

Vets take action to save Poland's lynx

January 30 2012, by Jonathan Fowler



Veterinarians Andrzej Fedaczynski and Agnieszka Naroznowska carry a lynx named Benek at a wild animals care centre in Przemyśl on January 16. Eradicated from much of Europe 150 years ago, lynx still roam the continent's forested north and east. Europe's population of Eurasian lynx is estimated at 7,500 to 8,000, excluding those in Russia, with the bulk found in Romania, Scandinavia and the Baltic.

Growling furiously, Benek the lynx cub looks up with baleful eyes as a veterinarian squats by his cage and takes aim with a tranquiliser gun.

"It'll take a half hour to knock him out," says Jakub Kotowicz, vice-president of the Rehabilitation Centre for Protected Animals in Przemyśl, southeastern Poland.

The feline snarls as the dart strikes its haunch, but minutes later is toying kitten-like with another pink, fluffy-tailed missile which went off target.

"If he was a bear, we'd need a whole night to get him under," jokes the centre's head Radoslaw Fedaczynski.

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Europe's population of Eurasian lynx is estimated at 7,500 to 8,000 -- excluding those in Russia -- with the bulk found in Romania, Scandinavia and the Baltic states.

An estimated 200 of the solitary wildcats live in Poland, mostly clustered near the northeastern borders with Belarus, Lithuania and Russia's Kