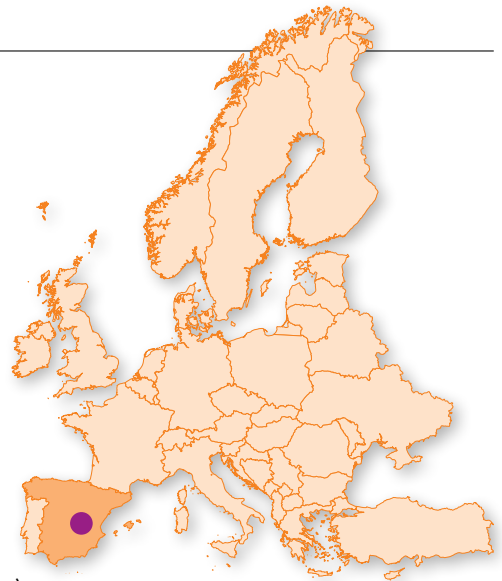
Plateau landscape with extensive pine and juniper forest, grasslands and steppe vegetation. Deep canyons with rivers, high cliffs and deciduous forest.

#### Focal species

Cinereous, bearded and Egyptian vultures, Iberian ibex, Iberian wolf, Iberian lynx, Przewalski's and other horse types, Tauros, red kite and black woodpecker.

#### Team Leader

Pablo Schapira



landscape. When people see that we are already employing 17 people in the area, and that this number will grow to 19 at the end of 2024, they can see that we are serious in our commitment to the Iberian Highlands, and that we are here for the long-term, to invest in communities, as well as nature recovery.

From an ecological perspective, I would say the biggest win has been the development of natural grazing at different sites across the landscape. We've overseen the translocation of two herds of Przewalski's horses, for example, with the assistance of Hortobágy National Park in Hungary and the Monts D'Azur Biological Reserve in France, and with financial support from the Endangered Landscapes & Seascapes Programme and Cartier for Nature Fund. The arrival of the first herd was a very proud moment for me, when I realised rewilding was really taking off, and that we had managed to do something very special.

The fact that our natural grazing programme is developing so well has helped to change local people's perceptions too. At first, they didn't fully understand what we were trying to do with the release of herbivores such as

who have pushed hard to deliver impact and results and to show how rewilding can benefit nature and people here. While this is only the beginning, I think everyone in Rewilding Spain should be proud of what we managed to achieve in such a short space of time.

#### What were the "big wins" of the year for you?

Seeing people's attitudes towards us and rewilding become increasingly positive has been incredibly rewarding. People who were cautious and raised questions about the initiative at the beginning have become far more supportive as they've seen the benefits and opportunities that rewilding is already delivering. This surprised me – I thought it would take longer for local communities and people in authority to buy into our rewilding vision for the

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 "We've managed to build a strong, skilled, and committed team who have pushed hard to deliver impact as quickly as possible."  
 .....





► The town of Chequilla in the Alto Tajo Natural Park.

►► Rewilding Europe Capital loaned La Maleza Wildlife Park EUR 13,000 in 2023, enabling the launch of safari tours.

the Przewalski's horses and Tauros, and the benefits these animals could deliver through their grazing and presence in the landscape. A year later, we're in a position where local municipalities are approaching us asking us if we can release wild and semi-wild herbivores on their land. It's been quite a turnaround.

### Can you tell us how Rewilding Spain built engagement in 2023?

Building engagement has been critical during this initial phase of our work. We have spent a lot of time meeting stakeholders – from local authorities to people living in villages – explaining why we are here, and what we want to achieve. We have organised gatherings for local mayors, some of whom have already seen the benefits of our work, so that they can learn about rewilding from us, and relate their positive impressions to each other.

Another thing that pleasantly surprised me in 2023 was the amount of outside attention we managed to focus on the landscape. Thanks to our comprehensive communications and outreach efforts, our work was the subject of more than 100 national and international media publications and television shows in 2023. Every time we send out a press release now, the media picks it up. This is important, because we want to change the negative narrative that has come to be associated with this area – about rural depopulation leading to economic decline and a lack of jobs – which in the past meant nobody wanted to visit or live here. By replacing this narrative with a positive message about rewilding, and promoting the natural and cultural heritage of the Iberian Highlands, we have created significant interest in the landscape, which in turn has generated a lot of pride in the local community.



.....  
 “The arrival of the first herd was a very proud moment for me, when I realised rewilding was really taking off, and that we had managed to do something very special.”  
 .....

The regional government is already starting to notice the interest we are receiving – I think in 2024 we can expect national authorities to pay attention too. This is good news for us, and good news for rewilding in Spain, because it can lead to more support for rewilding efforts.

### How did rewilding and nature recovery provide benefits to local businesses and communities last year?

In June, the first Naturtajo 2023 Nature Observation Tourism Fair was held in the town of Corduente, showcasing the natural heritage of Alto Tajo Natural Park, which is part of the Iberian Highlands rewilding landscape. More than 2500 people attended, as well as 30 tourism-related companies. The event helped us to develop many useful connections with local businesses, and to promote the landscape as a top destination for nature lovers throughout Spain. Separately, we also organised a trip to the landscape for Spanish and overseas tour operators, which has led to more visitors and more revenue for local nature-based businesses.

In 2023, La Maleza Wildlife Park – which is located inside the Iberian Highlands rewilding landscape in Tramacastilla – became the first Spanish

.....  
**11,000**

hectares of land secured for rewilding by the Rewilding Spain team in 2023.  
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nature-based company to receive financial support from Rewilding Europe Capital. The loan allowed the park to launch seasonal safaris, which take visitors to see a herd of Tauros that are now living in this area as part of the Iberian Highlands rewilding initiative, as well as a range of other wildlife. We also supported another local association with a repayable grant to support the development of non-timber forest products, which will employ a number of local people.

These initiatives have really inspired local businesses who want to develop their own nature-based products and services, and we now have two or three more who are interested in applying for loans from Rewilding Europe Capital.

### Can you tell us about the progress made accessing land for rewilding in the Iberian Highlands?

Land access in the Iberian Highlands may be different to other rewilding landscapes in that the majority of the land is public. To develop our natural grazing programme this meant we needed to secure grazing rights from local municipalities – in 2023 we secured access to around 11,000 hectares of land this way.

Securing grazing rights on public land doesn't mean you have exclusive



▲ Przewalski's horses are released in the Iberian Highlands.



▲ Iberian Highlands herd manager Rafa Vigil, with Tauros.

“By promoting the natural and cultural heritage of the Iberian Highlands, we have created significant interest in the landscape, which in turn has generated a lot of pride in the local community.”

access to the land. It can also be used for other activities such as forestry and hunting, so we have to select areas carefully. In addition, grazing rights only last for five years, and are then put up for tender again. So it's been important for us to generate benefits for people as quickly as possible, to ensure we can keep the rights. We are also exploring ways to access and potentially buy private land, which can give long-term security, but this can be expensive.

### If 2023 was a year when rewilding really kicked off in the Iberian Highlands, what are your expectations for 2024?

I'm looking forward to 2024 as a year of scaling up and further growth. We are going to grow the rewilding team, deliver more impact, and generate greater benefits for people and nature. It will mean more hard work, of course, but I'm energised and excited.



# Vultures flying high

Rewilding efforts could soon see four vulture species regularly soaring through the skies above Bulgaria's Rhodope Mountains.



STEFAN STEPANOV

## A vulture stronghold on the rise

Vultures are iconic and ecologically important keystone scavengers that deliver benefits to people and nature. The Rhodope Mountains, which straddle the border between Bulgaria and Greece, are the last stronghold of these majestic birds in the Balkans. Today, thanks to rewilding efforts, this stronghold is now becoming stronger, with the future of Europe's four vulture species looking more promising here than it has done for many decades.

"Ten years from now there could be thriving populations of cinereous, griffon, Egyptian, and bearded vultures in the Rhodope Mountains again, which is how it was 70 years ago," says Stoycho Stoychev, conservation director at the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB), the local, long-term partner of the Rewilding Rhodopes Foundation. "This would represent fantastic progress."

Since 2016, the Rhodope Mountains rewilding team have supported the

recovery of the landscape's griffon vulture population in close collaboration with the BSPB. The two partners have also been releasing cinereous vultures here since 2022, with further releases planned over the coming years. And thanks to rewilding initiatives carried out by the BSPB and other NGOs, the area's population of Egyptian vultures has stabilised after years of decline, while bearded vultures will soon be released in key Natura 2000 sites across Bulgaria, within the framework of an EU-funded LIFE initiative involving NGOs and private and public bodies.

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"Ten years from now there could be thriving populations of cinereous, griffon, Egyptian, and bearded vultures in the Rhodopes. This would represent fantastic progress."

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## Cinereous comeback

The cinereous vulture – Europe's largest raptor – is a hugely impressive bird, with a wingspan of nearly three metres. The species once ranged from Portugal all the way across Europe, through Turkey to the high mountains of Kazakhstan and the Mongolian steppe. However, like many vulture species, cinereous vultures have seen their historical range shrink and fragment as their numbers have plummeted, with populations subject to a combination of threats, including poisoning, habitat loss, diminishing availability of carrion, and collisions with power lines.





## RHODOPE MOUNTAINS

BULGARIA

Today, the European cinereous vulture population is divided in two, with a population in Western Europe, and separate remnant populations in the Balkans and Crimea.

Cinereous vultures last bred in the Bulgarian part of the Rhodope Mountains in 1993. With the aim of re-establishing a breeding colony, the Rewilding Rhodopes team and the BSPB began releasing birds in the landscape in late 2022. In November 2023, a second group of 13 vultures was released, having spent five months in a purpose-built acclimatisation aviary, which boosts the post-release survival rate of the birds. As with the first release, the vultures were sourced from Spain. Further releases of 20 to 40 birds are planned for at least the next three years.

“I’m very pleased with how the programme is progressing,” says Rewilding Rhodopes rewilding officer Hristo Hristov. “It has been challenging, because we are only using young vultures. On the one hand, this is an advantage, because it means they can adapt more quickly to a new environment. But on the other, it means we have to wait several years before they start breeding.”

### Towards breeding success

It is important to ensure that as many of the cinereous vultures released through the reintroduction programme as possible settle in the Rhodope Mountains. Human contact is kept to a minimum, the birds are sustained on food they are likely to find locally after their release, and ten nesting platforms have been constructed on trees within sight of the acclimatisation aviary.

All the released vultures will be tagged and fitted with GPS transmitters, enabling the rewilding team to keep track of their health and movement in

- **Country**  
 Bulgaria
- **Focal landscape**  
Eastern Rhodope Mountains

- **Size of landscape**  
471,081 ha
- **Work started in**  
2014
- **Larger landscape**  
Part of large escarpment between Greece and Bulgaria (the Rhodopes and Orvilos Mountains), including a number of Natura 2000 sites and national reserves.

- **Main habitats**  
Mediterranean and continental temperate forests, river valleys, cliffs, grasslands, and steppe.

- **Focal species**  
Griffon vulture, cinereous vulture, Egyptian vulture, red deer, fallow deer, wild horse, wolf, brown bear, European bison, European souslik.

- **Team leader**  
Andreana Trifonova

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# 138

breeding pairs of griffon vultures in the Rhodope Mountains in 2024.

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▲ Rewilding officer Hristo Hristov.

real-time, and to learn more about their life in the local landscape and beyond. Almost all the birds from the second release have stayed close to the release site, although some have made periodic journeys to other mountainous regions in Bulgaria, Turkey, and Greece.

“We have observed an exchange of birds with the cinereous vulture colony across the Greek border in Dadia-Lefkimi-Soufli Forest National Park to the south, and Bulgaria’s Stara Planina (Balkan) Mountains to the north, where cinereous vultures were first reintroduced in 2018,” says Hristov. “We have two pairs of cinereous vultures inhabiting nests here already, which is a very good sign that a breeding colony will soon become a reality.”

### A remarkable recovery

The Rhodope Mountains rewilding team have been supporting the comeback of griffon vultures in the Rhodope Mountains since 2016, mainly by improving the availability of





▲ Vulture check-up.

natural prey, and by working to reduce mortality caused by factors such as poaching, poisoning, and collisions with power lines. By 1986, these threats had seen the Bulgarian population decline to just three breeding pairs – all in the Rhodopes.

The beneficial impact of these efforts is reflected in the ongoing growth of the griffon vulture population. In early 2024, a team from the BPSB identified 138 occupied nests along the Arda River, in the heart of the Rhodope Mountains rewilding landscape. Of these, 100 pairs were engaged in breeding, while the rest were still building their nests and defending them from rivals.

“I remember when I first became involved in griffon vulture conservation in the Rhodope Mountains back in the early 1990s, when there were only 10 to 15 pairs,” says Stoycho Stoychev. “So to reach the point we’re at today is a major conservation success story. The resurgence of griffon vultures shows that this area can support the comeback of all four vulture species that should naturally be present here. Vulture comeback is also of great value to local communities, because the birds are driving the development of nature-based tourism by attracting growing numbers of domestic and international visitors.”

### Comprehensive support

All vulture species present in the Rhodope Mountains – whether they are settled breeders, recently released birds, or sporadic visitors – benefit from a range of support measures.

The Rhodope Mountains rewilding team and the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds have been working for many years to boost the availability of wild herbivore carcasses, which is helping to restore natural food webs and close the circle of life. The partners have overseen multiple releases of red and fallow deer at various sites across the landscape, with populations of both species now increasing and gradually

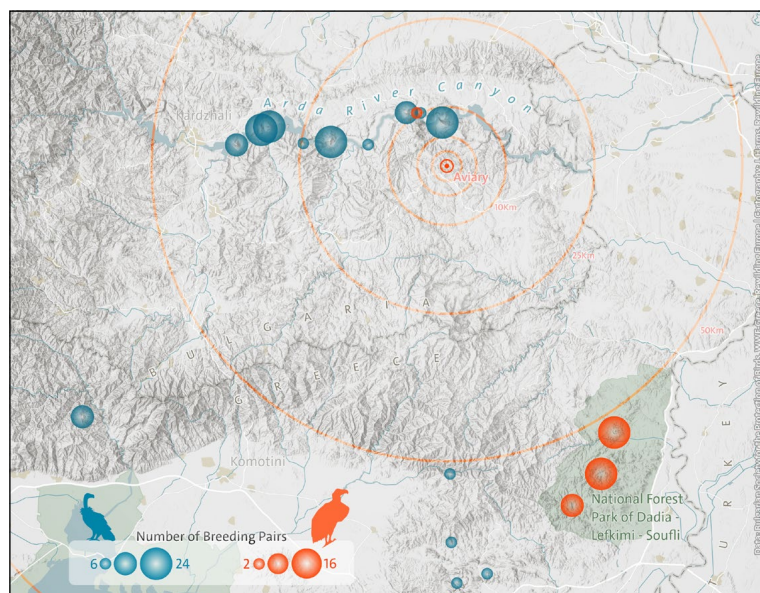
expanding their range. Another release of fallow deer near the cinereous vulture release site is planned for 2024.

A number of artificial feeding stations are maintained by the rewilding team, where the carcasses of livestock supplied by local farmers are regularly deposited. These are checked to ensure they are free from all veterinary drugs that could poison vultures that feed on them.

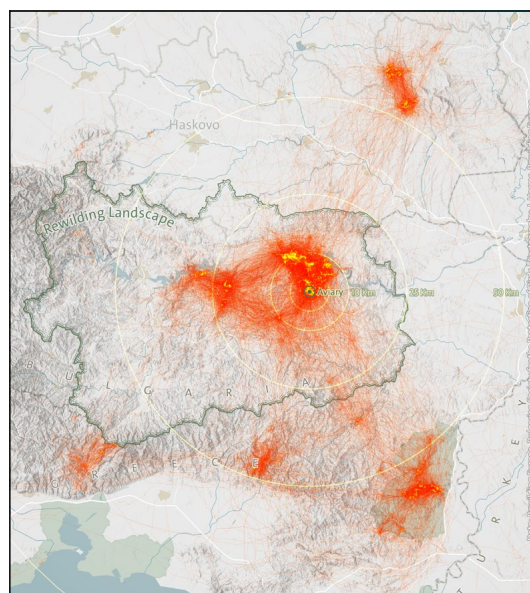
In an ideal world, vultures in the Rhodope Mountains and across Europe would feed exclusively on the carcasses of wild animals. However, a decline in wildlife populations means livestock carcasses are often a critical source of food.

“We’re seeing cinereous and griffon vultures increasingly feed on the carcasses of wild herbivores in the landscape,” says Stoycho Stoychev. “As populations of wild herbivores such as red and fallow deer, semi-wild horses, and European bison grow, we expect this upward trend to continue, and the dependency on feeding stations to continue decreasing.”

Populations of vultures and other raptors in the Balkans still face a range of threats, with illegal poisoning top of the list. Since 2016, anti-poison dog units have patrolled the Rhodope Mountains rewilding landscape, helping to establish poison-free areas by controlling and removing poisoned baits before they can negatively impact local wildlife.



▲ Breeding populations of griffon (blue) and cinereous (red) vultures.



▲ Tracking reintroduced cinereous vultures 2023–2024 – hotter areas indicate more frequently visited places.





STAFFAN WIDSTRAND

▲ Reintroducing bearded vulture into Bulgaria would mean that all four European vulture species are back in the country.



STEFAN STEFANOV

▲ Red deer.



IVO DANCHEV

▲ The acclimatisation aviary in the Rhodope Mountains.

### Egyptian and bearded vultures

While the Rhodope Mountains rewilding team aren't directly involved with the restocking of Egyptian vultures, or the reintroduction of bearded vultures, their rewilding efforts are helping to create conditions that will support the comeback of both species. Measures to combat poisoning and boost the availability of wild carcasses, as well as to make electricity pylons and power lines safe and visible to vultures and other raptors, are all beneficial in this regard.

The Egyptian vulture, Europe's smallest and only long-distance migratory vulture, was once widespread throughout Bulgaria and Greece. Today, the Balkan Peninsula is home to less than 60 pairs. Between 2018 and 2023, the BSPB and partners released 31 Egyptian vultures in the Rhodope Mountains, while the NGO has tagged 80 Egyptian vultures with GPS transmitters since 2010. This has enabled a hugely improved understanding of the ecology and behaviour of the birds, and the threats they face in their breeding territories on the Balkans, in their wintering grounds in Africa, and along their migration routes.

The bearded vulture – a species as impressive as the cinereous and griffon vulture – last bred in Bulgaria in 1972. As

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 “We’re seeing cinereous and griffon vultures increasingly feed on the carcasses of wild herbivores in the landscape.”  
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**15**

bearded vultures to be released in Bulgaria between 2024 and 2030 through the LIFE for the Bearded Vulture initiative.  
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the same threats facing other vulture species have taken their toll, its European abundance and range has declined drastically over the last century. While it is now the rarest vulture in Europe, today the population is gradually increasing thanks to extensive reintroduction and conservation efforts. However, nearby populations in the Alps, Turkey, and Crete do not produce enough offspring to enable recolonisation in the Balkans. This is why the Bulgaria-focused reintroduction programme that kicked off in 2023 – involving a range of other NGOs such as Green Balkans and the Vulture Conservation Foundation, as well as organisations such as national parks – is so essential. This should see fifteen young bearded vultures released in small groups by 2030.

“The ongoing return of vultures to the Rhodope Mountains and other parts of Bulgaria, which is the result of collaboration between a wide range of organisations and stakeholders, is great news for nature and great news for local communities,” says Hristo Hristov. “Together with our partners, the Rewilding Rhodopes team will continue our efforts to support vulture comeback. We have a long way to go, but I’m very proud of what we’ve achieved so far.”





LUIS ACOSTINHO

# A festival of rewilding

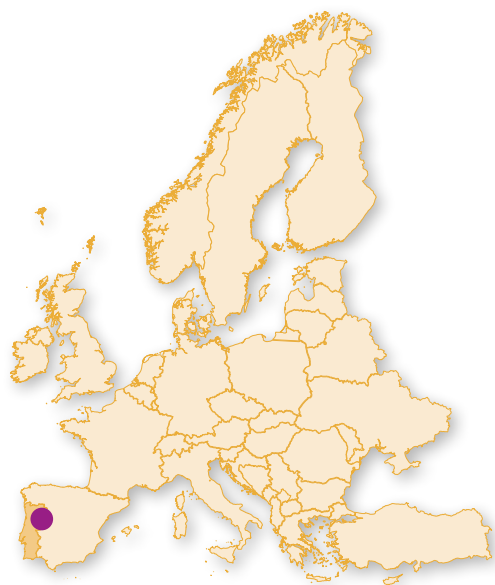
In July 2023, the “CÔA – Corridor of Arts” Festival united art, nature, and culture in the Greater Côa Valley. The landmark event benefitted local people, businesses, and rewilding efforts.

Conceived and organised by the Rewilding Portugal team, the “CÔA – Corridor of Arts” Festival was the headline rewilding event in the Greater Côa Valley landscape last year.

Celebrating the captivating nature and culture of the valley, the event helped to build engagement with local communities, create and deepen pro-

ductive partnerships, and advance the team’s ongoing efforts to recover nature across the landscape.

We caught up with Fernando Teixeira, Rewilding Portugal’s Head of Communications and Enterprise – who played a major role in the festival – to find out more about the event and the wide range of benefits it delivered.





○ **Country**

Portugal

○ **Focal landscape**

Greater Cõa Valley

○ **Size of landscape**

318,748 ha

○ **Work started in**

2011

○ **Larger landscape**

Rugged landscape between Sierra de Gata in the south and Douro Valley in the north, northeast Portugal.

○ **Main habitats**

Oak forests, shrublands, montado, serra, rivers and canyons with cliffs.

○ **Focal species**

Griffon, cinereous and Egyptian vulture, Spanish imperial and Bonelli's eagle, Iberian wolf, Iberian lynx, rabbit, red deer, roe deer, Spanish ibex, wild horse, and Tauros.

○ **Team leader**

Pedro Prata

### Can you summarise the festival? Why did you decide to organise it?

The Cõa Festival is the biggest event Rewilding Portugal has organised to date, and the most in-depth in terms of its connection with local communities. The run-up to the festival saw the Greater Cõa Valley energised for months, culminating in a fantastic artistic programme throughout July. While that month marked the end of the event, the festival left a legacy which has seen people and nature continue to benefit.

The festival saw contemporary artistic expression in the Cõa reborn. The results of the artistic residencies, for example, have become landmarks that will inspire visitors for many years to come. But much more than this, the event drew people from far and wide and from many different backgrounds to the valley, with a programme that featured cinema, theatre, music, and other performing arts, as well as markets and guided tours in the landscape. It raised awareness of rewilding and its



▲▲ Singers and songwriters of all genres helped to entertain the festival crowds.

▲ Gaspard Combes works on his granite artwork at the Ermo da Aguilas rewilding site.

► Michelle Trotta creates a unique sculpture overlooking the landscape at Foz Cõa.

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“The event raised awareness of rewilding and its benefits, enhanced a sense of pride in local communities, and helped us to establish and develop a wide range of partnerships.”

.....

benefits, enhanced a sense of pride in local communities, and helped us to establish and develop a wide range of partnerships. Overall, I think it gave the rewilding movement in the Greater Cõa Valley, and across Portugal, real added momentum, which is what we were aiming for.

### Can you tell us more about how the festival was productive?

I think it's fair to say the festival was a resounding success. Firstly, in terms of stakeholder engagement. The scale and diverse programme of the event brought local communities together. Doors were opened with local municipalities with whom relations were less developed before the festival took place. We managed to attract new audiences who were initially more interested in the cultural side of the festival, but who ended up discovering rewilding and its principles, and becoming passionate supporters of our work. The festival also involved artists, artisans, and other business owners





◀ A wide range of artistic performances took place until late in the evening, transforming communities into vibrant social hubs.

▶ Ricardo Lourenço's image of a fox searching for food in a tree won first place in the "Fauna" category of the Rewilding Photo Contest.

▼ Local products were the highlight of cooking demonstrations at the festival.

▼ The Cõa Valley is renowned for its rock engravings, dating back thousands of years.

### Why is building engagement so essential to the work of the Rewilding Portugal team?

In a highly fragmented landscape where most of the land is privately owned – as is the case in the Greater Cõa Valley – the success of rewilding efforts is heavily reliant on the support of local communities. Rewilding is an inclusive approach to nature conservation – it works to engage and empower people and organisations of all backgrounds, enabling them to benefit from the recovery of nature, and to exist and flourish alongside healthy, resilient wildlife populations. In this regard, the festival was a fantastic engagement tool, showcasing the ecological and socio-economic benefits of rewilding, and helping to elevate the pride that local communities have in the unique nature and culture of the area.



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“The ability of the festival to attract visitors from across Portugal and beyond – who fell in love with the natural beauty of the area and took advantage of nature-based services – has done much to open people’s eyes and highlight new possibilities.”

.....

who used the event to showcase what they do and how their work is connected with and benefitting rewilding.

Secondly, the festival helped to raise awareness of the captivating wild nature of the Greater Cõa Valley, and to promote nature-based tourism in the area. Ongoing rewilding efforts are enhancing the natural value of the valley’s landscapes and wildlife, which means the tourism potential of the area

is also growing. So far, however, this potential has often been overlooked by municipalities, local residents, and entrepreneurs. The ability of the festival to attract visitors from across Portugal and beyond – who fell in love with the natural beauty of the area and took advantage of existing nature-based services – has done much to open people’s eyes and highlight exciting new possibilities.

### How did the festival help to enhance rewilding efforts and impact?

By allowing Rewilding Portugal to create and strengthen connections and partnerships with communities and decision-makers across the region, the festival has had a positive and lasting influence on our practical work. These new relationships are enabling our rewilding efforts to develop faster and more cohesively across the landscape.

A good example of this is the connection we made with several municipalities taking part in the festival. The municipality of Sabugal decided to select our Vale Carapito rewilding site as a role model for promoting nature-based tourism at Portugal’s largest tourism fair in Lisbon, while the municipality of Pinhel has been an important partner in all the tourism initiatives that Rewilding Portugal has carried





out in recent months. In addition, the municipality of Figueira de Castelo Rodrigo has become an official partner in the new European Commission-supported LIFE LUPI LYNX initiative, which will see Rewilding Portugal and a range of partners work to enhance the recovery of Iberian lynx and Iberian wolf populations south of the Douro River. The municipality will provide invaluable support for the environmental education component of the initiative.

### How did the festival deliver socio-economic and cultural benefits to people in an around the landscape?

The festival played an important role in the economic development of the Greater Cõa Valley and surrounding area. It attracted more than 10,000 people to the region, invested directly in the region and its services, and boosted overnight stays, meals, and visits over the course of an entire month.

This beneficial impact was even more noticeable within the 50-odd members of the Wild Cõa Network, which unites local businesses that share our rewilding vision for the landscape. Of these members, more than 20 participated directly in the festival, organising activities, selling their products, and generating an economic return from their par-

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“The festival has had a positive and lasting influence on our practical work, enabling our rewilding efforts to develop faster and more cohesively across the landscape.”

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ticipation. We estimate that the festival generated more than EUR 50,000 for local operators and businesses.

The Greater Cõa Valley has witnessed many decades of rural depopulation and associated land abandonment, which have negatively impacted both the ecology and cultural heritage of the area. Through rewilding, and by organising events at the intersection between nature and culture such as the CÕA Festival, the Rewilding Portugal team are working hard to counter both of these trends.

.....

## 200+

activities, performances, and forms of artistic expression took place during the month-long CÕA Festival.

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### How will you build on the success of the festival going forwards?

The CÕA Festival was expensive to organise, and the truth is that events of this scale still do not have enough support at national level to allow them to take place regularly. Even so, having witnessed the benefits, we are still keen to organise something similar every three years.

In the meantime, Rewilding Portugal and various partners in the Wild Cõa Network will continue to work together to organise various cultural and nature-based activities that were a big part of the festival programme – such as hikes in the landscape, artistic shows, and local product tastings – which will maintain the momentum generated by the last festival, and help to build anticipation for the next one. I extend a warm welcome to anyone thinking of visiting the Greater Cõa Valley!





STEFAN WIDSTRAND

# Thinking big

Home to some of Europe's most spectacular nature, the Southern Carpathians of Romania have huge rewilding potential. In 2023, the Rewilding Romania team took steps to expand their efforts and impact across the landscape and beyond.

## Next level rewilding

Between 2014 and 2023, Rewilding Europe and WWF Romania translocated 99 European bison to the Țarcu Mountains – a part of the Southern Carpathians rewilding landscape where no wild bison had roamed free for at least 250 years. Based on a genetic study carried out in 2022, the current population of bison is estimated at around 180 individuals, which includes the release of eight additional bison in 2023, plus new calves born during the year.

With the population of wild bison in the Southern Carpathians now thriving

and expanding naturally, the focus in 2023 shifted to taking the recovery of this keystone species to the next level. Discussions with two national parks adjoining the landscape – as well as with hunting associations – were designed to

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## 105,000+

hectares of land will benefit from rewilding as a result of agreements with Retezat and Domogled National Parks.

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enhance cooperation, ensure the growing bison herds can continue to increase their geographical range safely, and explore opportunities to expand wildlife comeback. The Rewilding Romania team also worked on enterprise and engagement, to further elevate human-wildlife coexistence, amplify the benefits that wild nature delivers to local communities, and build further support for their mission.

## A broader agenda

This broader rewilding agenda, which will encompass more than simply bison-related work, is led by Rewilding Romania, which was established at the end of 2022. The Rewilding Romania team also oversees rewilding efforts on the Romanian side of the Danube Delta rewilding landscape – which are due to kick off in earnest in 2024 – and are working to promote rewilding to a larger audience.

“In 2023, we spent a lot of time thinking about the bigger picture for rewilding in the Southern Carpathians,” says Rewilding Romania Executive Director Marina Drugă. “This allowed us to identify our priorities beyond the bison



release site, which is just a small part of the rewilding landscape. We worked hard to build relationships and understand how we could diversify and scale up positive impact for nature and people.”

### Bison beyond

The Rewilding Romania team estimate that more than 20 bison calves were born in the Southern Carpathians in 2022–2023. Representing the highest number of calves born in any year since reintroductions began, this shows the free-roaming herds are flourishing in the landscape. Accounting for births and deaths, it means more than half the total population of bison in the Țarcu Mountains has now been born in the wild. The range of the bison population is also steadily increasing, and is now estimated to be around 370 square kilometres – the fastest range expansion of any reintroduced European bison herd. This can be attributed partly to the fact that the animals receive no supplementary feeding, as is the case with a number of other free-roaming European bison populations.

The 318,000-hectare Southern Carpathians rewilding landscape, which encompasses a 59,000-hectare Natura 2000 site, comprises alpine meadows, old-growth forests, cliffs, and canyons. The area currently inhabited by the free-roaming bison population, which consists mostly of half-open beech and spruce forest, is home to a wide range of other wildlife, including brown bears, grey wolves, Eurasian lynx, red deer, and wild boar.

This landscape is bordered to the north by the 43,000-hectare Retezat National Park, and to the south by the 62,000-hectare Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park. In September 2023, when a group of eight bison crossed into the latter and were caught on camera trap, their arrival was welcomed by park authori-

#### Country



Romania

#### Focal landscape

Southern Carpathians

#### Size of landscape

318,065 ha

#### Work started in

2011

#### Larger landscape

Southern Carpathian mountain range including a connected series of national parks and protected areas ranging from the Danube River valley in the south to Retezat NP in the north.

#### Main habitats

Temperate forest, sub-alpine grasslands, cliffs, and steep river valleys.

#### Focal species

European bison, red deer, wolf, brown bear, Eurasian lynx, griffon vulture.

#### Team leader

Mariana Drugă



**SOUTHERN  
CARPATHIANS**

ROMANIA

ties. The Rewilding Romania team also saw one of the male bison translocated in 2023, together with bison already in the landscape, travel 20 kilometres to the north of the release site, in the direction of Retezat National Park. At the current rate of expansion, the team expect bison herds to cross over into this park within two to three years.

The Rewilding Romania team are working to identify natural corridors connecting the rewilding landscape and both national parks, with the aim of predicting where bison will move through the landscape in the future, and ensuring they are able to move safely.

“It’s great that both parks are happy to welcome bison, and that as numbers are increasing animals are moving there of their own accord,” says Marina Drugă. “Supporting the population growth and range expansion of the bison will boost natural grazing and browsing in the landscape. This, in turn, will help to maintain and enhance the biodiversity-rich mosaic of woodlands and grasslands that characterise much of the Southern Carpathians. It will also help to restore the complexity of local food webs, with benefits for carnivores and scavengers.”

.....  
“In 2023, we spent a lot of time thinking about the bigger picture for rewilding in the Southern Carpathians.”  
.....





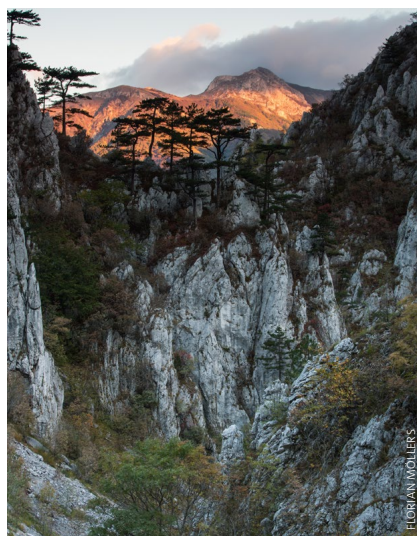
▲ Bison in the Southern Carpathians.

► Domogled National Park.

### Partnership progress

In March 2023, Rewilding Romania began discussions with the authorities of both Retezat and Domogled National Parks, focused on establishing collaboration agreements. These agreements, which were subsequently signed at the beginning of February 2024, will support rewilding efforts across more than 105,000 hectares of additional land. A plan of work for each of these parks has already been agreed. The Rewilding Romania team are aiming to set up 60 camera traps in Retezat in May 2024 – and later in Domogled – which will provide a better idea of the existence and abundance of wildlife in both parks, and help to inform rewilding measures moving forwards.

“The partnership with Rewilding Romania will provide us with valuable resources, expertise, and support in our work to promote biodiversity,” says Acimov Zoran, Director of the Retezat National Park. “By working together, we can better manage habitats, monitor wildlife populations, and implement measures that benefit both wildlife and local communities.”



.....

**180**

The current bison population in the Southern Carpathians is estimated at around 180 individuals, with more than 20 calves born in 2022–2023.

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### Vulture comeback

Romania was home to significant vulture populations until the first decades of the twentieth century. All four European vulture species – griffon, cinereous, Egyptian, and bearded – are reported to have existed in the country, but factors such as habitat loss, declining availability of prey, and deliberate persecution led to their decline and eventual disappearance.

Following visits to both Domogled and Retezat National Parks by the Rewilding Romania team and a vulture expert in late 2022, the former was selected as the best place for Romania’s first-ever griffon vulture reintroduction programme, with suitable habitat for nesting and good availability of natural carcasses. An agreement was signed with both the park authorities and ROMSILVA, Romania’s national forest administration, while members of the team visited the Iberian Highlands rewilding landscape in Spain in April to learn more about vulture reintroduction.

Discussions with national authorities about artificial feeding stations and the involvement of livestock breeders were also productive, as were numerous meetings held with local communities and shepherds to prepare for the arrival of the vultures. A potential site for a pre-release acclimatisation aviary in





▲ The Rewilding Romania team are planning a comprehensive educational programme in 2024.

► The reintroduction of griffon vultures in the Southern Carpathians will enhance biodiversity, restore the circle of life, and boost nature-based tourism.



Domogled has been identified, and permits to build the it should be obtained by the end of 2024.

“The new partnership with Rewilding Romania will enhance conservation in Domogled-Valea Cernei National Park, with both parties sharing an interest in vulture reintroduction,” says park director Gașpar Ioan. “As a keystone species, griffon vultures will benefit other species by helping to maintain and enhance the health of the landscape and limiting the spread of disease.”

“We expect to start releasing griffon vultures in 2025, which is hugely exciting,” adds Marina Drugă. “Reintroducing these iconic and ecologically important birds will represent another step forward to realising a healthy and resilient landscape governed by natural processes. It will also boost the appeal of the Southern Carpathians as one of Europe’s best nature-based tourism destinations, which will have a positive socio-economic impact on local communities.”

### Enterprise and engagement

The Rewilding Romania team also stepped up their enterprise and engagement efforts in 2023.

“We spent much of the year making Rewilding Romania and rewilding better known and understood across the

.....

“Reintroducing these iconic and ecologically important birds will represent another step forward to realising a healthy and resilient landscape governed by natural processes.”

.....

landscape,” says Paula Bora, the Rewilding Romania enterprise officer. “We focused on understanding the needs of local communities, and how rewilding and the recovery of nature could benefit them. In the past community-related efforts have been largely confined to the Armeniș area, close to the bison release site, so it was time to expand our scope, in line with the scaling up of practical rewilding.”

The team sponsored and carried out promotional activities at two marathons, which helped to bring many local communities together and spread the message about rewilding. They began collaborating with accommodation owners, souvenir producers, and a local museum, as well as manufacturers of local products, such as preserved foods and dishes made according to local recipes. And they also organised a number of educational events in schools, as well as a week-long junior rewilders camp, with a comprehensive

educational programme planned for 2024.

“We were invited by schoolteachers to talk about conservation and rewilding, responsible consumption, fair trade, and sustainable local development,” says Paula Bora. “The kids really loved it, and asked us when we were going to come back. These children also talk to their parents, so it was a great way of building engagement.”

Today, a decade on from the first release of animals, Romania’s largest population of wild European bison is flourishing and recolonising habitat in a hugely encouraging way. This is not only delivering benefits for wild nature and local communities on a growing scale, but helping to carry the positive message about rewilding into new hearts and minds. As rewilding efforts enter a new phase, in line with a scaled-up vision for the landscape, the future for bison, people, and wider nature recovery in the Southern Carpathians looks bright.



# Engage. Inspire. Thrive.

In the Central Apennines of Italy, efforts to engage local communities are changing the way people view nature and maximising the positive impact of rewilding.

## Critical outreach

Building engagement is one of the core objectives of Rewilding Europe's "Strategy 2030", our pioneering and ambitious plan for advancing and scaling up rewilding through to the end of the decade. In the Central Apennines rewilding landscape in Italy, a diverse calendar of events held throughout 2023 helped to engage a wide range of people and local communities with rewilding, informing and inspiring in equal measure.

Today, the Rewilding Apennines team are working hard to protect and enhance the population of endangered Marsican brown bears in the landscape, along with other wildlife, by developing a network of large-scale wildlife corridors connecting protected areas. They are also carrying out other measures to support the comeback of keystone species, such as Apennine chamois, griffon vultures, and white-clawed crayfish. By reaching out to local communities, and thereby elevating the level of human-wildlife coexistence in the landscape, the team are maximising the positive impact of these rewilding efforts.

"When it comes to rewilding and the conservation of iconic Central Apennine wildlife species such as the Marsican brown bear, involving local residents is absolutely critical," says Luciano Sammarone, Director of the Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National

Park, one of the region's largest protected areas. "Over time, the relationship between people and wildlife in the Central Apennines has improved significantly, in a mutually beneficial way. With the recovery of nature ongoing, the challenge is to sustain the upward trend, because conservation is not achieved, but practised every day."

## Pioneering seminar

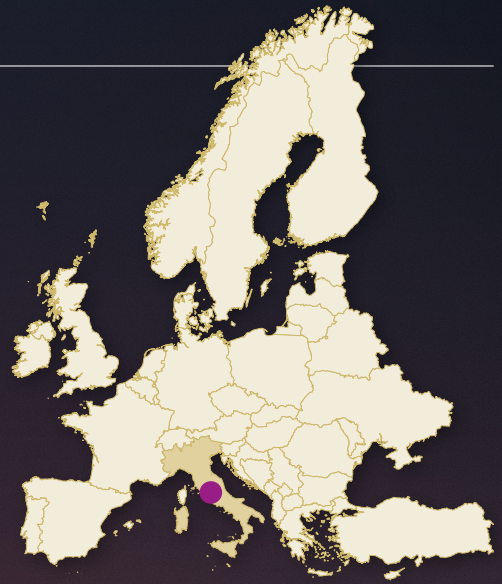
For the Rewilding Apennines team, the headline engagement event of 2023 was a three-day rewilding seminar entitled "Rewilding in Italy. State of the art and future perspectives". Taking place in early November, it saw over 100 participants from across Italy and beyond come together to discuss rewilding-related topics in the town of Gioia dei Marsi, in the heart of the Central Apennines rewilding landscape. Through its diverse programme, the event helped the local rewilding team raise awareness of rewilding and its benefits, and establish and strengthen relationships with a wide range of stakeholders.

100+

people participated in the rewilding seminar in November 2023.

"When it comes to rewilding and the conservation of iconic Central Apennine wildlife species such as the Marsican brown bear, involving local residents is absolutely critical."





“This was a unique opportunity to explain and discuss what rewilding means to a diverse range of conservationists, protected area managers, and others unfamiliar with the approach,” says Fabien Quétier, Rewilding Europe’s Head of Landscapes. “There were also many students and young people attending who were keen to know what they could do to change things for the better.”

Niccolò Pellecchia, a student at the Sapienza University of Rome and former Rewilding Apennines volunteer, is working on a master’s thesis on Central Apennine mammals. He attended the seminar to present his research and meet more people in conservation and rewilding.

“My general impressions of the seminar were very positive, and there were many interesting presentations from prominent people in the field. Through the seminar I came to understand human-wildlife coexistence issues better, and the need to engage people to fully realise rewilding goals.”

- **Country**



Italy

- **Focal landscape**

Central Apennines

- **Size of landscape**

546,295 ha

- **Work started in**

2013

- **Larger landscape**

Apennines mountain range throughout Italy, connected network of protected areas with major national parks.

- **Main habitats**

High alpine mountains, alpine grasslands and valleys, small rivers, and temperate forests.

- **Focal species**

Marsican brown bear, Apennine wolf, Apennine chamois, griffon vulture, red deer.

- **Team leader**

Mario Cipollone

### High-level exposure

In the run-up to the seminar the Rewilding Apennines team worked hard to publicise the event through a range of channels and platforms. They collaborated with Emanuele Biggi, for example, a well-known Italian conservationist, photographer and television celebrity, to promote the seminar and their rewilding efforts on Italian national TV.

“Not everyone can appreciate a small endangered toad, but most of us can understand the importance of nature, and the essential benefits that healthy ecosystems deliver,” says Biggi. “In this regard, the team are doing great job connecting with people of all backgrounds and inspiring them to want to protect and enhance nature. I was proud to be associated with the seminar and happy to see how productive it was.”



▲ A Marsican brown bear.





▲ A beekeeper with his fenced off beehives.



▲ A bear-proof bin.



▲ A bear-proof chicken coop.



▲ Conducting a stakeholder opinion survey.

“As a result of our outreach, more and more people understand the benefits of restoring the natural value of the Central Apennine landscape.”

### A tragic loss

At the end of August, efforts to support the recovery of Marsican brown bears in the Central Apennines were dealt a serious blow when a well-known female bear called Amarena was killed. She had been wandering through the streets of the small town of San Benedetto Dei Marsi with her two cubs, when she was shot dead by a man who claimed he was defending his chickens.

“Amarena was a fertile female who had given birth to many cubs,” says Rewilding Apennines Communications Manager Angela Tavone. “The potential that was lost in terms of future population growth was significant. Her loss was a real tragedy.”

Amarena’s sudden death sent shockwaves throughout the area, prompting over 2,000 people to gather in early September to protest at her death. The crowd called for stricter penalties against those who harm regional wildlife, and for more conservation measures to be carried out in the Central Apennines and across Italy. A number of regional and national politicians also condemned the killing.

### Silver linings

The death of Amarena echoed a similar incident in 2014, when a young male bear was gunned down by a farmer just outside the village of Pettorano sul Gizio. If there is anything positive to take from Amarena’s loss, it is that the reaction to her shooting was far more widespread

and vociferous than that generated by the shooting nearly a decade before. This shows that efforts by the Rewilding team to engage people in local communities, and to promote human-wildlife coexistence, are gradually working.

“As a result of our outreach, more and more people understand the benefits of restoring the natural value of the Central Apennine landscape,” says Angela Tavone. “They also understand that there are effective ways of living alongside animals such as bears and wolves. They realise that the killing of a single bear can have a hugely negative impact, not only on wild nature, but on local communities too.”

“The sense of indignation at this tragedy was important,” adds Luciano Sammarone. “But even more important, I think, was the emotional involvement of many people who felt the need to differentiate themselves from the person responsible for the killing and adopt very careful and respectful behaviour towards Amarena’s cubs, who appear to be doing well, even without their mother.”

### An ongoing challenge

Sadly, setbacks to rewilding in the Central Apennines went beyond the death of Amarena in 2023. Several instances of suspected poisoning, where poisoned baits were left out by farmers targeting wolves, led to the tragic deaths of an entire wolf pack, a number of griffon vultures, and other wildlife species. In conjunction, these incidents drive home the fact that challenges around human-wildlife coexistence in Europe are a clear and present danger. Illegal poisoning still hampers wildlife comeback across many parts of the continent, and is frequently carried out by people who have little to no understanding of the devastating consequences of their actions.

**1.7 million**

people reached through the promotion of rewilding and the Central Apennines on Italian TV.



► Each year, Rewilding Apennines sells high quality local food products in a “Bear Smart Box”. Revenues are used to help finance human-bear coexistence efforts.

As a result of publicity generated by the Central Apennine rewilding team and partners, the poisoning incidents featured in a wide range of Italian media at local and national level. A letter was also sent to national, regional authorities to ask for stronger action to crack down on poisoning and reduce the risk to wildlife and people. One of the proposed measures is for any land contaminated by a poisoning incident to be removed from use for at least five years – as is the case in Spain – which would hopefully discourage perpetrators.

### Smart solutions

The Central Apennines is a focus landscape within the Rewilding Europe-coordinated LIFE Bear-Smart Corridors initiative – a coalition of Italian and Greek partners working to enhance brown bear populations through the development of large-scale coexistence corridors. In the Central Apennines, communities within such corridors are encouraged and empowered to live alongside bears, through measures such as the installation of electric fences, the distribution of bear-proof bins, and the restoration of abandoned orchards in areas away from population centres. As they become increasingly “bear smart”, these communities are enjoying a growing number of economic benefits associated with the presence and comeback of the landscape’s most iconic wildlife species.

In 2023, as part of the initiative, a series of workshops was organised in the Central Apennines to engage people in local communities. Those who attended these popular events learned about the various actions the Rewilding Apennines team and partners are taking to support human-bear coexistence, and how to behave when encountering a bear in the wild. Interactive sessions allowed them to express their feelings and opinions about bears.



▲ Emanuele Biggi



▲ Giorgia Amicone

“I’m very grateful for the economic opportunities generated by the rewilding team’s efforts.”

“The participants in these workshops were truly curious and open to learn,” says Angela Tavone. “We received many questions and a lot of positive feedback. By far the most common emotions generated by Marsican brown bears were pride and enthusiasm.”

Giorgia Amicone is a pastry chef from the town of Vastogirardi, where one of the workshops was organised. In addition to serving a buffet at the event, one of her speciality panettoni was included in “bear-smart boxes” produced through the LIFE Bear-Smart Corridors initiative. These boxes help to raise the profile of high-quality food from the Central Apennines, and simultaneously promote human-wildlife coexistence.

“It’s great to see how rewilding is supporting wildlife comeback in the Central Apennines,” says Amicone. “Species such as bears, wolves, and red deer are as much a part of the landscape here as humans, and their recovery shows that the health of wild nature is improving. In Vastogirardi we face a range of socio-economic challenges associated with rural depopulation, so I’m very grateful for the economic opportunities generated by the rewilding team’s efforts. I’m looking forward to more collaboration in the future.”







BERTIL HAGBERG

# Wilder waterscapes

In Swedish Lapland, the integrated rewilding of landscape hydrology, rivers, and forests is enhancing blue-green corridors, with benefits for people and wildlife, including reindeer.

## Joined-up thinking

In line with its guiding principles as a holistic approach to nature recovery, rewilding works to restore lost interactions and restore habitat connectivity. In Swedish Lapland, this can be seen in Rewilding Sweden's "waterscape" approach to landscape rewilding, which aims to enhance blue-green corridors for nature and wildlife by restoring hydrological pathways and forests.

In 2023, the Rewilding Sweden team led efforts to rewild stretches of the Abramsån River in the valley of the Råne River. As part of Rewilding Sweden's joint 2050 vision with local Sámi villages and the UNESCO Vindelälven-Juhtátahkka Biosphere organisation, they also began restoring a reindeer grazing corridor, which will help to create a naturally healthy forest corridor along the Vindel River and lower Ume River valleys. Together, these





- **Country**  
 Sweden
- **Focal landscape**  
 Swedish Lapland
- **Size of Landscape**  
 1,506,149 ha
- **Work started in**  
 2015
- **Larger landscape**  
 The greater Nordic landscape in northern Sweden.
- **Main habitats**  
 Taiga forest, high tundra and alpine grasslands, free-flowing rivers, lakes, and peat marshes.
- **Focal species**  
 Reindeer, beaver, sea trout, grayling, salmon, lamprey, whitefish, freshwater pearl mussel, deciduous tree species (e.g. birch, willow, aspen).
- **Team Leader**  
 Henrik Persson

two large waterscapes encompass 1.5 million hectares of land.

“By connecting mountainous areas to the sea through healthier, well-functioning rivers embedded in naturally forested corridors, we are aiming to enhance habitat for a wide range of wildlife species,” explains Rewilding Sweden team leader Henrik Persson. “Our rewilding efforts will deliver a whole range of benefits to nature and people – from more climate resilient, life-sustaining, well-connected landscapes, to cleaner water, reduced flood risk, and opportunities to develop thriving nature-based economies.”



### Historical degradation

Nearly 70% of Sweden is covered in forest. Yet the country's long history of industrial-scale forestry means only a tiny fraction of this can be considered natural, near-natural, or old-growth. Most of the country's natural forests have been replaced by dense, even-aged, commercial plantations, which are a pale imitation of their biodiversity-rich, old-growth counterparts. Today, only 85,000 hectares of pristine, old-growth forest remains in Sweden, representing a mere 0.3% of Sweden's total forested area.

Rivers have been another casualty of Sweden's rapid industrialisation. From the 1850s, before the age of road and rail, the country's waterways were engineered into unobstructed channels to create a vast fluvial transport network. Rapids were removed and bends straightened to allow logs to float hundreds of kilometres downstream for processing. An extensive network of drainage ditches, connected to rivers, was dug to create drier soils for improved tree growth.

The channelisation of rivers cut many ecological, biogeochemical, and

.....

## 85,000

hectares of pristine, old-growth forest remains in Sweden, representing a mere 0.3% of Sweden's total forest cover.

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▲ Arctic char in a waterfall on the Miellesjohka River.

hydrological connections between land and water, negatively impacting plants and animals, and their habitats. It also increased the speed of water flow in rivers, affecting riverbank and riverbed erosion and reducing the local retention of gravel, sand and organic matter. This decimated populations of fish and aquatic insects.

### Rebuilding a river

The Abramsån River is a tributary of the 210-kilometre long Råne River – Europe's longest undammed forest river. It is typical of many waterways in the Swedish Lapland rewilding landscape severely damaged by historical logging. To ease log transportation, large boulders and stones were removed from the river bed and piled up at the river's edge, while a wooden floor made up of individual tree trunks was laid down in parts of the river.

Starting in June 2023, the Rewilding Sweden team began to restore a five-kilometre stretch of the Abramsån. Funded by a LOVA (Local Water Preservation) Grant from the County Administrative Board of Norrbotten, the restoration process was a highly technical one, involving a 24-tonne excavator and 10 hours of hard labour a day. Thousands of freshwater mussels – a keystone species that can live for up to 250 years and filter up to 50 litres of water a day – had to be removed first, to be returned once the restoration work was complete.





REWILDING SWEDEN

“We essentially rebuilt the entire structure of the river,” explains Henrik Persson. “Above and below the wooden flooring, there was virtually no habitat for fish at all, so we had to build back a framework to enable the river to start functioning again. But we couldn’t just throw stones randomly in the water – we needed to recreate a natural river environment.”

Around two kilometres of the Abramsån were restored in 2023, with work set to continue in 2024.

“The work was tough, but it was incredibly rewarding seeing the river and riverside areas begin to revitalise,” says Persson. “We saw fish recolonising pools soon after the restoration work had been carried out.”

### Beneficial impact

Restoring rivers such as the Abramsån, and removing their channelisation, reduces water velocity and increases connectivity between the river and surrounding forest.

“This means water stays in the landscape for longer, which has a huge ecological benefit, not only for animals such as insects, birds, and fish, but also for natural grazers such as reindeer, which feed on hanging lichens that thrive in moist forest conditions, and moose that graze on plants in and around rivers,” explains Persson. “By



▲ Freshwater pearl mussels in the Abramsån River.

increasing upstream water levels, the recreation of rapids can significantly increase river corridor biodiversity, including grazing areas. Local communities also benefit, because the river can perform its function as a natural buffer, meaning there is less flooding downstream in times of heavy rainfall.”

In 2024, in addition to the ongoing work on the Abramsån, Rewilding Sweden is preparing for restoration work to begin on two more nearby rivers. In the Vindelälven-Juhtátahkka Biosphere Reserve, four dams will be removed, while the team is also working to secure permits for the removal of an additional five in 2025.

### Supporting reindeer migration

For rewilding to be successful, it has to provide socio-economic benefits, as well as ecological ones. One of the

◀ Restoration of the Abramsån River.

► Marja Skum is a Sámi reindeer herder whose family has been involved in reindeer husbandry for generations.

►► Migrating reindeer herds face a range of challenges as they navigate the landscapes of Swedish Lapland.

most important goals of the work being carried out by the Rewilding Sweden team is to restore forests around prominent rivers to function as blue-green corridors that can facilitate reindeer migration. This restoration work is being carried out in the Vindelälven-Juhtátahkka Biosphere Reserve.

“The provision of such corridors – in which healthy ecosystems provide more lichen and the natural tree cover is less dense – will help the reindeer herds of the indigenous Sámi move through the landscape more easily, and provide more food for them to eat during the winter,” explains Henrik Persson. “Forests that are good for reindeer are also good for many other species, which means they are an important indicator species in lowland areas. In the mountains they also play an important role as an ecosystem engineers.”

The majority of the 280,000 semi-wild reindeer that inhabit Swedish Lapland are managed by the indigenous Sámi people, of whom around 900 are still actively involved in reindeer herding. These reindeer are descended from two reindeer strains that are now extinct – forest reindeer, which were more sedentary, and mountain reindeer, which were migratory.

In summer, herds of Sámi reindeer graze in the Scandinavian Mountains, feeding on grass, leaves, herbs and fungi. At the onset of the harsh Arctic winter, they migrate to the forest, seeking food and shelter. Under the layers of snow beneath the canopies of healthy forests, they can find the ground lichens essential for survival, while tree-hanging lichens, found in old-growth forests, are also important. The current state of Swedish forests, however, greatly limits lichen distribution.

In Swedish Lapland, infrastructure construction, climate change, and the impact of the forestry industry, have all made it increasingly difficult for





mountain reindeer to follow traditional migration routes, which often cross frozen rivers and lakes. As temperatures rise, and winter ice on water bodies thins and disappears, these routes have become dangerous and unviable. Compounding this challenge, clear-cut logging negatively impacts the availability of both tree and ground lichens, while monoculture plantations are frequently too dense for reindeer to pass through. Wind farms and mines are also presenting a growing obstacle.

### Sámi collaboration

Together with three Sámi villages and the Vindelälven-Juhtátahkka Biosphere Reserve organisation, Rewilding Sweden have launched a working group to help realise the vision of a blue-green corridor from the mountains in the west to the sea in the east by 2050. Such a corridor will support local communities in preserving their way of life, herding traditions, and culture.

Marja Skum is a Sámi reindeer herder whose family has been involved in reindeer husbandry for generations. Each year, the reindeer herds managed by her family migrate up to 450 kilometres, mostly along the Vindel River.

“Today, Sámi reindeer herders face a range of challenges,” she explains. “In our winter pastures, for example, commercial forestry has eliminated 70

“Commercial forestry has eliminated 70 to 80 percent of the lichen.”

**280,000**

reindeer in Swedish Lapland, of which the majority are migratory.

to 80 percent of the lichen. On top of that, for the last 15 to 20 years, climate change has had a growing impact on the landscape.

“We now have mild winters with lots of snow every year, whereas before it was every seven years. With hardly any lichen left, and the rest buried under compacted snow, we are forced to buy artificial food for the reindeer, which is very expensive and not good for the health of the animals.”

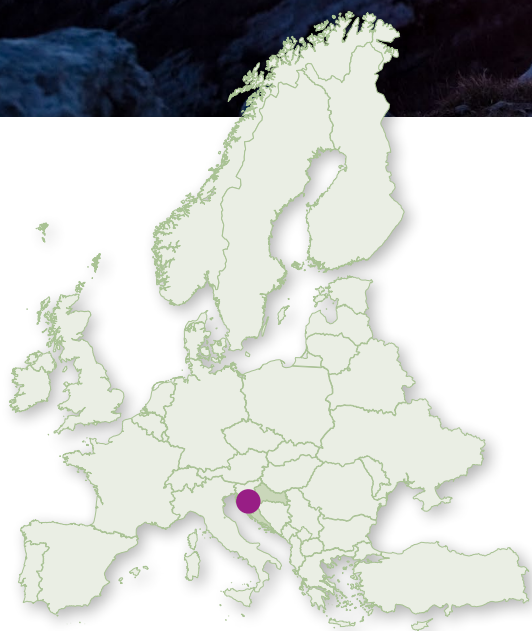
In August 2023, Rewilding Sweden kicked off forest restoration efforts at two sites along the Vindel and lower Ume River, with more work scheduled for 2024. Moving forwards, it will employ representatives from the Sámi villages (which are more like itinerant communities) and in the Vindelälven-Juhtátahkka Biosphere Reserve, while an education programme run by Rewilding Sweden will raise awareness among local high school students of the challenges around reindeer grazing in forests.

“Rewilding focuses on the long-term health of the landscape, which aligns with the way the Sámi think,” says Marja Skum. “We want to see something done on the ground now to open up migratory routes for reindeer, because we can’t afford to wait. I’m looking forward to seeing the positive impact of rewilding efforts.”





NEILA LORRIDGE



# The Velebit connection

From schoolchildren and students to beekeepers and everyday citizens, the Rewilding Velebit team connected with a wide range of stakeholders in 2023, amplifying support for their nature recovery efforts.



.....  
**10,000**

The documentary "A New Path for the Velebit Mountains" has now been viewed nearly 10,000 times online.  
.....

## Capturing hearts and minds

In the Velebit Mountains of Croatia, a 145-kilometre long massif that lies parallel to the country's Adriatic coast, the Rewilding Velebit team are working to create a large wildlife corridor across the beautiful and biodiverse landscape. Having purchased five hunting concessions – encompassing 30,000 hectares of forest and grassland in the heart of the Velebit Nature Park – they are now overseeing a transition from traditional hunting-based management towards wildlife watching, which is supporting a gradual resurgence in wildlife. Five newly constructed hides became

operational in 2023 and are attracting growing numbers of visitors.

Developing and nurturing positive attitudes towards nature and nature recovery among stakeholders is essential to the success of these rewilding efforts. Last year, the Rewilding Velebit team carried out a wide range of activities to engage with various parts of society – from children and students to beekeepers, hunters, and everyday citizens. By connecting people of all backgrounds with the majestic nature of the Velebit Mountains, the aim was to inspire them to want to protect and enhance it, and to build support for rewilding.



### Country



Croatia

### Focal landscape

Velebit Mountains

### Size of landscape

300,370 ha

### Work started in

2012

### Larger landscape

Velebit Mountain range, connected with Slovenia in the north and Dalmatia in the south; including the marine coast and islands.

### Main habitats

Temperate and Mediterranean forest, sub-alpine grasslands, coastal marine, cliffs, and canyons.

### Focal species

Grey wolf, brown bear, red deer, Balkan chamois, Eurasian lynx, wild horse, Tauros, and griffon vulture.

### Team leader

Marija Krnjajić



.....  
 “I was informed and inspired in equal measure by this beautiful documentary.”  
 .....

### Popular premiere

One of the engagement highlights of 2023 for the Rewilding Velebit team was the premiere of “A New Path for the Velebit Mountains”, an enthralling 15-minute documentary shot by award-winning French filmmaker Emmanuel Rondeau. In March, the short film was screened for the first time in the local town of Gospić, drawing a large and diverse audience of over 100 people. These included dignitaries from the Lika-Senj County Development Agency and Velebit Nature Park, representatives of other NGOs, professors from the University of Zagreb, local entrepreneurs, hunting concession managers, and local residents of all ages. Following the premiere, the documentary has now been viewed online more than 8000 times.

“A New Path for the Velebit Mountains” portrays the efforts of the Rewilding Velebit team and the gradual resur-

gence of the area’s spectacular wildlife. It shows how this recovery is enabling a fresh and sustainable approach to wildlife management – based on wildlife watching, rather than hunting – which is driving the development of a burgeoning nature-based economy. Featuring a range of interviews, it also shows how the team are reaching out to the local community to raise awareness and establish relationships, and working to ensure that as many people as possible benefit from rewilding.

“I was informed and inspired in equal measure by this beautiful documentary,” says Jasenka Svetić, a resident of Gospić who attended the premiere. “Seeing the power and diversity of nature in Velebit really surprised me. If I hadn’t seen the film, I wouldn’t have known that so many lynx live in the landscape here. I believe rewilding can help people and wildlife to live alongside each other here, and bring benefits through nature-based tourism.”

### Generating buzz

Promoting human-wildlife coexistence in the Velebit Mountains is particularly important as species such as brown bears are present in the landscape.

In October, the Rewilding Velebit team organised a seminar for seven beekeepers in the village of Jablanac.



▲ The premiere of the new film.





◀ Rewilding Velebit  
Communications Officer  
Kruno Bošnjaković.

.....

“The Velebit Mountains are incredibly valuable – both for the nature they contain, and for the people that live here and visit.”

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Apiaries, in particular, can attract bears searching for food, which means protecting hives can help to increase acceptance of bears in the landscape.

“We talked with local beekeepers about how they can prevent damage from bears themselves, as well as what we can do for them, including repairing existing fencing and installing new electric fences,” explains Rewilding Velebit Communications Officer Kruno Bošnjaković. “Beekeepers in Velebit often have protective fencing in place already, but it isn’t set up correctly or well enough. We also discussed rewilding in general and ways of living alongside wildlife.”

“The seminar in Jablanac was useful and interesting,” says Hrvoje Spodnjak, a beekeeper who owns an apiary inside Velebit Nature Park. “I suffered a lot of bear damage to my hives two years ago, and I think an electric fence, which the rewilding team will install soon, will help to prevent this. I have nothing against bears – with today’s knowledge and technology people and wildlife can coexist in Velebit, and the Rewilding Velebit team are doing a great job of making this happen.”

Honeybees can have a negative impact on wild bees by competing for food. However, in some of our rewilding landscapes, such as the Velebit Mountains, we work with beekeepers to prevent damage caused to their property and livelihood by wildlife. Rewilding embraces the role of people, and their cultural and economic connections with the land, so this aligns with one of our stated rewilding principles.

### The hunting perspective

The Rewilding Velebit team also held numerous discussions with local hunters in 2023. With hunting still widely practised in Velebit, the need to engage hunters in constructive dialogue is essential. The team regularly warn

people about the health risks of lead ammunition, and offer non-hazardous, lead-free ammunition to hunters as a preferential alternative.

“I support lead-free ammunition,” says Dragan Perkić, hunter from the island of Rab, which lies just offshore from Velebit in the Adriatic Sea. “I see rewilding as something positive here because the team work hard to protect nature and foster a spirit of cooperation. I’ve learned a lot from them.”

In late 2022, Rewilding Velebit signed an agreement with representatives of six neighbouring hunting concessions, as a first step in establishing good relations and best practice on issues such as respecting borders, poaching prevention, wildlife management, and informing others about plans to establish activities such as photo safaris. In 2023, an important milestone in the transition towards wildlife watching across the Velebit landscape was reached when the Rewilding Velebit team helped to set up a wildlife watching hide on a neighbouring concession.

### Educational outreach

Inspiring and enabling young people to join the burgeoning rewilding movement is critical for the future health of the planet. Connecting children with nature is not only beneficial for their health and development, but can help to create a generation of eco-conscious individuals who want to take an active role in nature recovery.

The Rewilding Velebit-designed “When I grow up I want to be a wildlife ranger” workshop is intended for children of higher nursery school age and primary school students. Its goal is to introduce the younger generation to the wildlife of Velebit, and inspire them to be active nature guardians. In 2023, the Rewilding Velebit team held a series of these workshops in various locations around the landscape.

## 7

electric fences installed around apiaries and vegetable gardens in 2023.

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NEIL ALDRIDGE

▲ Spectacular view of the Lika Plains, with the Velebit escarpment in the background.

► Davor Dundovic and Nino Salkic from the Velebit team installing electric fences around beehives to protect them from bears.

► Schoolchildren from Gospić learning about wildlife in the Velebit Mountains.



REWILDING VELEBIT



REWILDING VELEBIT

“Our aim was to encourage participants and their families to protect the wild animals of Velebit, and we sent a message to over 500 homes about the importance and uniqueness of Velebit wildlife,” says Kruno Bošnjaković.

“I think it’s very important to teach children about nature, environmental protection, and sustainable development from their early years,” adds Nikolina Trošelj, a teacher from a nursery school in Starigrad where the Rewilding Velebit team held a workshop. “The children loved the event and learned a lot. We have a new generation of nature lovers here!”

The team also organised a large carnivore field trip for students at the Karlovac University of Applied Sciences.

“During the visit, I learned more about tracking animals, their behaviour, and taking samples, and generally became better acquainted with fieldwork,” says Sara Polojac, a student of wildlife management and nature pro-

tection. “I believe the needs of people and wildlife are equally important in the Velebit landscape. As a way of promoting coexistence, education is vital. Seeing the work of the rewilding team first-hand was a real eye-opener for me.”

### Beyond Velebit

The Rewilding Velebit team also stepped up their efforts to reach people beyond the landscape in 2023. The launch of a new English-Croatian Rewilding Velebit website will allow people from Croatia and across the world learn about the

team’s mission, vision, achievements and activities, and also about rewilding in general. A photo exhibition in the Croatian capital Zagreb, showcasing the beauty of Velebit nature, also drew a significant audience, and helped the team establish new relationships. Last but not least, a range of Rewilding Velebit branded merchandise – featuring the brown bear, grey wolf, and Eurasian lynx as the three iconic carnivores of the Velebit landscape – saw rewilding promoted on the streets and in homes right across the country.

Moving forwards, the Rewilding Velebit team will continue their efforts to scale up outreach in 2024.

“The Velebit Mountains are incredibly valuable – both for the nature they contain, and for the people that live here and visit,” says Kruno Bošnjaković. “Through rewilding and our ongoing engagement efforts, we’re committed to enhancing that value.”

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**530**

children participated in educational activities in 2023.

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#### ● Countries

 Ukraine  Romania  Moldova

#### ● Focal landscape

Danube Delta

#### ● Size of landscape

789,958 ha

#### ● Work started in

2013

#### ● Larger landscape

Overall Danube Delta system consisting of major river branches in Romania, Ukraine and Moldova.

#### ● Main habitats

River delta, reed beds, marshes, riverine forests, coastal grasslands, dune systems, coastal lagoons, and dry forest.

#### ● Focal species

White and Dalmatian pelican, red deer, Tauros, wild horse, beaver, water buffalo, kulan, demoiselle crane.

#### ● Team leader

Mykhailo Nesterenko

# Steppe change

Against the backdrop of war, rewilding efforts continue to transform Ukraine's Tarutino Steppe, with benefits for nature and local residents.

## A unique landscape

Good news has been hard to come by in Ukraine over the last few years, as the country struggles to contend with the death and destruction wrought by the Russian invasion. But on the Tarutino Steppe, in the far southwest of the country, stories about nature recovery offer welcome respite from headlines dominated by conflict. In the face of adversity, the efforts of the Rewilding Ukraine team and local partners in 2023 continued to have a positive impact.

As part of the extended Danube Delta rewilding landscape, the 5200-hectare Tarutino Steppe is situated well away from the main areas of fighting. Characterised by its

expansive grassy plains, it is home to a wide range of flora and fauna, many of which are endangered. In former times, large herds of saiga antelope, deer, wild horses and kulan (wild donkeys) roamed the Tarutino Steppe and surrounding area, shaping and creating habitat, but over the centuries these were all hunted to local extinction.

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 “Even in times of war, we are working to revitalise this precious landscape, which in turn will restore the pride and identity of local communities and support economic regeneration.”  
 .....

“The great Eurasian steppe once stretched from Hungary to Mongolia, but has been massively converted to cropland, with only fragments now remaining in Europe,” explains Rewilding Ukraine rewilding officer Oleg Dyakov. “The Tarutino Steppe is one of the last and best preserved pieces of steppe in Ukraine, and is extremely important for the conservation of many rare wildlife species. Even in times of war, we are working to revitalise this precious landscape, which in turn will restore the pride and identity of local communities and support economic regeneration.”



.....  
“The Tarutino Steppe represents  
a ‘Noah’s Ark’ for such species  
as hamsters and marmots.”  
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### **Towards a wilder steppe**

The ongoing restoration of the Tarutino Steppe by the Rewilding Ukraine team is part of scaled-up rewilding efforts in the extended Danube Delta rewilding landscape, which began at the start of 2019 with funding provided by the Endangered Landscapes and Seascapes Programme, through Rewilding Europe.

The overarching aim is to realise a wilder steppe governed more by natural processes, such as natural grazing, with herds of kulan and fallow deer released in recent years. Ongoing releases of small mammals such as hamsters and marmots are also improving the health of the steppe ecosystem. A 1600-hectare area of steppe that was damaged by illegal ploughing in 2016 has been restored by the Rewilding Ukraine team and local partners and is now returning to health.

While rewilding is a long-term process, the efforts of the Rewilding Ukraine team are already starting to bear fruit.





- Kulan release on the Tarutino Steppe.
- Sunrise on the Tarutino Steppe, with characteristic steppe grass blowing in the wind.
- ▼ Hamster release.
- ▼▼ Rodent monitoring on the Tarutino Steppe.

“The ecological health and functionality of the Tarutino Steppe has improved since we began rewilding,” says Rewilding Ukraine field officer Oleksandr Gaidash. “The recovery of vegetation in the area of steppe that was damaged has created good conditions for the nesting of many bird species – the number of the Eurasian skylark within restored areas is now approaching that in undamaged areas, for example. The steppe marmots that were released in 2021 have created a stable colony, and their presence is helping to attract raptors such as eagles, buzzards and harriers.”

### Kulan comeback

One particularly uplifting news story from the Tarutino Steppe in 2023 was the birth of six kulan foals. Once common across Eastern Europe and Central Asia, kulan have been on the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s Red List of Threatened Species since 1994, with their population now classified as endangered. In 2021, the Rewilding Ukraine team translocated a herd of 20 kulan to the Tarutino Steppe from the Askania-Nova Biosphere Reserve to the east, following an initial shipment in May 2020. Some of these animals have been released into the wild, while others remain in an acclimatisation enclosure. The plan was to translocate and release more, although this has had to be put on hold with Askania-Nova currently under Russian control.

“The fact that the kulan are giving birth is a good sign because it shows that they are settling in well to their new home,” says Rewilding Ukraine Executive Director Mykhailo Nesterenko.

“The animals we are reintroducing to the steppe are the ‘engineers’ of the



landscape, helping to diversify steppe vegetation through their grazing, trampling and wallowing, which in turn provides habitat for a wide range of other wildlife.”

### Rodents return

Kulan aren’t the only animals reintroduced onto the Tarutino Steppe by the Rewilding Ukraine team. A group of 15 European hamsters were released in September 2023 – the second release of a reintroduction programme overseen by the Rewilding Ukraine team, in collaboration with Kyiv Zoo and the Tarutino Steppe Nature and Ethnographic Park. The burgeoning presence of the diminutive rodents, which were once widespread across Ukraine, will contribute to the creation of a wilder and ecologically healthier steppe landscape, helping to restore local food webs and enhance biodiversity, as well as boosting nature-based tourism.

The hamsters, which are doing well, complement a thriving population of steppe marmots, which the Rewilding Ukraine team released onto the Tarutino Steppe in 2021.

“Small mammals such as hamsters, marmots, and ground squirrels are often overlooked as a group of animals, and don’t receive as much attention as large predators or herbivores,” says

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15

European hamsters released on the Tarutino Steppe in 2023.

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FRANS SCHEPERS

Mykhailo Rusin of Kyiv Zoo. “Yet their role in the steppe ecosystem is critical – they are key to the survival of many other species, such as saker falcons and other steppe predators, while they help to revitalise habitats and take an active role in soil enrichment.”

Kyiv Zoo has been breeding and returning European hamsters to the wild for a few years as part of a programme to restore populations of rare and endangered species across Ukraine. On the Tarutino Steppe, both the hamsters and marmots will benefit from environmental protection.

“Small mammals are true flagship species for steppe ecosystems in Southeast Europe, yet factors such as direct persecution and habitat transformation have brought many to the brink of extinction,” says Rusin. “It has been estimated, for example, that the Euro-

pean hamster may disappear completely by 2050 if current trends persist and no population conservation and restoration efforts are carried out. The Tarutino Steppe represents a ‘Noah’s Ark’ for such species as hamsters and marmots, where they are given a chance to rewild and occupy areas where they once flourished. Stable populations of these species will help to revitalise the whole region.”

### Scaling up: a new national park

The rewilding of the Tarutino Steppe shows what can be accomplished when nature is given the chance to recover. During 2023, the Rewilding Ukraine team, in conjunction with the local community of Borodino (who own the land) and the Department of Ecology of Odessa, took important steps towards the creation of the Budzhak Steppes National Natural Park – a new national park that would encompass the Tarutino Steppe and adjacent yet unconnected areas of steppe. The designation of the park would give the highest level of protection to 9000 hectares of steppe landscape, allowing the restoration of key wildlife species such as kulan and small mammals to be scaled up.

Having drawn up the design, zonation and management of the park, the Rewilding Ukraine team also helped to negotiate the administrative process

for its creation. The relevant documents have been submitted by the Borodino community to the authorities, and are now being considered by the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources in Kyiv. The park will formally be established when the Ukrainian president signs an official decree.

The new park will benefit local communities and their local culture, as well as wild nature. Its creation will generate new jobs, enable the further development of nature-based tourism, and support traditional forms of farming based on grazing and haymaking.

“The residents of Borodino are passionate about rewilding and wildlife comeback,” says Ivan Kusse, who is head of the community. “We take pride in the steppe, and its restoration can help our villages to develop economically. The new park will also make more people aware of our need for healthy nature.”

“The number of tourists visiting the steppe in 2023 has already exceeded the level before the pandemic and war,” adds Oleksandr Palariev of the local Frumushika-Nova Green Tourism Centre. “They stop, admire, and take photographs of the kulan, marmots, fallow deer, and other wildlife. The restoration of Tarutino and plans to scale up protection and rewilding are a beacon of hope in these dark times.”

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“The ecological health and functionality of the Tarutino Steppe has improved since we began rewilding.”

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# Rewilding without borders

In the Oder Delta, which straddles the German-Polish border, river and riparian restoration efforts are working to revitalise an entire ecosystem.

## Towards wilder waters

Artur Furdyna, a hydrobiologist, has spent the last 20 years bringing biodiversity back to the Oder River and its tributaries. He knows better than most how well-functioning waterways are critical to the overall health of the Oder Delta, which may be bisected by the German-Polish border, but is effectively a giant interconnected mosaic of rivers, lakes, wetlands, heathlands, and riparian forests.

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“From a human perspective, the delta has a Polish and German side, but from a natural perspective, it’s one watery ecosystem.”

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“It’s only when we comprehensively address the restoration of nature, which is what rewilding is about, that we start to see beneficial results at scale,” says Furdyna. “And in the Oder Delta, which is a highly aquatic landscape, one of the most important factors in this restoration is water.

“From a human perspective, the delta has a Polish and German side, but from a natural perspective, it’s one watery ecosystem. Last year, we focused

our efforts on rewilding a tributary of the Oder River in Poland. To bring about meaningful and positive change, we need to work on both sides of the border, which is what the Rewilding Oder Delta team are aiming to do in a coordinated way.”

## Revitalising waterscapes

Rivers harbour some of the richest biodiversity on earth and provide an array of benefits to people. Healthy, free-flowing rivers, which are well-connected with surrounding landscapes, offer a wide range of habitats for wildlife species. Such “waterscapes” also help to purify water and reduce the risk of downstream flooding in times of heavy rainfall, and are more resilient to the effects of climate change.

In the Oder Delta rewilding landscape, which comprises the centrally located 70,000-hectare Stettin Lagoon, and 380,000 hectares of surrounding forest and open areas, many streams and rivers are in poor ecological





#### ○ Countries



#### ○ Focal landscape

Oder Delta

#### ○ Size of landscape

468,582 ha

#### ○ Work started in

2015

#### ○ Larger landscape

A network of rivers, forests, wetlands, and the Baltic Coast on the border between Germany and Poland.

#### ○ Main habitats

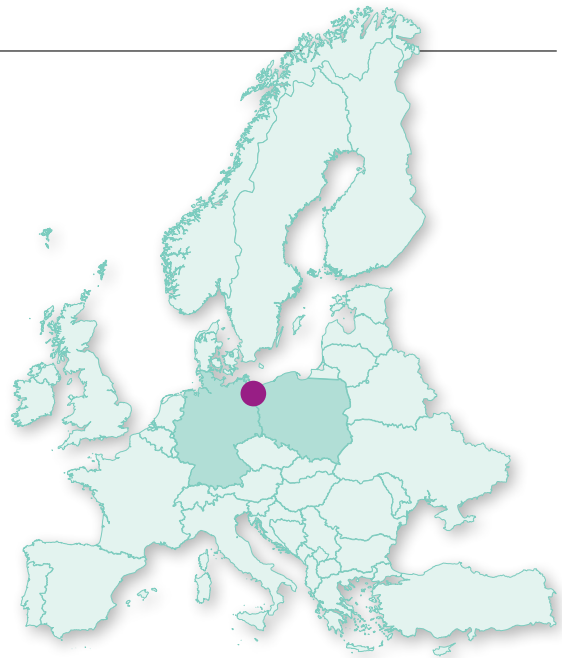
Baltic coast with wetlands, tidal zones, reed marshes, sand dunes, alluvial and coastal forests, peat systems, and wet grasslands.

#### ○ Focal species

White-tailed eagle, European bison, beaver, elk, wolf, Atlantic sturgeon, and grey seal.

#### ○ Team Leaders

Ulrich Stöcker (Germany)  
Peter Torkler (Poland)



▲ Artur Furdyna.

In collaboration with local partners – and complementing other rewilding efforts around forest restoration and wildlife comeback across the landscape – the Oder Delta rewilding team are working to restore a number of local waterways through a range of measures. These include rewetting wetlands near rivers to increase water storage, planting riparian trees to provide shade and lower water temperatures, removing barriers to increase habitat connectivity, and supporting riverine species by restoring spawning grounds, which typically involves adding stone and gravel in locations where it should occur naturally. With the Stettin Lagoon acting like a kidney, making the rivers of the delta healthier will help the functioning of the lagoon become healthier too.

#### The power of prisms

In the autumn of 2023, the rewilding team carried out restoration work on a small stretch of the 126-kilometre-long Ina River, which flows

“Historic human intervention means the condition of the Ina today is closer to a canal than to a natural waterway.”

condition. Riverbeds have been artificially straightened, deepened, and embanked in many places, the free flow of water has been restricted by barriers such as dams and weirs, and the areas surrounding rivers drained and reclaimed for human activity, such as agriculture and forestry. Channelising rivers increases the speed of water flow, increases erosion, reduces the amount of sediment in the water, and reduces the diversity of riverbed habitats, which are essential for species such as fish and aquatic invertebrates.

## 4

Rewilding efforts were carried out along four kilometres of the Ina River in 2023.





into the Oder River and has a roughly 2000 square-kilometre catchment area. Together with local partners, and with the use of an excavator, the team oversaw the construction of raised stone and gravel features (called “prisms”) on the riverbed at three sites, near the Polish village of Strumiany. Laid down in a natural way, these prisms – and the sequences of rapids and pools they create – are extremely important for the natural functioning of rivers.

“Historic human intervention means the condition of the Ina today is closer to a canal than to a natural waterway,” explains Artur Furdyna. “Rewilding using large machines in a riverbed may be visually shocking, but the man-made changes to the river are so significant that manual restoration is no longer feasible.

“As a rewilding measure, the addition of stone and gravel helps to diversify and naturalise water flow, thereby improving the living conditions for aquatic animals and plants. It also helps to stabilise water levels. This, in turn, benefits people by enhancing water retention, increasing the availability of clean water and reducing the risk of floods and droughts, boosting the filtration of agricultural chemicals, and mitigating climate change through enhanced carbon storage.”

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**100**

volunteers helped to clean the banks of the Ina River in Goleniów.

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◀ River restoration on the Ina River.

▼ Soil sampling with Dr. Sebastian Lorenz, head of the Physical Geography Laboratory at the University of Greifswald.

▼ A white-tailed eagle.

## Riparian restoration

In late October, the Oder Delta rewilding team followed up on their riverbed restoration efforts by planting around 100 willow saplings along the Ina. This was carried out in collaboration with several Polish NGOs, as well as volunteers from a nearby town and village.

Riverside trees provide numerous benefits. They can help the self-cleaning process of a catchment area by capturing nutrient run-off. They also create niches for mosses and aquatic lichens, and habitat for birds and insects, which helps to enhance biodiversity. Tree roots stabilise riverbanks and reduce erosion. And the partial shading of rivers by trees, when combined with the addition of gravel and stone piles, also helps to stabilise the temperature of the water, which can benefit a wide range of wildlife species, particularly fish. In river valleys such as that of the Ina, trees also act as a natural flood barrier.

The tree planting day was a great way for members of the local community to come together, socialise, and learn about rewilding.

“It’s great to see the number of volunteers and activists grow with each rewilding activity,” says Magdalena Urlich, a tourism and entrepreneurship specialist who organised the event on behalf of Rewilding Oder Delta. “Being out in the field working on practical restoration really helps us to build engagement and reconnect people of all backgrounds with nature.”

## Scaling up

The Ina River and its surroundings provide an important habitat for a wide range of animals, from Atlantic salmon and Eurasian beavers to common cranes and white-tailed eagles. However, climate change has led to increasingly intense periods of drought, which have had a damaging impact on





▲ Rewetting peatlands in the Oder Delta supports nature recovery and boosts carbon capture and storage.

► A giant poplar tree felled by a beaver at a dam on the River Randow.

►► Fungi in the Oder Delta.



both the landscape and its wildlife. This has been exacerbated by agricultural drainage systems, which rapidly funnel water into the river from surrounding fields, and the loss of meadows and wetlands, which also help to keep water in the landscape for longer.

In February 2024, the necessity of carrying out further rewilding efforts along the Ina was clearly shown when a period of heavy rain resulted in a rapid surge of water along the river. Because of its channelisation, most of the water quickly passed downstream. But on the stretch that had been rewilded, water flow velocity was lower, the water level remained higher for longer, and surrounding floodplains became inundated.

“This kind of flooding, where the river is well-connected to its floodplains, is a natural process that helps

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 “This kind of flooding, where the river is well-connected to its floodplains, is a natural process that helps to revitalise the landscape.”  
 .....

to revitalise the landscape,” says Artur Furdyna. “On the downstream sections of rivers which have not been channelised, and which naturally meander through a flatter landscape, it should take many hours for flood water to rise and fall. But widespread intervention

has made the Ina a so-called ‘flashy’ river, draining the catchment of water far too quickly after periods of rainfall.”

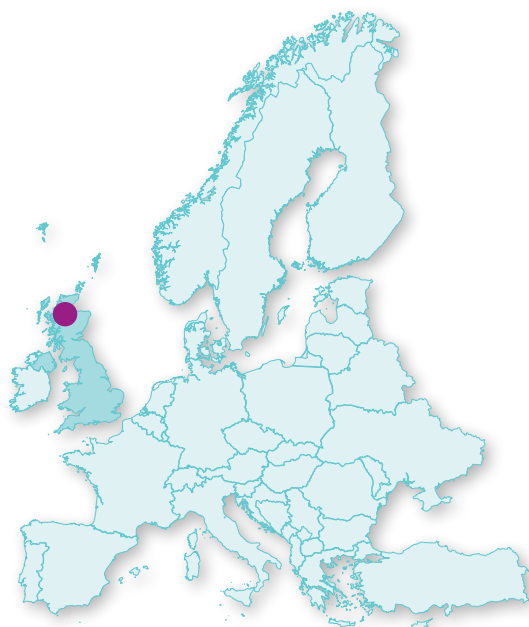
The rewilding team plan to continue rewilding efforts along the Ina and other rivers on the Polish side of the delta in 2024. They also want to develop a monitoring programme, which would assess the beneficial impact of their work.

“This would prove that our actions make sense and help to scale up rewilding measures across the region,” says Artur Furdyna. “Eventually we would like to see similar restoration carried out as part of regular maintenance work along multiple rivers and their surroundings in the Oder Delta. Carried out on such a cross-border scale, this would really amplify the benefits for people and nature.”



# The regeneration game

JAMES SHOOTER



In the Affric Highlands of Scotland, efforts to protect and restore woodland are supporting natural regeneration and the realisation of a wilder, more biodiverse landscape.

## Pinewoods under pressure

The Caledonian Forest – the ancient old-growth forest of Scotland – is one of the country's richest habitats. A globally unique ecosystem, it is characterised by wild Scots pines, complemented by species such as juniper, birch, willow, rowan and aspen, all of which have naturally evolved together over thousands of years. It provides a home for a wide variety of rare and adapted wildlife, including pine martens, capercaillie, and Scottish wildcats, conifer specialists such as crossbills and red squirrels, as well as butterflies, lichens, fungi, and wildflowers.

At its peak, the Caledonian Forest covered most of the Scottish Highlands, but historic climate change, together

with forest clearance for agriculture, led to widespread decline. Today, less than 2% remains, with 84 pinewood fragments scattered across a largely treeless landscape. Many of these are in danger of disappearing forever, taking their precious genetic diversity with them.

"A major pressure on these small fragments is the unnaturally high level of deer browsing, which prevents new generations of pines from establishing," explains James Rainey, an ecologist with Trees for Life, Rewilding Europe's partner in the Affric Highlands. "This means mature 'granny' pines get older and naturally die without a new generation of trees being able to establish and to grow in their place."



## Country



Scotland

## Focal landscape

Affric Highlands

## Size of landscape

218,315 ha

## Work started in

2021

## Larger landscape

Scottish highlands west of Loch Ness, from Glen Affric in the east to Glen Shield in the west.

## Main habitats

Caledonian forests, peatlands, grasslands, rivers, lakes and mountain hillsides.

## Focal species

Red deer, roe deer, Scottish wildcat, red squirrel, pine martin, Atlantic salmon, Eurasian lynx, Tauros.

## Team Leader

Stephanie Kiel



## Towards natural regeneration

In 2023, efforts to recover nature in the Affric Highlands primarily focused on woodland and riparian restoration. These were guided by a wild tree survey, which the local rewilding team began in late 2022, with a focus on the various estates across the Affric Highlands landscape.

The ongoing survey, which is largely based on fieldwork, looks at the distribution, health, and diversity of native tree species on each estate. This includes factors such as age and abundance, the level of grazing pressure, and the direction woodland and forest fragments are moving in terms of expansion or decline.

"The overall aim is to identify where the remaining diversity hotspots are and which are the most severely threatened," explains James Rainey. "This allows us to allocate resources for maximum impact, in terms of protection and restoration. We want to ensure as many trees as possible are protected

– in larger woodlands and along rivers and gorges where trees are clinging on in places where deer can't reach them – so that natural regeneration can take place."

Such regeneration can support the recovery of wildlife species such as capercaillie and Scottish wildcat, boost genetic diversity, and increase the resilience of trees to variables such as climate change. It also ensures the right tree grows in the right place, helping to create a mosaic of habitats that store and sequester carbon.

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# 23

hectares of riparian restoration carried out on Corrimony Farm in 2023.

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## A precious remnant

The regeneration of Scotland's native pinewoods took a small but important step forward in late 2023 with the protection of a forest remnant in Glen Loyne, located at the western end of the Affric Highlands rewilding landscape. Situated on the East Glenquoich Estate, the ancient woodland currently contains 57 pines, including Scotland's oldest wild Scots pine, thought to be at least 566 years old. The ancestry of such pines stretches back to the last ice age, which ended about 10,000 years ago.

"We assessed the protection of the pines at Glen Loyne as extremely high priority due to the ongoing decline at the site," says James Rainey. "Old maps and documents suggest there were a couple of extensive pinewoods here in the 1700s, but by the 1990s there were less than 90 trees left. Photos from that time show thousands of pine stumps and a handful of survivors – it was like a pine graveyard."





◀ A river in the Affric Highlands runs through a heather landscape.

▶ Wild boar.

▶▶ Black grouse.

▶▶▶ Pine marten.

“Scientific data shows rivers across the Highlands are warming up rapidly as a result of climate change.... Riparian restoration can help to minimise future temperature increases.”

In cooperation with the owner of East Glenquoich, and with funding provided by the family of Harry Steven, who co-wrote “The Native Pinewoods of Scotland” in the 1950s, Trees for Life oversaw construction of a new, deer-proof fencing “exclosure” around as many of Glen Loyne’s unprotected pines as possible. In balanced, healthy ecosystems, the presence of predators helps to keep herbivore numbers at sustainable levels. Many large estates in the Scottish Highlands have long managed their land specifically to encourage high deer numbers for sport shooting. In addition, habitat loss and persecution led to the disappearance of wolves in Scotland by the late 1600s, which means deer now have no natural predators.

By keeping deer out, the new fencing at Glen Loyne will allow young seedlings to grow without being eaten - something that hasn’t happened for decades. A second phase of fencing may happen in 2024, although many of the remaining unprotected trees are located on crags and steep slopes, which makes fence construction a challenging proposition.

“We fully recognise that fencing is a short-term, quick-fix solution,” says James Rainey. “Ideally, we’d like to see more landscape-scale deer management in the Affric Highlands area, which would really help natural regeneration

to take off. This is what we’re working towards, but it’s a long-term process.”

Since red deer counts began in the 1960s, official estimates suggest that the Scottish population has roughly trebled from 150,000 to between 360,000 and 400,000, which means Scotland is home to almost 30% of the entire European population. The current average density of red deer on open hills across the Scottish Highlands is estimated to be around 10 per square kilometre. For natural regeneration to take place, this figure needs to be halved. And for the full range of native trees species to regenerate, it needs to be as low as 2 to 3 per square kilometre, as deer will feed on specific tree species first if they have a choice.

### Riparian restoration

Re-establishing natural processes and restoring the functionality of woodland along rivers across the Affric Highlands, especially at higher elevations where tree cover is particularly sparse, is another pressing issue.

“Scientific data shows rivers across the Highlands are warming up rapidly as a result of climate change,” explains Paul Greaves, the Affric Highlands rewilding team’s riparian officer. “Without the shading provided by trees, this is threatening cold water-adapted aquatic species, which includes everything from Atlantic salmon and brown trout to freshwater pearl mussels and aquatic invertebrates. Riparian restoration can help to minimise future temperature increases.”

Funded by a Scottish Power Foundation grant and a donation from Startline Motor Finance, the Affric Highlands rewilding team restored 23 hectares of riparian woodland on the 4000-hectare Corrimony Farm in the autumn of 2023. Working inside deer-proof fencing, a

## 566

The oldest pine at Glen Loyne is at least 566 years old.





group of volunteers planted a range of native tree species, including downy birch, several types of willow, rowan, juniper, aspen, and bird cherry along small tributaries of the River Enrick, at an elevation of between 400 and 550 metres. Many of these species are very palatable to deer and are now rarely found in the Scottish Highland landscape.

“The ideal scenario would be to support the regeneration of existing woodland remnants, where the diversity is high, but this is very difficult if there isn’t an adequate seed source,” explains Paul Greaves. “For this reason, we planted saplings from nearby nurseries to keep the provenance as local as possible.”

If and when grazing pressure from deer is reduced, the restored woodland at Corrimony will enable further recolonisation of the landscape.

“We would expect to see further expansion of trees downriver, as seeds are transported on the current and become established in nutrient-rich riverside soils,” says Paul Greaves.

### Stakeholder engagement

The Affric Highlands rewilding team have established good relations with David and Barbara Girvan, the owners of the Corrimony Farm. The idea of restoring riparian woodland on their land came about following conversations that took place through the

Glen Urquhart Farming Cluster, which the team established in early 2023 to support farming enterprise within the Affric Highlands, and to help make sustainable, locally produced food easily accessible for communities.

“Moving forwards we want to scale up riparian restoration, ideally through landscape-scale interventions,” says Paul Greaves. “Ultimately it depends on what the landowner wants to take forward, and then we can look to secure funding. There’s no financial disincentive for

landowners, while on the flip side there is a possibility to generate revenue in the future through the sale of nature-based credits, such as carbon credits.”

“The Affric Highlands team have been great to work with, especially the people on the ground,” says David Girvan. “It’s been great to get more trees along the river and I’m keen to see how they develop. I’d be open to more restoration in the future, and I hope the work carried out at Corrimony leads to similar initiatives on other estates.”

“We fully recognise that fencing is a short-term, quick-fix solution...”









# Main achievements in 2023

This section provides an overview of the progress we made on the four main components of our work, across our entire European initiative.

## Nature for people

Demonstrating that rewilding generates new business opportunities, jobs, and income for local people, and providing new perspectives for local culture, identity, pride, and social cohesion.

## Scaling up rewilding

Engaging, inspiring, and empowering others to adopt and apply rewilding principles, models, and tools to scale up rewilding as a mainstream approach to recover nature at scale.

1

## Wilder nature

Increasing the amount of land where natural ecosystem processes function freely, and supporting the comeback of keystone wildlife populations, while enhancing human-wildlife coexistence.

2

3

## Building engagement

Reaching out to people and capturing hearts and minds, showcasing the impact of rewilding in our flagship landscapes, and influencing target groups that are key to scaling up rewilding across Europe.

4



► An information panel for the Genzana bear-smart community.

# Wilder Nature



## Functioning ecosystems

Creating wildlife corridors and changing the way wildlife is managed, restoring natural dynamics in rivers, wetlands and steppe, rewilding forests, and natural grazing were the main focus of our efforts in 2023. These interventions at landscape scale demonstrate how the revival of natural processes lies at the heart of nature recovery and more naturally functioning ecosystems.

### Large landscape rewilding

One of our key roles is to demonstrate rewilding at scale, either by managing land ourselves (land under 'rewilding management'), or through partnerships with third parties (land under 'rewilding influence'). In 2023, we focused strongly on establishing partnerships for rewilding land. A dedicated effort was set up, called Task Force Land, to increase access to land more rapidly, working towards our target of 500,000 hectares (ha) by 2030. In 2023, we added 19,192 ha of land under rewilding management (six sites across three landscapes), which brought the total land under management in our 10 operational rewilding landscapes to 65,126 ha.

In terms of land under influence, we added around 296,000 ha inside our 10 rewilding landscapes and 50,000 ha outside, representing strong progress towards our target of one million ha by 2030.

### Ecological corridors

As a large-landscape intervention, ecological corridors between protected areas are under development in several of our landscapes. In the Velebit Mountains, for example, we are now managing nearly 30,000 ha of hunting concession to boost wildlife populations. Agreements with neighbouring concessions have added another 105,000 ha where wildlife is being

managed more favourably, compared to traditional hunting concessions. This way of working is enabling us to establish a wildlife corridor connecting two existing national parks, which are themselves part of the 300,000-ha Velebit Nature Park.

In the Central Apennines, so-called 'bear-smart communities' are being developed, at the heart of five large wildlife corridors between national parks and reserves, creating a protected area network of over 500,000 ha. The development of a wildlife corridor in the Greater Côa Valley between the Douro region and the Malcata Mountains is another large-scale intervention that made significant progress in 2023.





## Large-scale restoration of rivers and wetlands

Despite the ongoing war, Rewilding Ukraine took a significant step forward by restoring water flow in the Kartal and Katlabuh lake systems in the Ukrainian part of the Danube Delta. By reconnecting these lakes with the Danube River, we made a significant contribution to the restoration of 8,900 ha of wetlands and marshlands. In Swedish Lapland, we completed our first season of rewilding on the Abramsån River, a tributary of the 210-kilometre-long Råne River – Europe's longest undammed forest river. Over a five-kilometre stretch of the Abramsån, old infrastructure was removed to enable the river to flow freely again.

In the Polish part of the Oder Delta, we continued efforts to restore the 126-km long Ina River, an important tributary of the Oder River, through a range of rewilding measures. These include rewetting wetlands to increase water storage, planting riparian trees to provide shade and lower water temperatures, removing barriers to increase habitat connectivity, and supporting



**15** Tauros released in Portugal (for the first time in the country)



Protection of

**1,000**

ha old-growth forest explored in the Iberian Highlands

**65,125**

hectares of land under rewilding management by the end of 2023



296,000 ha of land was added inside our 10 rewilding landscapes, and 50,000 ha outside, through agreements with third parties



Over 42,000 ha of land in the pipeline for purchase of ownership, concession, or lease in six rewilding landscapes, worth > EUR 18 million



Seven partnerships signed with neighbouring hunting concessions in the Velebit Mountains, influencing wildlife management on 62,424 ha

Preparations undertaken for the removal of **87 dams** across five rewilding landscapes

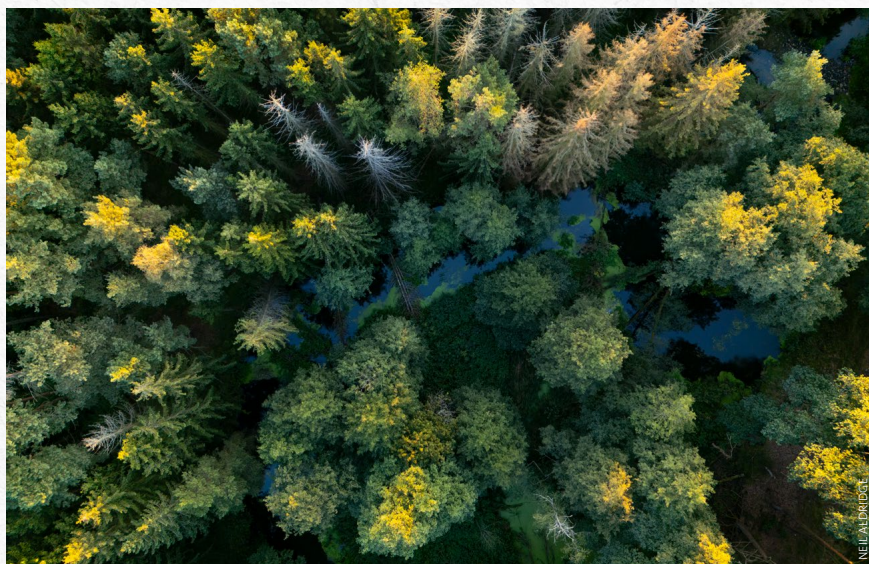
**26** Przewalski's horses released in Iberian Highlands, becoming only the second free-roaming herd in Europe



**8,900 ha**

of wetlands restored in Ukrainian Danube Delta by reconnecting them with the Danube River





◀ Aerial view of a stream dammed by beavers flooding forest in the Oder Delta.

▼ Decaying tree trunk with large tree fungi.

► Opening of channels to reconnect the Danube River and Katlabuh Lake in Ukraine.

riverine species by restoring spawning grounds, which typically involves adding stone and gravel in locations where they should occur naturally.

Preparations for identification and removal of dams progressed well in 2023, with five landscapes advancing this agenda. Rewilding Romania received funding to prioritise dam removal in three catchments in the Southern Carpathians. Rewilding Apennines and Rewilding Portugal concluded preparations for the removal of a total of seven dams. Rewilding Sweden concluded preparations to remove 77 dams across two catchments, and applied for permits to remove 10 small dams.

Beyond these initiatives, the annual report for Dam Removal Europe was concluded. Together with Wetlands International, Rewilding Europe will represent this coalition in the Open Rivers Programme Advisory Group for the next two years.

### Rewilding forests and protection of old-growth forests

In 2023, further work on rewilding forests and the protection of old-growth forests was carried out across multiple landscapes.

In the Iberian Highlands, the team evaluated all identified old-growth forests, analysed municipal forest management plans, and engaged with various forest owners. This helped in the location of old-growth forests



FLORIAN WOLLERS

Our work on wetlands and rivers is scaling up rapidly, encompassing several rewilding landscapes.

requiring urgent protection, and with owners open to innovative forest management. The proposed mechanism is to compensate owners for the income loss arising from the cessation of timber extraction in these forests for the next 30 years. Once this is legally possible, the first deals will be signed with six forest owners, encompassing both municipalities and private owners. The goal for 2024 is to protect at least 1,000 ha of old-growth forests, and to explore carbon and biodiversity credits for long-term financing.

In the Velebit Mountains, we calculated carbon storage and stocks for the 1475-ha Ramino Korito-Šugarska Duliba forest management unit in Gospić, with a view to establishing a partnership for rewilding forests and carbon sequestration with Croatian Forests. This would be a first for Croatia.

And in the Rhodope Mountains, meetings were conducted with relevant forest institutions, including state forestry units in Momchilgrad, Krumovgrad, Kirkovo, and Zhenda. Discussions were also initiated with three municipalities to explore management options for their land, including potential carbon projects, with at least 5,200 ha of land offering long-term commitment opportunities. Furthermore, three capacity-building sessions were carried out in the field with local forestry units, involving over 70 local forestry experts.

### Natural grazing

Restoring natural grazing remains a top priority across our landscapes and beyond. Our work in this area includes the reintroduction of various large herbivores across Europe, and creating enabling actions beyond reintroductions that are essential to the scaling up of natural grazing. Field teams in the Greater Cõa Valley, Velebit Mountains, and Iberian Highlands were trained up on handling and releasing Tauros,



while long-term grazing plans were also developed. At the same time, monitoring on the impact of natural grazing began in all of these landscapes, as well as in the Rhodope Mountains, using drones, eDNA, and the movement data of grazing animals.

In the Iberian Highlands, we released herds of Tauros, Przewalski's horses, and local horse breeds at different sites (now totaling over 200 animals), marking the first phase of large-scale natural grazing by large herbivores in this magnificent landscape. We were thrilled by two releases of Przewalski's horses (brought from France and Hungary) in July and November, totalling 26 animals. These releases saw the establishment of only the second free-roaming herd of this truly wild horse on the European continent (the other one is located in the Chernobyl exclusion zone, Ukraine). These iconic animals will roam an area of 10,300 ha, with the potential to expand this to over 40,000 ha.

The first-ever release of a herd of Tauros (15 animals) in Portugal took place in April – a real milestone for natural grazing in the Greater Côa Valley. Other herbivore releases took place in the Rhodope Mountains (fallow deer and red deer), Danube Delta (fallow deer and red deer), Velebit Mountains (red deer), and Southern Carpathians (European bison).

In the Southern Carpathians, a feasibility study explored the potential for natural grazing beyond European bison. The study, which was carried out by FREE Nature, provided recommendations for reintroducing wild and semi-wild herbivores in the landscape, and has led to discussions with local partners.

To scale up natural grazing beyond our landscapes, we established our Natural Grazing Facility, which aims to connect the demand and supply of large herbivores among organisations dedi-



.....

We are exploring the possibility of protecting 1,000 hectares of old-growth forest with funds generated by carbon credit development.

.....

cated to rewilding principles in Europe. To further support this upscaling effort, the technical report 'Rewilding Horses in Europe' (initially published in 2014), was updated and published in December. Lastly, we continued to be an active member of the organising team working on the delivery of a European Bison Conservation Action Plan, led by the IUCN SSC Bison Specialist Group.

### Transforming hunting concessions

In the Velebit Mountains, we continued our efforts to help shape a new national hunting law in Croatia by submitting a series of proposals to the appropriate authorities. Such proposals included better management of chamois populations by establishing breeding areas, the creation of general wildlife breeding zones in each hunting concession (minimum 10% of a concession),

reducing prescribed hunting quotas, implementing measures to ensure brown bears aren't disturbed in their den areas during the winter, and an immediate shift from lead to non-lead ammunition. We conducted several meetings with representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development to present and discuss these proposals.

To complement these actions, we are actively expanding our influence with neighbouring concessions. In 2023, seven partnership agreements (MoUs) were signed, covering 51,208 ha of land where we are making positive progress in changing wildlife management practices, including the construction of the first wildlife watching hide. This hide, which is scheduled to become operational in 2024, will complement the five wildlife watching hides already set up in the Velebit Mountains by the Rewilding Velebit team.

In the Rhodope Mountains, we successfully secured a contract for almost 3,878 ha of state forest and pasture in Zhenda. Planned activities for 2024 and beyond include bison reintroduction, deer releases, alternative tourism initiatives, educational programmes for young people, and improved wildlife management. Our primary focus was on securing extensive areas to support diverse activities such as natural grazing, rewilding forests, and restoring trophic networks.





STEFAN WIDSTRAND

## Wildlife comeback

In addition to the natural recolonisation of species, efforts to support wildlife comeback included the active release of a range of animals. These efforts worked to restore the natural dynamics between wildlife species and enhance their beneficial impact on the landscape.

### Critical elements

Supporting the comeback of wildlife species is a core element of our work at Rewilding Europe, because healthy and diverse populations of animal species are a critical element of functional ecosystems. In 2023, we witnessed fantastic results, involving a wide range of species: from freshwater pearl mussels, white-clawed crayfish and fish, through to dung beetles, hamsters, eagles, vultures, and European bison.

In 2023, a major milestone was the progress achieved through the newly established European Wildlife Comeback Fund (EWCF), supporting

15 wildlife translocations of 12 species across nine countries, mostly outside our rewilding landscapes. Rewilding Europe supplemented this effort with additional reintroductions in its own landscapes. The 'wildlife-smart communities' concept, originating from the bear-smart communities in the Central Apennines, gained traction, particularly in the Southern Carpathians (for bison) and Oder Delta (for wolf and lynx). Staff exchanges and conflict resolution training sessions were facilitated to promote human-wildlife coexistence strategies in the Oder Delta, Central Apennines, and Southern Carpathians.

The evidence base for the role of wildlife in the global carbon cycle (called 'Animating the Carbon Cycle') was strengthened through a partnership with the Global Rewilding Alliance and Yale University. Peer-reviewed publications garnered widespread attention from various media outlets, enabling us to showcase the significant role wildlife comeback can play in climate change mitigation and adaptation.

### Clean-up crews

Vultures are a priority species for Rewilding Europe as they close the so-called 'circle of life' by scavenging and helping to dispose of carcasses. In 2023, the reintroduction of the cinereous vulture as a breeding species in the Rhodope Mountains made great progress with a second release of 13 birds, following an initial release of 14 birds in 2022 (all originating from Spain). In addition, we released our first group of cinereous vultures in the Iberian Highlands. The restoration of griffon vulture populations in the Velebit Mountains and Central



◀ One of the rewilding initiatives supported by the European Wildlife Comeback Fund is bringing back red kites to some regions in Spain.

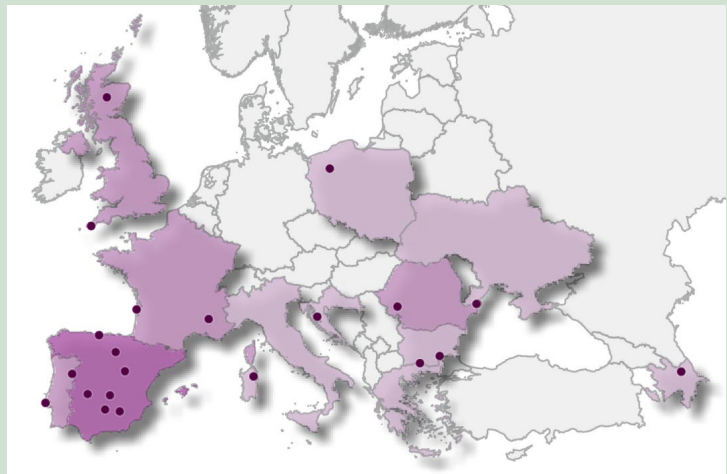
Apennines received a lot of attention, while we undertook preparations for a first-ever reintroduction of the species in Romania, where it has completely disappeared. The plan is for this to take place in Domogled National Park in the Southern Carpathians in 2024.

### Free-roaming European bison

The European bison population continues to do well in the Southern Carpathians, where we now have a healthy herd of around 180 animals, half of which were born in the wild. Roaming free across this vast landscape of forests, half-open grasslands, and valleys, this is the fastest growing bison population in Europe. In the Rhodope Mountains, we began preparations for the establishment of a second bison population in Zhenda – a large, 4,000-ha concession containing prime bison habitat. The existing bison population in Studen Kladenets is doing well and gradually growing, with a herd of 15 animals now roaming free. We are considering more bison releases in other rewilding landscapes, so stay tuned!

### Human-wildlife coexistence

In 2023, we observed increasing challenges around human-wildlife coexistence, both in our landscapes and across Europe. A serious poisoning incident occurred in the Central Apennines rewilding landscape, leading to the tragic deaths of an entire wolf pack, several griffon vultures, and other wildlife species. This really drives home the fact that such challenges are a clear and present danger. Illegal poisoning, for example, still hampers wildlife comeback across many parts of the continent, and has sadly been seen in other Rewilding Europe landscapes and the areas around them. It is frequently carried out by people who have little to no understanding of the devastating consequences of their actions.



▲ Accepted European Wildlife Comeback Fund applications at the end of 2023.

## European Wildlife Comeback Fund

Supporting wildlife comeback is one of the core objectives of Rewilding Europe's mission. In addition to creating the right conditions for wildlife comeback to happen naturally, Rewilding Europe takes active measures, such as reintroductions of keystone species and population reinforcements.

Wildlife reintroductions are long and complicated processes that typically face many challenges. This often makes it difficult to align the timing of when funding is available with the timing of actual releases. To help overcome this challenge, Rewilding Europe provides immediate funding for reintroductions and population reinforcements that are ready to be carried out.

In early 2024, the Dutch Postcode Lottery awarded the European Wildlife Comeback Fund a grant of EUR 2.2 million. Together with EUR 2.8 million already secured from other donors, this takes the budget of the fund for the period 2022–2026 to EUR 5 million. Reaching this significant financial target means the fund can now support an average of 11 reintroductions per year through till 2026.

- So far the fund has a secured budget of **EUR 5 million** for 2022–2026.
- We aim to facilitate more than **150 wildlife comeback initiatives** by 2030.
- **22 reintroductions** already funded by the end of 2023.
- Covering **20 wildlife species** across 12 different European countries.







38 sites with keystone species reintroductions or population enforcements, of which 27 were in our 10 rewilding landscapes



Four keystone species benefitting from active reintroductions and reinforcements reached minimum viable population levels in our landscapes

19

European wildcats released in Scotland



60

dung beetles released on the Gascony Moors in France

Four large EU grants secured for keystone wildlife species: **Iberian lynx, Iberian wolves, European bison, cinereous vulture, Eurasian lynx, and Marsican brown bears**



13

Eurasian lynx released in Western Pomerania in Poland



At least 180 European bison roaming free in the Southern Carpathians, with 50% born in the wild



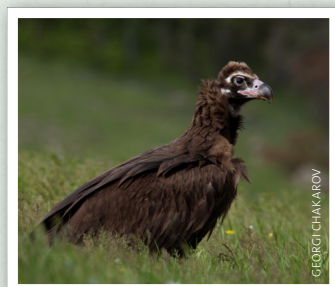
A total of 1585 large herbivores reintroduced



One report published on rewilding horses in Europe

1400

juvenile white-clawed crayfish released into the Verde River in the Central Apennines



13 cinereous vultures released in the Rhodope Mountains, following the release of 14 birds in 2022

► Release of Eurasian lynx in northwest Poland

Heavily featured in the media was the return of the grey wolf across Europe, with the current population of the species now estimated to be over 20,000 animals (excluding European Russia). While an independent survey at the end of the year showed that 68% of rural people believe wolves should be strictly protected, and 72% believe wolves have a right to coexist alongside humans, we saw pushbacks on wolf protection in various European countries, and even the European Commission.

To counter this, we focused our efforts on promoting ways of coexisting with wolves, which involve raising awareness and practical solutions that have been employed in our rewilding landscapes. This is exemplified by the Greater Côa Valley, where Rewilding Portugal have overseen a livestock guard dog programme since 2020, providing dogs free of charge to local farmers to enable them to better protect their sheep, goats, cows, pigs, and horses from predation by Iberian wolves. The programme has now delivered more than 100 dogs to livestock owners. The programme complements efforts by the Rewilding Portugal team to increase the availability of natural prey for the wolves by boosting local populations of roe deer, which a recent survey has revealed are increasing in abundance and range.

### Eurasian lynx releases in northwest Poland

With the support of Rewilding Europe's European Wildlife Comeback Fund, 13 Eurasian lynx – six females and seven males – were released in the Polish province of Western Pomerania, in the northwest of the country and east of the Oder Delta rewilding landscape. Another four individuals will be released in 2024. The reintroduction, which is being overseen by the Western Pomeranian Nature Society (ZTP) – a Polish NGO and partner of Rewilding Oder Delta – will enhance the genetic





diversity of the area's existing lynx population.

ZTP, also a member of the European Rewilding Network, has released over 70 Eurasian lynx in Western Pomerania since 2019. While Eurasian lynx have also been reintroduced in central and northeast Poland, these populations have not expanded westward so far – the aim of ZTP's reintroduction programme is to restore a permanent population in Western Pomerania.

### Wildlife monitoring

Considerable effort has been devoted to better understanding how we can plan new actions, monitor the effectiveness of reintroductions, and contribute to national monitoring endeavours across our landscape portfolio. In 2023, 34 monitoring initiatives were undertaken across our 10 landscapes, including five multispecies monitoring efforts. These initiatives primarily focused on monitoring large herbivores, carnivores, and birds. They encompassed 17 species, including European bison, deer, wolf, lynx, wild cat, various vulture species, Dalmatian pelicans, crayfish, and pearl mussels. Notable findings include a thriving bison population of 180 individuals in the Southern Carpathians, and the presence of at least seven Eurasian lynx in the Velebit Mountain range. Camera trapping efforts in the Metla Concession (Velebit Mountains) revealed a low abundance of red and roe deer – together with efforts from

previous years, this supports the ban on the hunting of these species in the hunting concessions that are managed by Rewilding Velebit.

Much of this monitoring effort involves collaboration with national authorities and the involvement of volunteers, with teams regularly contributing to annual census efforts. Particularly significant collaborations include monitoring vulture species in the Central Apennines (62 griffon vulture breeding pairs counted) and the Rhodope Mountains (139 griffon vulture breeding pairs counted). Additionally, partnerships with universities, such as with iDiv for multi-species camera trap monitoring in the Oder Delta, the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Veterinary Medicine for lynx surveys in the Velebit Mountains, and the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences for wolf studies in the Rhodope Mountains, are noteworthy. There is also emphasis on less charismatic but ecologically critical species, such as pearl mussels in Swedish Lapland, and crayfish in the Central Apennines. Overall, these efforts show that populations of most monitored species are gradually recovering, but are still in a far from healthy condition.

This work employs a variety of methods tailored towards specific species, necessitating not only 'boots on the ground', but also the increasing use of technology such as camera trapping, DNA analysis from scats, and eDNA analysis of water and soil samples.

## EU support for keystone wildlife species

In 2023, four large EU grants were secured to support wildlife comeback in our rewilding landscapes.

In the Southern Carpathians, the new 'LIFE with Bison' grant (overall budget EUR 5.2 million) will help us to continue the **success story of the European bison** here over the next five years, with more animals to be added and a focus on coexistence, including the development of bison-smart communities.

Rewilding Portugal secured the 'LIFE LUPI LYNX' initiative, with an overall budget EUR 3.5 million. The focus is on supporting the **comeback of the Iberian wolf and Iberian lynx** in the Portuguese/Spanish transboundary region of the Douro and Côa Valleys by promoting coexistence and improving the local prey base.

We are also very excited that the European Commission has approved a proposal to continue supporting the **recovery of cinereous vulture** populations in the Rhodope Mountains (overall budget EUR 4.4 million).

Last but not least, an EU LIFE grant was secured to support the continued **reintroduction of Eurasian lynx** in northwestern Poland, adjacent to the Polish part of the Oder Delta (overall budget EUR 4.3 million).

Besides these four new LIFE grants, existing EU LIFE funding is supporting the **comeback of the Dalmatian pelican** across five eastern European countries, and **coexistence with brown bears** in Italy and Greece through the establishment of bear-smart communities.

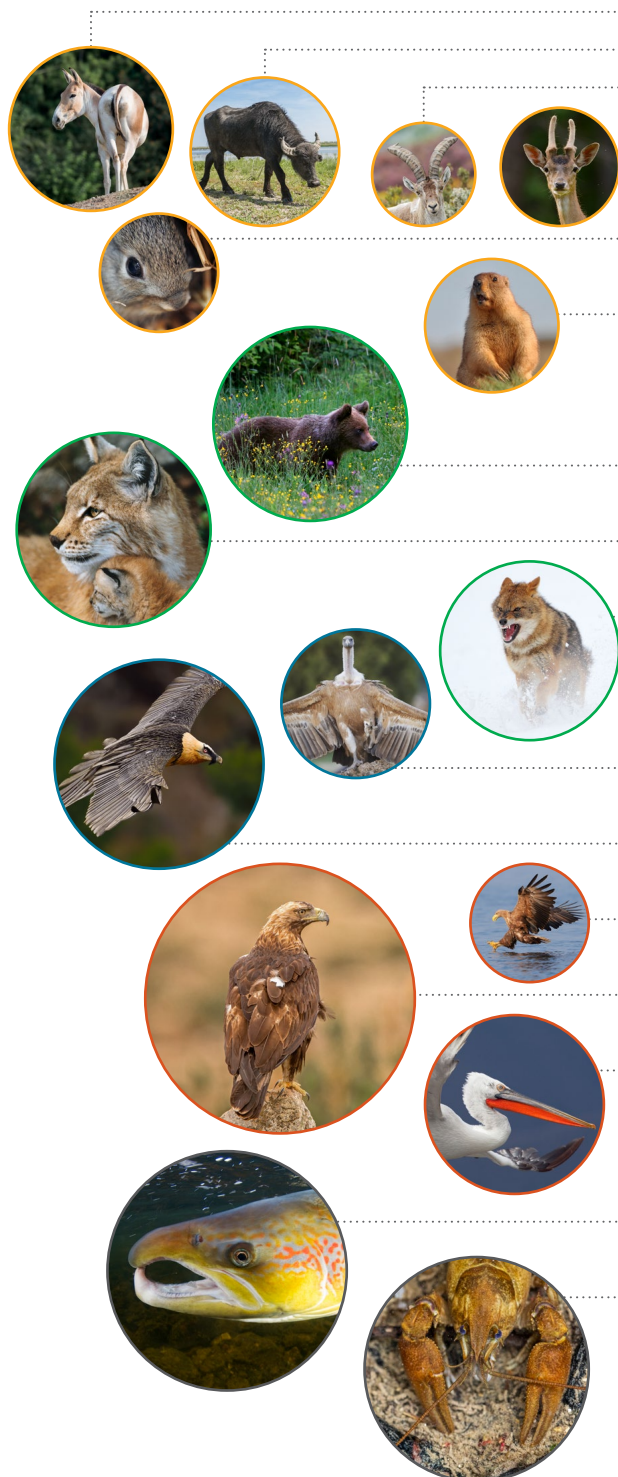
All of these EU grants last four to five years and cover 75% of overall costs. Co-funding is provided by private or corporate foundations such as Arcadia, Cartier for Nature, Fondation Ensemble, the Ecological Restoration Fund, and the Dutch Postcode Lottery.





# Working with wildlife

An overview of the various wildlife species that our rewilding landscapes focus on.



	Iberian Highlands	Rhodope Mountains	Greater Côa Valley	Southern Carpathians	Central Apennines
<b>HERBIVORES</b>					
Arctic reindeer					
Chamois <sup>1</sup>				●	●
European bison <sup>2</sup>		●		●	
Eurasian elk					
Tauros	●		●		
Wild horse <sup>3</sup>	●	●	●		
Kulan	●				
Water buffalo					
Iberian ibex	●		●		
Red deer	●	●	●	●	●
Fallow deer	●	●	●		
Roe deer	●		●	●	●
European rabbit	●		●		
Eurasian beaver			●		●
Steppe marmot					
European hamster					
<b>CARNIVORES</b>					
Grey wolf <sup>4</sup>	●	●	●	●	●
Brown bear <sup>5</sup>		●		●	●
Iberian lynx	●		●		
Eurasian lynx		●		●	
Wildcat	●				●
Golden jackal		●			
Grey seal					
<b>SCAVENGERS</b>					
Cinereous vulture	●	●	●		
Griffon vulture	●	●	●	●	●
Egyptian vulture	●	●	●		
Bearded vulture	●				
<b>OTHER BIRDS</b>					
White-tailed eagle		●			
Golden eagle	●		●		●
Imperial eagle <sup>6</sup>		●	●		
Bonelli's eagle	●		●		
Dalmatian pelican		●			
Eagle owl	●				
<b>FISH/CRAYFISH/MOLLUSCS</b>					
Atlantic sturgeon					
Salmon <sup>7</sup>					
Trout <sup>8</sup>					●
White-clawed crayfish <sup>9</sup>					●
Freshwater pearl mussel					

● Populations are enhanced through measures such as restocking, reintroduction, anti-poaching, anti-poisoning and coexistence work, and habitat improvement.

● The species benefits indirectly from measures supporting other species.



Swedish Lapland	Velebit Mountains	Danube Delta	Oder Delta	Affric Highlands	
<b>HERBIVORES</b>					
●					Arctic reindeer ○
	●				Chamois <sup>1</sup> ○
			●		European bison <sup>2</sup> ○
			●		Eurasian elk ○
	●			●	Tauros ○
	●	●			Wild horse <sup>3</sup> ○
		●			Kulan ○
		●			Water buffalo ○
					Iberian ibex ○
	●	●	●	●	Red deer ○
		●			Fallow deer ○
	●		●		Roe deer ○
					European rabbit ○
●		●	●	●	Eurasian beaver ○
		●			Steppe marmot ○
		●			European hamster ○
<b>CARNIVORES</b>					
	●		●		Grey wolf <sup>4</sup> ○
	●				Brown bear <sup>5</sup> ○
					Iberian lynx ○
	●		●		Eurasian lynx ○
	●			●	Wildcat ○
		●			Golden jackal ○
			●		Grey seal ○
<b>SCAVENGERS</b>					
					Cinereous vulture ○
	●				Griffon vulture ○
					Egyptian vulture ○
					Bearded vulture ○
<b>OTHER BIRDS</b>					
	●	●	●		White-tailed eagle ○
				●	Golden eagle ○
					Imperial eagle <sup>6</sup> ○
					Bonelli's eagle ○
		●			Dalmatian pelican ○
		●			Eagle owl ○
<b>FISH/CRAYFISH/MOLLUSCS</b>					
			●		Atlantic sturgeon ○
●			●	●	Salmon <sup>7</sup> ○
●			●		Trout <sup>8</sup> ○
					White-clawed crayfish <sup>9</sup> ○
●					Freshwater pearl mussel ○

1 Different subspecies, generally divided into Northern and Southern chamois.

2 Both lowland line and lowland-Caucasia line.

3 Using 5 different breeds: konik, karakachan, Bosnian mountain horse, garrano and Przewalski horse.

4 For Iberian Highlands and Greater Căa Valley this is Iberian wolf.

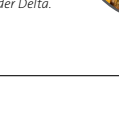
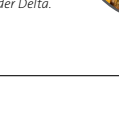
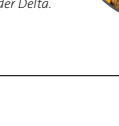
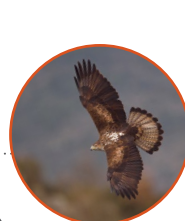
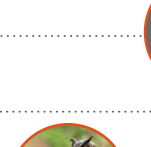
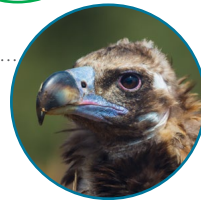
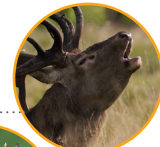
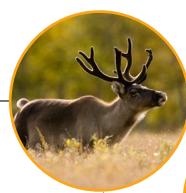
5 In Central Apennines Marsican brown bear subspecies.

6 Spanish imperial eagle in Greater Căa Valley, Eastern imperial eagle in Rhodope Mountains.

7 Baltic Salmon in Swedish Lapland and Oder Delta, Atlantic salmon in Affric Highlands.

8 Mediterranean trout in the Central Apennines, brown trout for Swedish Lapland and Oder Delta.

9 Subspecies Austropotamobius italicus meridionalis in the Central Apennines.







## Economic benefits

In 2022, our work to build nature-based economies focused mostly on building local business networks in our rewilding landscapes, development of nature-based tourism, exploring a revolving fund for dam removal, and setting up Rewilding Climate Solutions.

### Growing nature-based economies

At Rewilding Europe, we recognise that rewilding can and should offer a wide range of economic benefits, and are fully committed to scaling up their delivery. We want to show that the recovery of nature – particularly in areas suffering from economic stagnation, rural depopulation, and land abandonment – can drive economic development, generating new business opportunities, jobs, and income for local communities.

We identify investment opportunities in our landscapes, create nature-based business networks, enable nature tourism, and facilitate the sale of nature-related credits.

### Investing in Rewilding

As a specialist financing division of Rewilding Europe, Rewilding Europe Capital has been providing commercial loans to businesses located in and around our rewilding landscapes since 2014.

The overall goal has been to amplify rewilding impact, support the development of nature-based economies, and pilot new ways of doing new business that are good for nature and good for people. To date, Rewilding Europe Capital has disbursed loans with a cumulative value of around EUR 2.1 million to 20 small and medium enterprises, whose efforts continue to benefit people and nature.

# Nature for People





► WeWilder Campus in the Southern Carpathians, Romania.

Rewilding Europe facilitated additional co-investment of EUR 5 million in these enterprises.

### Supporting diverse business sectors

Nature-based business networks are a key element of Rewilding Europe's growing portfolio of rewilding landscapes, bringing businesses together under a shared rewilding vision for the landscape. As local communities directly benefit from the recovery of wild nature, it generates more support for rewilding.

The business sectors that Rewilding Europe Capital can support are summarised in the table right below.

### Case in point: WeWilder

Examples of Rewilding Europe Capital loans disbursed recently include one to the WeWilder initiative in Romania in 2022. This supported construction of the 'WeWilder Campus', a collection of contemporary wooden buildings located in the Southern Carpathians rewilding landscape, where a burgeoning European bison population – the result of rewilding efforts by Rewilding Romania and WWF Romania – is proving an increasingly influential tourism drawcard.

The green campus will help to drive nature-based tourism forward in the area and spark entrepreneurial innovation around rewilding, the recovery of local nature, and regenerative economics.

The loan will also be partly used to co-finance a second joint venture between a local family and WeWilder Social Enterprise, an innovative approach to encouraging entrepreneurship in individuals who are not yet comfortable or familiar enough with nature-based business opportunities.



Business sector	Aim
Nature and wildlife tourism	To support the growth of nature and wildlife tourism companies and help create new ones.
Wetland restoration and water management	To support businesses that are working to rewet degraded peatlands, restore wetlands, and improve the flow of rivers by removing obsolete barriers such as dams.
Biodiversity and CO <sub>2</sub> offsetting	To unlock new sources of finance for nature recovery by facilitating the sale of carbon and biodiversity credits. In this regard, Rewilding Europe Capital is complemented by Rewilding Climate Solutions, which is working to connect landowners and land managers interested in or already engaged in rewilding with carbon buyers and impact investors.
Land estates	To increase the amount of land being rewilded by supporting estate management models that support, reinvigorate, and conserve wild nature and contribute to the socio-economic development of rural areas.
Wildlife breeding and management	To support wildlife breeding and management initiatives that generate positive rewilding and environmental impact – for example, by transforming traditional hunting concessions into wildlife reserves.
Forest management	To support businesses that are working to transform intensively managed forests and monoculture plantations into more biodiverse, natural forests.
Marine rewilding	To support the restoration of marine ecosystems.



## Nature-related credits: Rewilding Climate Solutions

Rewilding Climate Solutions, a start-up company that is wholly owned by Rewilding Europe, developed further in 2023 with the aim of scaling up rewilding efforts through the voluntary carbon market. The team is working on opportunities to finance rewilding measures across several rewilding landscapes, including the Iberian Highlands, Velebit Mountains, Oder Delta, and Swedish Lapland. In addition, opportunities outside rewilding landscapes are being explored, including in Ireland and Lithuania. These opportunities encompass forests, grasslands, and peatlands.

To support practical implementation, Rewilding Climate Solutions developed a carbon training programme. This will support rewilding landscapes and initiatives in Europe as they explore the potential for leveraging carbon markets in the scaling up their work.

Rewilding Climate Solution's work also includes developing and piloting new standards which will support rewilding activities – either where there is no current existing relevant standard, or where there is a wider biodiversity impact, rather than a carbon impact – such as piloting Verra's Nature Framework. Progress was also made in exploring the potential for piloting other standards in our rewilding landscapes, such as Wilder Carbon, while working with Wetlands International to keep up to date on and influence the development of the EU Carbon Framework.



## Business network in Greater Côa Valley proves highly beneficial

The most notable example of a nature-based business network in our landscape is the Wild Côa Network, which was established in the Greater Côa Valley in Portugal in early 2021. It now has more than 50 members, who meet online once a month and in person once a year. A survey conducted by the Rewilding Portugal team at the end of 2023 revealed over 80% of the Wild Côa Network members have benefited from increased relationships and partnerships. Nearly two-thirds answered that they had collaborated with at least one other member from the network, and over a third had gained clients through network connections. Most members also agreed that the Wild Côa Network has increased the flow of nature-based tourism to the region, with 75% of the members reporting increased turnover because of network membership.

## Wildlife comeback supports business growth

Straddling the German-Polish border on a key ecological crossroads, the Oder Delta is one of Central Europe's wildest regions. With nature-based tourism on the rise, growing numbers of people are visiting the area to reconnect with nature and enjoy a chance to spot the so-called "Big Seven" – the Atlantic sturgeon, grey seal, beaver, white-tailed eagle, elk, wolf, and European bison.

The Wild Oder Network, launched in 2023, is a cooperative network of nature-based enterprises located in and

around the Oder Delta rewilding landscape, whose business is aligned with rewilding principles. The network enables members to benefit from wildlife comeback in the delta, and to benefit from and drive the further growth of the area's nature-based economy.

Potential members encompass everyone from accommodation owners and manufacturers of local products, to companies and individuals offering nature-based experiences and restaurants and caterers.

One of the network's primary aims will be to develop links between business sectors, creating a stronger commercial environment that fosters cooperation instead of competition. In addition, bringing businesses together will also enable the region to be marketed as a whole, with its significant natural and cultural values promoted more effectively. Being part of the network will also help members to develop sustainable business models aligned with rewilding principles, create new touristic offerings in partnership with each other, and exchange knowledge through regular workshops and meetings.

Over 80% of Wild  
Côa Network members  
have benefited from  
increased relationships  
and partnerships.






### Revitalising the Iberian Highlands


Rewilding Europe Capital is also playing a role in the socio-economic revitalisation of the Iberian Highlands. In 2023, La Maleza Wildlife Park – which is located inside the Iberian Highlands rewilding landscape in Tramacastilla – became the first Spanish nature-based company to receive financial support from Rewilding Europe Capital.

The loan allowed the park to launch 'Safari Rewilding La Maleza'. These new seasonal guided tours take visitors through the Sierra de Albarracín to see the herd of Tauros that are now living in this area as part of the Iberian Highlands, as well as a range of other wildlife. The launch of the safaris has helped to raise the profile of the area, which means more tourists are visiting and bringing in much-needed revenue. People learn about rewilding and the important ecological role that the Tauros are playing in the Iberian Highlands.

Ensuring local people and communities benefit economically and culturally from the recovery of local wild nature is one of the pillars of Iberian Highlands rewilding. With this in mind, Rewilding Spain made concerted efforts to develop sustainable tourism in 2023. Such efforts included celebrating sustainable tourism in the area, promoting the Iberian Highlands as a destination for international visitors with the support of international tour operators, helping local entrepreneurs develop and offer nature-based activities, and increasing the national and international visibility of the landscape by enhancing its wild nature.

 Two new loans provided through Rewilding Europe Capital

 EUR 520,000 for local economies derived from and supporting rewilding efforts

 An additional EUR 5 million of investment unlocked

**EUR 7.1 million**

invested in nature-related commercial activities

**141**



new rewilding-related jobs created in rewilding landscapes to date

**20 small and medium enterprises** received **EUR 2.1 million** in credit from Rewilding Europe

**Three**

rewilding landscapes have established nature-based business networks



**Seven**

landscapes offering nature tourism experiences

**7**

business sectors receiving support for rewilding-related activities

**One**

new company launched in 2023: Rewilding Climate Solutions

The Wild Côa Network in Portugal now comprises over

**50 members**

**Two rewilding centres** now operational, in the **Affric Highlands** and **Greater Côa Valley**





## Wider benefits

We believe that rewilding can lead to new prospects, stronger social coherence, and an enhanced sense of identity and pride among local communities in our rewilding landscapes, while improving people's health and wellbeing.



## Scaling up measurement

Rewilding can generate benefits for people that go way beyond purely economic indicators, such as jobs, income, and investment returns. These relate to factors which are often hard to evaluate, such as resilience to the impacts of climate change, improved social coherence and wellbeing, and burgeoning identity and pride based on new ecological and socio-economic narratives for landscapes. In 2023, we began working with a group of French experts (Anthropolinks) to define ways of measuring the immaterial benefits of rewilding. Results are expected in 2024, including first baseline data. This builds on earlier work carried out in the Iberian Highlands, Central Apennines, and Greater Côa Valley.

## An entrenched narrative

The huge rewilding potential of the Iberian Highlands isn't simply a product of their relatively intact ecology. Today, the region has one of the lowest human population densities in Europe.

Young people here don't want jobs in farming or forestry, so they end up

leaving for the city. Many people have a negative view about the area and don't see how things can be turned around – a very entrenched narrative.

On the positive side, the fact that land has been widely abandoned in the Iberian Highlands has allowed some wildlife species to make a comeback. But it has also caused ongoing problems. Rural depopulation has led to a decrease in animal husbandry, which has disappeared completely in some municipalities. Without the grazing impact of large, domesticated herbivores, open areas of the landscape are being encroached by shrubs and bushes, which means the risk of catastrophic wildfire is increasing – as it is across much of the region. In 2005, one such fire damaged nearly 12,000 hectares of pine and Pyrenean oak in the area.

By attracting more visitors and enabling the development of a thriving nature-based economy, rewilding at scale can encourage and enable people to return and revitalise the area. The low population density in the Iberian Highlands means that every action carried out can potentially create a

significant benefit. The case of Pablo Villa, Rewilding Spain's herd manager, exemplifies this kind of positive impact. In May 2023, a herd of 10 Przewalski's horses arrived in the rewilding landscape in Spain and are now in his care. This enabled Pablo – and subsequently his family – to return to the village where he was born, with knock-on socio-economic benefits for the area.

## Promotional value of Marsican brown bears

A new study, published in early February in the journal *Human Dimensions of Wildlife*, highlighted the value of Marsican brown bears to residents of the Central Apennines. The study attempted to measure the value of earned media coverage by assessing how much it would cost to buy advertising space of size or length. The authors estimated the Advertising Value Equivalency (AVE) of articles and broadcasts featuring Marsican brown bears – appearing in a high-profile selection of national Italian newspapers and television channels between 2015 and 2020 – to be around EUR 11 million.





The researchers also looked at the costs incurred through bear-related damage over the same timeframe. This included damage to beehives, agriculture, buildings, and domestic animals, including veterinary bills. Using the records of the Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Park, this was estimated at around EUR 535,000, which equates to just under 5% of the value of the promotional services generated by the presence of bears in the landscape.

Although these values are only approximate, the study underlined the fact that Marsican bears deliver benefits that extend way beyond nature. Investing time and money in these animals and their recovery makes economic as well as ecological sense.

### **Pioneering art festival**

Organised and managed by the Rewilding Portugal team, the 'CÔA – Corridor of Arts' Festival united art, nature, and culture in the Greater Côa Valley in July. The festival, which attracted around 7000 visitors, took place across five different weekends in five different municipalities – all in and around the

Greater Côa Valley rewilding landscape. On weekends, the festival featured cinema, theatre, music, and other performing arts, as well as markets where local producers and operators were able to promote and sell their natural products and nature-based services. There were also educational activities for children.

In attracting such a large influx of visitors, the CÔA Festival proved good for businesses in the area too. Over the last few years, the Rewilding Portugal team have worked hard to establish the Wild Côa Network – an association of more than 50 like-minded local enterprises (from guesthouses to handmade natural product sellers) who share a vision for a wilder and more sustainable future.

Through the festival, Rewilding Portugal demonstrated how nature recovery can generate diverse benefits for local communities and businesses. The team were hugely gratified to receive praise for attracting external investment and raising the profile of the region through the event. Read the story in more detail on page 26–29.





In 2023, we worked tirelessly to grow the European rewilding movement and elevate engagement with our rewilding work to new levels. In collaboration with our landscape partners, we showcased the results, impacts and benefits of rewilding, leveraging captivating content and our strong visual identity.

# 3 Building Engagement



## Growing outreach

Through our communications efforts – which involved collaboration between communications experts in our central and landscape teams – we reached over 108 million people through online media articles. We developed a wide range of new and engaging products and publications, which showcased the results and impact of our work and promoted the beneficial impacts of rewilding. The number of our online followers, which now totals over 288,000 people, increased 27% year-on-year. We also saw an estimated 18 million impressions on social media, representing a year-on-year growth of 4 million. The number of people visiting our website rose 10% to nearly 400,000.

But of course, not all of our interactions were online! Physical and personal meetings are very important too, helping to foster lasting, productive relationships. Our landscape teams organised numerous meetings and events with local communities, stakeholders, and

partners. At central level, we convened eight meetings on European rewilding, helping to advance the rewilding movement and enhance rewilding impact.

## Rewilding on the road

At the start of 2023, we launched the “The Rewild Podcast” series, a collaborative endeavour between Rewilding Europe and the talented storyteller James Shooter. With over 100,000 downloads to date, the series has resonated deeply with audiences, building further support for European nature recovery and inspiring meaningful action.



The Rewild Podcast brings each of Rewilding Europe’s rewilding landscapes to life. It also takes an in-depth look at the work of many other leading European rewilding organisations, including members of the European Rewilding Network. Through the power of oral storytelling and insightful interviews, each episode shines a spotlight on the transformative impact of rewilding, while amplifying the voices of those leading the charge towards a wilder, more vibrant future for Europe’s landscapes. The Rewild Podcast embodies our commitment to innovation and inclusivity, inviting listeners of all backgrounds to join us on an inspiring journey of exploration and discovery. So far, it has been a huge success.

## World Rewilding Day

With the theme #RewildingHope, World Rewilding Day 2023 showcased the inspiring narrative of nature recovery. Today, rewilding is emerging as a beacon of optimism, with its inclusive





# 288,000

online followers (27% growth)

# 18

million impressions  
on social media  
(up 4 million on 2022)

# 2,312 online articles

mentioned our work,  
reaching an estimated  
**108,000,000 people**

# 8

events convened  
to build a European  
rewilding coalition

# 397,000

people visited the Rewilding Europe  
website and the growing number of  
rewilding landscape websites

# 7

engaging publications  
produced, promoting  
the beneficial impacts  
of rewilding

and uplifting ethos mobilising a global movement. Celebrations in 2023 underscored rewilding's capacity to unite and energise diverse communities behind a shared vision for a flourishing planet. As Rewilding Europe continues to catalyse action and collaboration, World Rewilding Day called for everyone to embrace #RewildingHope and join collective efforts to realise a wilder, brighter future for all.

Launched by the Global Rewilding Alliance in 2020, the outreach and impact of World Rewilding Day is growing rapidly, engaging people of all backgrounds across the world and helping to raise awareness of rewilding. In 2023, it saw rewilding initiatives from six continents come together.

At Rewilding Europe, we developed a poem on Instagram, while many of our landscape teams organised public events, focused on the people and communities that lie at the heart of rewilding. In the run-up to the event, all our local rewilding teams shared videos

from their landscapes and presented their actions on the ground – such as wetland restoration and efforts to support wildlife comeback – using the #RewildingHope theme.

### Annual Review 2022: Turning up the volume on nature

In June, we took great pleasure in presenting our Annual Review for 2022 – the eleventh year since our foundation, and one filled with important achievements and memorable milestones.

While writing and putting this review together, one thing really struck us – the sheer volume of tangible and impactful rewilding action now taking place across our growing portfolio of landscapes. The 12 months of 2022 were a time when we really turned up the volume on nature, in collaboration with all our partners and associates across Europe.

In addition to an extended section presenting our main achievements in 2022, the review included 10 feature stories which took a deeper look at







◀ Emmanuel Rondeau  
filming in the Oder Delta.

one aspect of rewilding in each of our operational landscapes. From people and nature to landscapes and upscaling, together these stories gave readers a broader and deeper perspective on rewilding and the wide range of benefits it offers, as well as the work and growth of Rewilding Europe. The first copy of the Annual Review was presented to Princess Laurentien van Oranje, who has been a special advisor and ambassador for Rewilding Europe since our launch in 2010.

#### Wild about film

Thanks to a partnership with global law firm Hogan Lovells, a new series of short films showcasing the work of Rewilding Europe began production in 2022. The first two episodes were produced and launched in 2023, with local premieres

bringing together many key stakeholders.

The first short documentary, called 'A New Path for the Velebit Mountains', tells the story of rewilding in this beautiful part of Croatia. At the end of March, a premiere in the local town of Gospić, in the heart of the Velebit Mountains rewilding landscape, drew a large and diverse audience. The film focuses on the efforts of the Rewilding Velebit team and the gradual resurgence in the area's spectacular wildlife. It shows how this recovery is enabling a fresh and sustainable approach to wildlife management – based on wildlife watching, rather than hunting. Featuring a range of insightful and inspirational interviews, it also shows how the team are reaching out to the local community to raise awareness and build engagement

### A pelican camp in the Danube Delta

Coordinated by Rewilding Europe, the Pelican Way of LIFE initiative is a pan-European, multi-partner initiative to boost populations of the Dalmatian pelican along the Black-Sea Mediterranean Flyway, which is home to around 50% of the global population. As part of the initiative, efforts have been carried out to reduce direct mortality from collisions with power lines, enhance nesting conditions, and increase support for the growth of Dalmatian pelican populations across Europe. To reconnect children with nature – and teach them more about Dalmatian pelicans and rewilding – a Pelican Education Camp was held at the end of June on the Romanian side of the Danube Delta rewilding



landscape. A group of 40 secondary school students from Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, and Ukraine were welcomed to the camp, which was based in the traditional Romanian fishing village of Sfântu Gheorghe. The Danube Delta is one of the strongholds of the Dalmatian pelican – the

camp's wide-ranging and immersive programme saw the children witness these majestic birds in the wild, as well as other iconic delta wildlife. They also learned first-hand about supporting the growth of Europe's Dalmatian pelican population and the important role that the birds

play in healthy wetlands. In addition to interactive lectures, wildlife-watching field trips and interesting practical exercises, the children were divided into teams and tasked with investigating threats and opportunities around pelican conservation, introducing concepts such as viable populations, habitats and landscapes. The children gained practical experience and enhanced their presentation, storytelling, language, photography, and information handling skills. At the end of the camp they developed their own rewilding projects and presented them as group theatre plays. They were then encouraged to carry out parts of these projects on their return home.



► The beautiful winning image from Tobias Richter shows grey wolves and wild boar interacting in eastern Germany.

▼ The second-placed image from Jyri Juuti shows the recovery of a landscape and natural processes in Finland.

and working to ensure that as many people as possible benefit from rewilding moving forward.

As a follow-up to the premiere in Gospić, an audience of 100 guests gathered in the Croatian capital Zagreb to view the documentary at the Kino Korzo Theatre. In attendance were dignitaries from the Lika-Senj County Development Agency and Velebit Nature Park, fellow NGOs, professors from the University of Zagreb, local entrepreneurs, hunting concession managers, and local residents of all ages.

The second documentary, called 'The Circle of Life in the Rhodope Mountains', tells the hopeful story of rewilding in the Rhodope Mountains of Bulgaria. At the beginning of November, a well-attended premiere in the town of Kardzhali helped the local rewilding team engage a wide range of stakeholders and build partnerships. Kardzhali's regional history museum, which was transformed into a movie theatre for the event, was chosen to host the premiere. It was attended by representatives of the local municipality, key partner organisations, including the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB), representatives of educational institutions and hunting, fishing and forestry organisations, and many other rewilding friends and supporters and members of the general public.

Both documentaries can be watched on Rewilding Europe's YouTube channel. At least six short films will be produced in the series, bringing people closer than ever to rewilding and the work of Rewilding Europe by showcasing the rewilding vision of specific rewilding landscapes, the rewilding actions being carried out there, and how these actions are benefitting wild nature and people. These captivating and intimate portrayals of practical rewilding are shot by award-winning French filmmaker Emmanuel Rondeau of White Fox Pictures.



### Rewilding Europe Photo Award

The annual European Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition, launched in 2001 by the German Society for Nature Photography (GDT), showcases some of the finest nature photography from Europe and around the world. The competition's winning photographs, together with the works of other participating wildlife photographers, are critical to the GDT's efforts to promote nature conservation to a broad audience.

As part of the annual European Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition, the Rewilding Europe Award celebrates some of the best rewilding-related imagery from across Europe.

This year's winning image, entitled "Wolves on the Hunt", was shot by German photographer Tobias Richter. His winning entry was taken from a camouflage hide in the eastern Ger-

man region of Lusatia, which borders Poland. Skillfully shot on a late summer evening, it depicts a small family of wild boar interacting with a pair of grey wolves.

Impactful, high-quality nature photos have always been a cornerstone of Rewilding Europe's communications, helping us to capture people's hearts and minds as we work to make Europe a wilder place. The Rewilding Europe Award honours outstanding achievements in photography, with a focus on one or more of the diverse aspects of rewilding, such as natural river dynamics, natural forest regeneration, the return of European wildlife and healthier food webs, and open landscapes maintained by free-roaming herbivores. Wolves, for example, are now making a recovery in Europe and helping to rebalance ecosystems.





# Scaling up rewilding



Rewilding Europe's ultimate goal is for rewilding to become a mainstream approach to nature recovery across our continent. Collectively, our growing portfolio of rewilding landscapes demonstrate what is possible at a much larger scale. These are the places where we work on the ground, apply rewilding principles, develop scalable models, and learn about and measure the impacts of our interventions.

## Three pathways to scaling up

In 2023, our new Upscaling Team began work to scale up rewilding more systematically, using three pathways as a guide: joining forces, building knowledge and capacity, and creating an enabling environment for rewilding.

In terms of joining forces, we are working to building strategic partnerships and networks such as the European Rewilding Network, the European Young Rewilders, and the European Rewilding Coalition. In terms of building knowledge and capacity, we are organising training sessions, online seminars, and physical meetings – including exchange visits and the development of a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on rewilding. In terms of creating an enabling environment, we are working with scientific institutions, as well as policy and legal partners, to support rewilding at a European and national level. In the sections below, you will find more information about the progress we made developing some of these tools in 2023.



European Young Rewilders membership grew from 150 members at the start of 2023 to 606 at the close.

### European Rewilding Network

One particular highlight of 2023 was the tenth anniversary of the European Rewilding Network. With five new members joining in 2023, membership now totals 91 rewilding initiatives across 29 European countries. These new members comprised Saving Wildcats (Scotland), the Pentezug Project (Hungary), Restoring water vole populations across Cornwall (England), Reintroduction of vultures in Madonie, Sicily (Italy), and Reintroduction of European bison to Shahdag National Park (Azerbaijan).

The European Rewilding Network arranged and hosted four webinars in 2023 – two of these were exclusively for members, the others were open to the public. Topics included Rewilding Europe Capital (REC); IUCN guidelines on human-wildlife coexistence, given by the authors themselves; Snowchange Cooperative (Finland), and Saving Wildcats (Scotland). In addition to being part of an active European community that facilitates the exchange of knowledge about practical rewilding, ERN members also have access to Rewilding Europe Capital, the European Wildlife Bank, Rewilding Europe Training, and the European Wildlife Comeback Fund.

In 2023, we reviewed the interests and needs of European Rewilding Network members, with a ‘refresh’ of the network planned in 2024. This may include the introduction of a convening platform for members to communicate directly with each other, the creation of opportunities for exchange visits between members, and organisation of an in-person event for members working on natural grazing.

### European Young Rewilders

A year of growth saw the network blossom into a well-connected community of passionate and skilled young Europeans, eager to drive the rewild-

ing movement forwards and scale up nature recovery. In 2022, the European Young Rewilders engaged 10 volunteers to help the coordinator with the overall management and activation of the network. As a result of their efforts, membership grew from 150 members at the start of 2023 to 606 at the close.

Connecting with other youth networks has been a pillar of the strategy in 2023, enabling outreach to larger audiences and amplification of the rewilding message. As a result, the European Young Rewilders formed partnerships with Youth and Environment Europe, the UK Young Wilders, and EUROPARC Youth+ Network. In 2023, joint activities with these organisations included online and in-person presentations on rewilding, attending a youth strategy planning session in Scotland, and inputting information on rewilding to a podcast and toolkit.

A second pillar of the strategy is to inspire and empower young rewilders within their own countries. In 2023, the network convened a visit to the Oder Delta rewilding landscape for young rewilders and supported five European Young Rewilders local meetups in Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium, and two in Portugal.

### Rewilding Europe Training

In 2023, Rewilding Europe launched a training course on carbon/rewilding credits. Online training began in September, with 18 participants from Rewilding Europe landscapes and Endangered Landscapes and Seascapes Programme grantees. Tourism training also took place in 2023, including field training for guides in the Oder Delta and Danube Delta. Additionally, staff from two landscapes and Rewilding Europe’s central team attended in-person training on conflict resolution and coexistence in conservation settings.

Five new ERN members in 2023, with membership now totaling 91 across 29 countries

Four webinars on different topics organised for ERN members

456 new members joined the European Young Rewilders, total membership over 600

45

rewilding leaders met in Vienna and launched the European Rewilding Coalition, with 16 countries represented

One new partnership agreement signed with the EUROPARC Federation, taking our total number of strategic partnerships to 24

Rewilding meaningfully embedded in 28 research and policy initiatives across Europe



1 national rewilding seminar organised in the Central Apennines



## Rewilding toolkit

We have developed a range of tools to support the scaling up of rewilding in Europe. Further information on all of them can be found on our website.



The **European Wildlife Comeback Fund** supports wildlife comeback by enabling the reintroduction of keystone species in a proactive and flexible way.



Natural grazing is an important ecological process that can deliver increasing benefits. We support it through our **Natural Grazing Facility**.



**Rewilding Europe Capital** is a nature-based funding facility that provides financial loans to businesses that deliver positive environmental and socio-economic impact and support rewilding.



**Rewilding Climate Solutions** is unlocking nature, climate, and people positive investment by connecting landowners with carbon buyers and investors.



Young people have the opportunity to take rewilding onwards and upwards. The **European Young Rewilders** is working to inspire and enable them.



The **European Rewilding Network** is enhancing the positive impact of its diverse range of member organisations by facilitating the exchange of knowledge and expertise.



BRUNO DAMICIS

The development of a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) continued, with the Open University UK as our university partner. We explored accreditation possibilities for the MOOC, but due to complexity and potential financial barriers, we decided to proceed – at least initially – with a free, non-accredited course.

A new Learning Coordinator joined our team in February 2024 and will help us to align the MOOC with our strategic move towards diverse learning opportunities beyond training, such as mentoring, self-led learning, and peer-to-peer exchanges.

### European Rewilding Coalition

In 2023, Rewilding Europe arranged and convened a gathering of 45 leaders from leading European rewilding organisations in Vienna, Austria. Together, the group mapped future priorities for rewilding in Europe and identified ways to work together to amplify impact and scale up nature recovery across the continent. To formalise this collaboration, a partnership agreement was signed by organisations from 16 different European countries on the final day of the event.

Building on work carried out in 2022, most of the Rewilding Europe landscapes have now signed the Network Agreement formalising their relationship with Rewilding Europe.

### Strategic Partnerships

In June 2023, Rewilding Europe and EUROPARC Federation signed a partnership agreement. This will see the two partners work together to inspire and enable EUROPARC members to use rewilding principles in the management of protected areas, with the aim of supporting and scaling up nature recovery. The partnership was formally launched at the EUROPARC 50th anniversary conference in the Dutch city of Leeuwarden, which opened with a keynote speech from HRH Princess Laurentien van Oranje, on behalf of Rewilding Europe. This was followed by an 'inspiration' session providing more information on rewilding. Development of a joint workplan will take place in 2024, informing future collaboration.

Continuing the focus on protected areas, Rewilding Europe is working to establish a group of 10 European protected areas, each extending across a minimum of 30,000 hectares, that are eager to embrace rewilding as a guiding principle for their management and development.

Rewilding Europe is also exploring a potential partnership with EUROSITE, and other networks whose members include protected area managers.

### Scaling up national rewilding

Some of our rewilding landscape partners have also carried out efforts



to scale up rewilding. In 2022, Portugal organised a national rewilding seminar, while in 2023 it was the turn of Rewilding Apennines in Italy.

Over 100 participants from Italy and beyond came together to discuss rewilding-related topics at a three-day seminar in the Central Apennines in November. The event helped the local rewilding team raise awareness of rewilding and its positive impacts, and to establish and strengthen relationships with a wide range of stakeholders.

The Rewilding Apennines team carried out a lot of work in October to promote the seminar through different channels and platforms. They collaborated with Emanuele Biggi, an Italian conservationist, photographer and TV celebrity, to present rewilding and their rewilding efforts on Italian national TV – and to promote the seminar – as well as posting sponsored content on social media. They also worked with Italian sustainability platform Life-Gate to increase their outreach.

The seminar turned out to be a great success, with prestigious speakers from across Italy and beyond talking about a wide range of species and topics. Through the event itself and the communications around it, the team were able to provide a better understanding of rewilding, and where it is heading as a progressive approach to conservation. This clarification is both welcome and necessary – until now there has been some confusion in Italy about what

rewilding is exactly, and it is still viewed sceptically by many people.

The seminar was educational and informative, and it was great to see students and young professionals given a platform to present their conservation and rewilding-related work, which really empowered them. In addition, the mayors of two bear-smart communities had the opportunity to spread the positive message of rewilding, and to encourage their peers to be more ambitious.

### Policy environment for rewilding

In 2023, we took active steps to create a more supportive enabling environment for rewilding at EU level, and continuously engaged in a number of campaigns. The most important one focused on the Nature Restoration Law, with Rewilding Europe supporting the #restorenature campaign, both independently, and through membership in the European Habitats Forum in Brussels. This will continue in 2024 as we push for the Nature Restoration Law to be finalised, and for implementation plans to kick off at national level, focusing on the countries where Rewilding Europe works.

Sharing the youth perspective at European level is a pillar of the European Young Rewilders strategy. In 2023, the EYR participated in the Nature Restoration Law campaign as a member of the European Youth Coalition, while also contributing to a joint letter to the European Commission. Swiss members signed a joint statement and letter regarding the protection of wolves in Europe.

As part of the Horizon Europe-funded NaturaConnect project, a series of private finance factsheets for protected areas and ecological corridors around Europe was drawn up. Work on tailor-made finance solutions for several areas across Europe also began.



.....

We took active steps to create a more supportive enabling environment for rewilding at EU level.

.....





# New to the network

These initiatives joined  
the European Rewilding  
Network in 2023.



## ○ Saving Wildcats (Scotland)

Saving Wildcats is a European partnership project dedicated to European wildcat conservation and recovery. The initiative is working to prevent the extinction of wildcats in Scotland by breeding and releasing them into the wild. Nearly 20 wildcats have so far been released and are now roaming free in the Scottish Highlands.

## ○ Pentezug Project (Hungary)

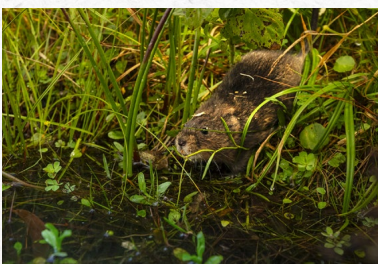
The Pentezug Reserve, established in 1997 by Hortobágy National Park Directorate (HNPI) and Cologne Zoo, aims to preserve open grasslands using semi-wild grazers with minimal human interference. To achieve this, bovines and Przewalski's horses have been introduced, creating a relatively diverse grazing community.







To learn more about these  
and other ERN members, visit  
[rewildingeurope.com/network](https://rewildingeurope.com/network)

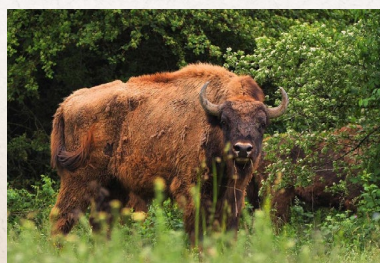


#### ○ **Restoring water vole populations across Cornwall (England)**

Kernow Conservation is working to restore water vole populations across Cornwall. Water voles disappeared here in the 1990s, with the first reintroductions made in Bude in 2014. Water voles are a keystone species, helping to create dynamic, healthy wetland habitat that supports numerous other species.

#### ○ **Reintroduction of European bison to Shahdag National Park (Azerbaijan)**

An international European bison reintroduction programme began in Shahdag National Park in 2019. As of 2023, 58 bison are now roaming across this 130,000-hectare protected area, in a move that supports the ongoing recovery of the species in the Caucasus region and beyond.



#### ○ **Reintroduction of vultures in Madonie, Sicily (Italy)**

The aim of this initiative is to restore populations of griffon and Egyptian vultures in the Madonie Regional Natural Park, located on the northern coast of Sicily. Vultures are keystone species, helping to recycle the carcasses of wild and domesticated herbivores as part of the so-called 'circle of life'.









**Rewilding  
Spain**



**Rewilding  
Rhodopes**



**Rewilding  
Portugal**



**Rewilding  
Romania**



**Rewilding  
Apennines**



**Rewilding  
Sweden**



**Rewilding  
Velebit**



**Rewilding  
Ukraine**



**Rewilding  
Oder Delta**



**Rewilding  
France**



**Rewilding  
Danube  
Delta**



**Rewilding  
African Highlands**

# Operational model

Rewilding Europe is a pan-European organisation, with a strong central function connected to a network of rewilding landscapes. The central team and landscape teams are intrinsically linked and work together coherently. This co-production approach enables us to work at a European level, while landscape partners take the lead in rewilding initiatives adapted to a local context.

In nine of our ten rewilding landscapes, dedicated rewilding entities have been legally established with their own local boards. In the Affric Highlands, this process is underway and will be completed in the first half of 2024. The nature of these entities differs depending on legislation, preference,

and local context. Each of these entities acts as our dedicated and preferential main rewilding partner – in turn, each of them has established and manage a wide variety of partnerships with key local stakeholders. Most of these entities are still young and building up their presence, work, and credibility in their respective region and country.

Within this setting, we continuously strive to maintain the optimum balance between central and local coordination and leadership. The main purpose of the central function is to empower the landscape entities and their teams, enabling them to become as self-supporting as possible.

In addition to sharing Rewilding

Europe's vision, mission and strategy, the central team provides support services in five main fields: wilder nature, nature for people, building engagement, upscaling, and core functions – mostly management and development support. To enable us to provide these services to local entities, we have significantly grown capacity at a central level over the last two years, and continue to develop a range of tools that empower partner entities.

Numerous external relationships have been established and formalised, both at a central and landscape level (for a list, see last inner page). Such partnerships are critical to the achievement of Rewilding Europe's mission.





MAXIM KNOVLEV

# Organisation

## Legal structure

Rewilding Europe is registered as a foundation ('Stichting' in Dutch) in the Netherlands. It is acknowledged as a charity for tax purposes ('ANBI-status') and certified by CBF, the Dutch supervisory body for organisations with a charitable purpose.

Rewilding Europe owns a limited liability company called Rewilding Europe B.V. This company serves as an incubator and holding company to pilot and develop new business concepts that support the mission of the foundation, and which have a chance to become profitable. Rewilding Europe B.V. owns three limited liability companies:

- Rewilding Europe Capital B.V. provides loans to enterprises whose activities contribute to rewilding.
- Rewilding Climate Solutions B.V., established in 2022, aims to make rewilding a financially competitive land use, demonstrating that rewilding is investable and enabling nature recovery at scale.

- Rewilding Assets B.V., also established in 2022, holds ownership of land that will be rewilded.

Rewilding Europe has long-term agreements with partner organisations in its rewilding landscapes. These organisations are registered locally as not-for-profit foundations or associations, which means they have their own boards and staff. Although independent entities, they form an integral part of the Rewilding Europe organisation through an intensive and equal collaboration that can best be described as 'co-production'.

In 2023, the relationship between Rewilding Europe and its partner organisations in the rewilding landscapes was further strengthened by the signing of a Network Agreement, and the formation of the Rewilding Europe Network Executive Team, consisting of the directors of Rewilding Europe and the directors of its partner organisations in the rewilding landscapes.

Following a comprehensive feasibility phase, the Dauphiné Alps in southeastern France was approved by the Supervisory Board as the eleventh rewilding landscape, with the launch planned for 2024. In addition, the establishment of a new legal entity in the Affric Highlands (Rewilding Affric Highlands) is underway, in close cooperation with our current partner organisation Trees for Life.

## Governance and leadership

The Supervisory Board comprises six members, each serving a term of three years, with the possibility of two extensions. Jan Derck van Karnebeek (chair), Odile Rodríguez de la Fuente (member) and Lena M. Lindén (member) left the Supervisory Board in 2023. They were replaced by Marc van den Tweel (chair), Charlie Burrell (member), and Sylvie Goyet (member).

The Supervisory Board had three meetings in 2023, of which two were physical meetings in the Netherlands.



The third meeting took place in the Greater Côa Valley, where the Supervisory Board and the Management Team also met the team and board of Rewilding Portugal.

Laurien Holtjer has been appointed as Director Engagement & Public Relations as of 1 March, 2024. The remuneration of the Executive Director, the Finance & Operations Director, and the Director Engagement & Public Relations (together the Executive Board) comply with the guidelines of 'Goede Doelen Nederland', the Dutch registered charities' association.

The Executive Director chairs the Management Team, comprising the Finance & Operations Director and the Director Engagement & Public Relations, three thematic heads (Wilderness Nature, Nature for People, and Upscaling), and two Heads of Landscapes (each overseeing five rewilding landscapes).

Following the 2030 strategy and fuelled by growing financial income, the Executive Board and Management team developed and implemented an Organisational Growth and Development Plan in 2022 and 2023. This encompassed, amongst other things, the growth of capacity in the Central Team and the Landscape Teams, the formation of an Upscaling Team to step up and align our upscaling work, a partial renewal of the Supervisory Board (see above), and the launch and development of Rewilding Climate Solutions as a separate entity.

### Rewilding Europe staff

By the end of 2023, Rewilding Europe employed 31 staff and Rewilding Climate Solutions three staff, complemented by external consultants with specific fields of expertise. With Rewilding Europe operating in 13 European countries, our staff encompass many nationalities and cultures, and offer a wide range of perspectives and experience. Of the 34 staff employed by Rewilding Europe

and Rewilding Climate Solutions, 22 work in the Netherlands and 12 in other European countries, with 21 staff of non-Dutch nationality. Our organisation is gender balanced – 56% of our employees are female, while the male/female ratio of our Supervisory Board is 50/50.

### Integrity

Integrity is of the utmost importance to Rewilding Europe. We have established guidelines and procedures to prevent integrity issues and inappropriate behaviour from happening in the workplace – and to identify and resolve such issues in a timely and effective manner, should they occur.

We hold ourselves to the highest standards of professionalism through our code of conduct, which is signed by all employees, board members, and contractors. Rewilding Europe also developed an anti-fraud and anti-corruption policy. In 2023, we received three internal notifications of leadership issues. The Executive Team discussed these notifications with the external confidential advisor to understand their nature, and to define appropriate and proactive measures for improvement.

External complaints about integrity and inappropriate behaviour can be reported via the Rewilding Europe website. In 2023, two external complaints were received: one concerning financial support provided to Rewilding Europe by a company, and the other about rewilding in general. Both these complaints were resolved with explanations.

At Rewilding Europe, we are committed to continually enhancing the safety and inclusivity of our working environment. We take all complaints seriously and will evaluate our integrity policy every year to ensure constant improvement.

## Our core values



### Pioneering

We aim to push the boundaries of nature recovery.



### Entrepreneurial

We seek new opportunities and innovative ways to rewild.



### Inspirational

We showcase the beauty of wild nature and the benefits of rewilding to society.



### Empowering

We provide the rewilding models, tools, expertise, and knowledge that can be adopted and applied by others to scale up rewilding.



### Practical

We are a 'can do' organisation that is hands-on and operates in the field at landscape scale.



### Experienced

We are uniquely experienced, with a decade of practical rewilding knowledge and learning on which to build.



### Committed

We understand that achieving landscape-scale change takes time – this is why we are committed to long-term engagement in the places where we work.





# One European team

In 2023, the Rewilding Europe team comprised 180 people working from 15 European countries, encompassing both central level and rewilding landscape teams. An overview of European Central Team members and Landscape Team Leaders is presented below, including their position and resident country. This list does not include all the staff members of the landscape teams (these can be found on our websites), and represents the situation at the time of publication of this Annual Review.

## ○ Supervisory Board

**Marc van den Tweel**  
Chair, as of December 2023 (the Netherlands)

**Sabine Hoefnagel**  
Member and acting Chair March-December 2023 (United Kingdom)

**Jan Derck van Karnebeek**  
Chair, until March 2023 (the Netherlands)

**Aleksandrina Leonidova Mitseva**  
Member (Denmark)

**Jens-Christian Svenning**  
Member (Denmark)

**Charlie Burrell**  
Member (United Kingdom)

**Sylvie Goyet**  
Member as of December 2023 (France)

**Lena M. Lindén**  
Member (Sweden), until December 2023 (Sweden)

**Odile Rodríguez de la Feunte**  
Member, until March 2023 (Spain)

## ○ Executive Team

**Frans Schepers**  
Executive Director (the Netherlands)

**Johan Booij**  
Director of Finance and Operations (the Netherlands)

**Laurien Holtjer**  
Director Engagement and Public Relations, as of March 2024 (the Netherlands)

## ○ Central Team

### FINANCE & OPERATIONS

**Johan Booij**  
Head (the Netherlands)

**Violeta Giurgi**  
Finance and Operations Manager (the Netherlands)

**Jelle Harms**  
GIS Data Manager (the Netherlands)

**Lucy Kilkens**  
Finance IT and Operations Officer (the Netherlands)

**Erik Jan Hofmeyer**  
System Administrator (the Netherlands)

**Tamar Vloedgraven**  
Lead Finance and Control, as of April 2024 (the Netherlands)

**Dana Bezdičková**  
Grants & Operations Manager (the Netherlands)

**Huub Limpens**  
Finance Officer, as of March 2024 (the Netherlands)

**Floor Peters**  
Grants & Operations HR Manager (the Netherlands)

**Len van Steensel**  
Finance Support, up and until June 2024 (the Netherlands)

**Theresa Stratmann**  
Geospatial Data and Monitoring Officer (Germany)

**Hanna Hoogendoorn**  
Office assistant, as of April 2024 (the Netherlands)

**Vanessa Cornejo**  
Finance and Operations Officer, up and until January 2024 (the Netherlands)

**Irene Fernandez Saez**  
Operations Manager Rewilding Europe Travel, up and until March 2024 (the Netherlands)

### WILDER NATURE

**Raquel Filgueiras**  
Head, until July 2024 (the Netherlands)

**Carolina Soto Navarro**  
Head, as of July 2024 (Spain)

**Sophie Monsarrat**  
Rewilding Manager (the Netherlands)

**Julia Clark**  
European Wildlife Bank Coordinator, until March 2023 (United Kingdom)

**Mykhailo Nesterenko**  
Rewilding Manager (the Netherlands)

**Dell Saavedra**  
Head of Landscapes (Catalonia/Spain)

**Fabien Quétier**  
Head of Landscapes (France)

**Annette Mertens**  
Grants Coordinator, Rewilding Manager, as of June 2024 (Italy)

### BUILDING ENGAGEMENT

**Laurien Holtjer**  
Head (the Netherlands)

**Kristjan Jung**  
Brand Manager (Estonia)

**Nelleke de Weerd**  
Communications Manager (the Netherlands)

**Nina Breck**  
Communications Officer (Germany)

**Daniel Allen**  
Lead Editor and Writer (United Kingdom)

**Kataryna Kurakina**  
Communications Officer (the Netherlands)

**Neil Aldridge**  
Creative Content Manager (United Kingdom)

### UPSCALING

**Amy Duthie**  
Head (United Kingdom)

**Aukje van Gerven**  
Training Manager, up and until 29 September 2023 (the Netherlands)

**Julia Mata**  
European Rewilding Network Coordinator (the Netherlands)

**Giulia Testa**  
European Young Rewilders Coordinator (Sweden)

**Kyle Grotens**  
Upscaling Officer (Spain)

**Sara Calçada**  
Learning Coordinator, as of 12 February 2024 (United Kingdom)

### NATURE FOR PEOPLE

**Johannes Schreuder**  
Head, as of 13 November 2023 (France)

**Victor van Dooren**  
Enterprise Manager, as of 1 February 2024 (the Netherlands)

**Andréa Gay**  
Enterprise Manager, as of 12 February 2024 (Spain)

**Daniel Verissimo**  
Rewilding Finance Expert (the Netherlands)

### REWILDING CLIMATE SOLUTIONS

**Timon Rutten**  
Director, as of 1 January 2024 (the Netherlands)

**Helena Newell**  
Finance and Operations Director, as of 1 April 2024 (United Kingdom)

**David Harleman**  
Investment Director, as of 1 November 2023 (the Netherlands)

**Christian van Maaren**  
Operations Manager, up and until May 2023 (the Netherlands)

**Nacho Martin**  
Senior Carbon Project Developer, as of 1 November 2023 (Spain)

**Preethi Sridharan**  
Carbon Project Developer, as of 1 February 2024 (the Netherlands)

**Laura Schefold**  
Carbon Project Officer, as of 1 November 2023 (the Netherlands)

## ○ Landscape Team leaders

**Mario Cipollone**  
Team leader  
Central Apennines

**Marina Drugă**  
Team leader  
Southern Carpathians

**Stephanie Kiel**  
Team leader  
Affric Highlands

**Marija Krnjajić**  
Team leader  
Velebit Mountains

**Mykhailo Nesterenko**  
Team leader  
Danube Delta (Ukraine)

**Henrik Persson**  
Team leader  
Swedish Lapland

**Ioana-Catalina Petrencu**  
Team leader  
Danube Delta (Romania), as of March 2024

**Pedro Prata**  
Team leader  
Greater Cōa Valley

**Pablo Schapira**  
Team leader  
Iberian Highlands

**Andreana Trifonova**  
Team leader  
Rhodope Mountains

**Ulrich Stöcker**  
Team leader  
Oder Delta (Germany)

**Peter Torkler**  
Team leader  
Oder Delta (Poland)



# Partnerships are key to us

We are fortunate to work with a number of strong, active, and very committed partners. Their valued support in 2023 allowed us to get where we are now – and we look forward to achieving more great things with them in the years ahead.

## Initiating partners



## Technical partners



## Financial partners



### Princess Laurentien van Oranje

Since Rewilding Europe was founded in 2010, Princess Laurentien van Oranje has supported our initiative by providing strategic advice and facilitating meetings and events.

We wholeheartedly thank the Princess for her dedicated support and fantastic team spirit and look forward to continued collaboration with her in the years to come.





# Financial overview 2023

## Income

Rewilding Europe's income nearly doubled in 2023, growing to EUR 16.3 million (compared to EUR 8.6 million the previous year). This increase is mostly a result of higher income from non-profit organisations, and reflects the progress made in our fundraising efforts. We received EUR 3.4 million from the Ecological Restoration Fund, a donation of EUR 2.4 million for our Land Fund, and an increase in the income from the Endangered Landscapes and Seascapes Programme and the Grantham Foundation.

Income from companies and (EU) subsidies also increased, while income from the Dutch Postcode Lottery remained stable. The total income from individuals decreased, which can be explained by an exceptional EUR 1 million donation in 2022.

Overall, our structural income (both restricted and unrestricted) is becoming more steady and secure, thanks to increasing support from a range of donors. From 2023, people have been able to leave legacies to Rewilding Europe, with several people already including Rewilding Europe in their wills.

The budget for 2024, as approved by the Supervisory Board in December 2023, includes secured and nearly secured income (EUR 12.6 million). In March 2024, we received a donation of EUR 2.2 million for our European Wildlife Comeback Fund from the Dutch Postcode Lottery. Based on our funding pipeline, we expect our income to further increase in 2024, and to reach at least the level of 2023.

## Expenditure

Rewilding Europe's expenditure increased from EUR 6.9 million in 2022, to EUR 11.2 million in 2023. Expenditure levels in 2023 were significantly higher than in 2022, mostly due to the growth and increased efforts of both the central and landscape teams.

Overall, working towards Rewilding Europe's four main objectives accounted for 81% of expenditure. Furthermore, 2% was spent fundraising and 17% on management and development of the initiative. Work carried out in our rewilding landscapes and by other external partners accounted for 65% of expenditure, with the central level accounting for the remainder, largely

for work carried out to support the rewilding landscapes.

- Total income of EUR 16.3 million in 2023 (+90% year-on-year).
- Total expenses of EUR 11.2 million in 2023 (+60% year-on-year).
- Work towards our four main objectives accounted for 81%, management costs for 17%, and fundraising costs for 2% of total expenditure.
- 65% of total income was allocated to rewilding landscapes and other external partners, and 35% at central level, mostly in support of landscapes.

With a budgeted expenditure of EUR 20.3 million, we expect to significantly increase our expenditure in both the rewilding landscapes and at central level in 2024. The growth in expenditure also reflects the ambitions for our Land Fund and Rewilding Climate Solutions B.V.

The aim is to deliver on the ambitions in our 2030 strategy and the annual workplans, while covering the budget deficit of almost EUR 7 million through our reserves (see next section) and anticipated additional funding.



### Assets and liabilities

Our positive net income in 2023 and the three preceding years are reflected in the consolidated balance sheet of Stichting Rewilding Europe. At the end of 2023, our bank balances were EUR 12.1 million, and the reserves EUR 11.4 million.

The reserves include the donor restricted reserve (EUR 2.5 million), the European Wildlife Comeback Fund (EUR 0.6 million), a general reserve (EUR 3.6 million), the Rewilding Europe Capital reserve (EUR 0.9 million), and a continuity reserve (EUR 1.4 million).

EUR 2.5 million of the general reserve belongs to Rewilding Climate Solutions B.V. Following the growth of the central team, the continuity reserve was increased by EUR 0.2 million, giving it the capacity to cover relevant work costs for a period of six months.

On the assets side, the loans (EUR 1 million) are provided through Rewilding Europe Capital to entrepreneurs in the rewilding landscapes, while the accrued income and prepaid expenses (EUR 1 million) mostly consist of payments to the landscape teams, for which no expenses have been reported yet. On the liabilities side, the subsidies received in advance (EUR 1.4 million) represent EU subsidies received for which no expenses have yet been reported.

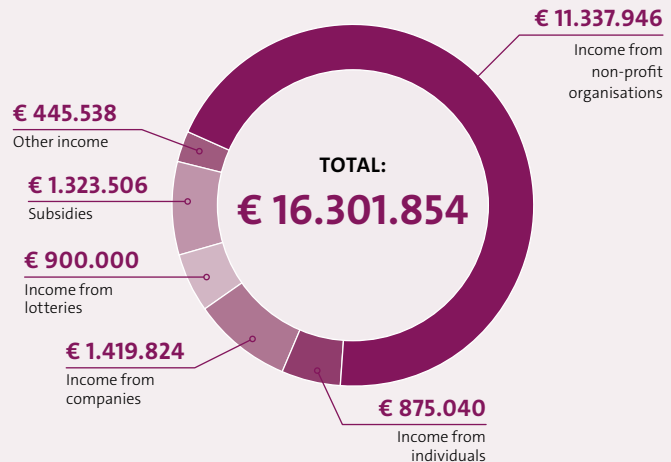
Income from companies, EU subsidies and other income increased slightly, while the income from lotteries (the Dutch Postcode Lottery) remained stable.

### Want to know more?

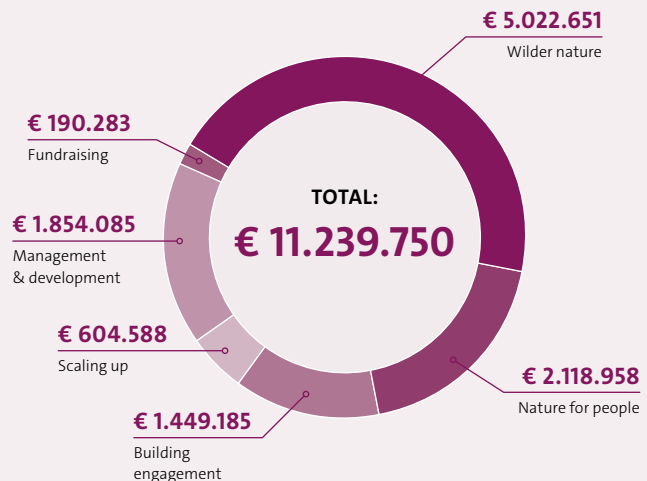
Our 2023 audited financial statements are available on our website:

[rewilding-europe.com/public-disclosures](https://rewilding-europe.com/public-disclosures).

## Income



## Expenses

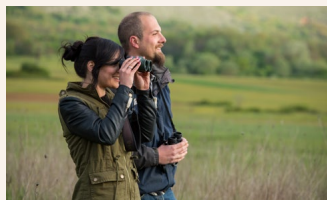


## Assets and liabilities (as of December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023, in EUR)

Assets		Liabilities	
Loans	965.703	Reserves	11.430.150
Accrued income and prepaid expenses	965.703	Long term Loan (EIB)	398.810
Other assets	192.498	Subsidies received in advance	1.379.267
Bank balances	12.054.494	Other short term liabilities	970.171
<b>Total</b>	<b>14.178.398</b>		<b>14.178.398</b>



## Why We Rewild



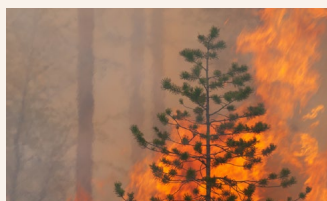
### ○ Providing hope and purpose

Rewilding generates a better future for people and nature. While it leads to a richer, more vital tomorrow, rewilding encourages practical action and collaboration today.



### ○ Reversing biodiversity loss

Rewilding safeguards and enhances biodiversity by creating space for species to return, including wildlife that drives ecological processes.



### ○ Climate mitigation

Rewilding can play a critical role in helping us to mitigate the scale and impact of global warming by storing carbon and preventing severe flooding and wildfires.



### ○ Economic opportunities

Rewilding boosts local economies by creating new sources of sustainable, long-term revenue for businesses and communities.

# Join the rewilding movement

As we work to make Europe a wilder place, Rewilding Europe is always looking to collaborate with private, corporate and public partners, such as foundations, companies, institutions and private individuals.

## We invite you to become a:

### **Technical partner**

To achieve our mission and generate impact, collaborating with technical partners is crucial for us. We warmly invite organisations and initiatives, research and technical institutions, fellow rewilding organisations, media production companies and any other kinds of organisations to join forces and provide pro-bono support and know-how, and become our technical partner.

### **Financial partner**

If you are an organisation, public or private institution, foundation or company with the ability and desire to help us making Europe a wilder place, we warmly invite you to become our financial partner. As our partner you believe in Rewilding Europe's approach, and your financial support can significantly contribute to our success at a European level. As we are building a differentiated financial base,

we offer you the opportunity to support us in different ways, such as through earmarked or un-earmarked funding, grants or investments. We warmly invite you to become a Rewilding Europe patron or major donor, or to explore a corporate partnership with us. Tailor-made partnerships are always possible.

### **Corporate engagement principles**

Working with companies as they seek to become involved in nature recovery in Europe is a tremendous opportunity to create real rewilding gains across the continent.

The corporate sector has an important role to play in advancing our rewilding mission. In these collaborations and partnerships, we always seek a direct connection to our mission and clear rewilding benefits with lasting, measurable outcomes. Rewilding Europe has designed Principles of Corporate Engagement for successful engagements with the corporate sector.

## Leave an enduring legacy

If you want future generations to enjoy a wilder Europe which benefits both people and nature, please consider supporting our work with a gift in your will. Your family and loved ones naturally come first, but we hope that you will also remember Rewilding Europe. This is a personal matter and your decision to make in your own time. We're here to help if you need us.

[rewilding-europe.com/join-us/legacy](https://rewilding-europe.com/join-us/legacy)



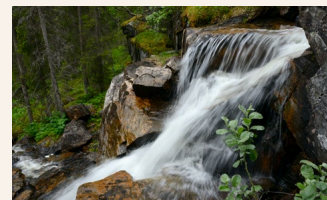


## Your support matters at every level

You can also make a contribution to the rewilding movement by:

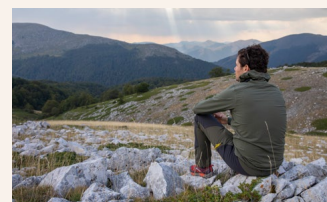
- ➔ Making an online donation through our website
- ➔ Promoting rewilding via social media by sharing articles
- ➔ Organising fundraising activities
- ➔ Visiting one of the rewilding landscapes
- ➔ Joining the European Rewilding Network with your own rewilding initiative

More at: [rewildingeurope.com/join-us](https://rewildingeurope.com/join-us)



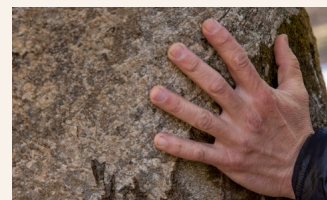
### ○ People's health and wellbeing

Clean air, fertile soil, good health, and well-being. Naturally functioning ecosystems deliver a huge range of benefits essential to human existence.



### ○ Identity and pride

Rewilding brings people together, generating synergy and a sense of pride. With new opportunities available, younger generations return to abandoned landscapes.



### ○ Reconnecting with nature

Experiencing the thrill of wild nature reconnects people with our living planet. Building an enduring relationship with nature makes people healthier and happier.



### ○ Nature is our best ally!

It is available as a cost-effective, pragmatic, proven solution – right now.



# A heartfelt thank you

From funding partners, donors, investors, advisors, scientists and photographers, to conservationists, entrepreneurs, and all other supporters – a diverse range of organisations and individuals provided invaluable support to Rewilding Europe in 2023.

To all those who helped us move forward, we truly appreciate your support and look forward to continued cooperation in the years to come. We are also deeply grateful to the increasing number of private individuals who supported us with donations in 2023.









# Rewilding Europe®

Making Europe a Wilder Place



Rewilding Europe wants to make Europe a wilder place, with more space for wild nature, wildlife and natural processes. In bringing back the variety of life, we will explore new ways for people to enjoy and earn a fair living from the wild.

Let's make Europe a wilder place together!



[www.rewildingeurope.com](http://www.rewildingeurope.com)

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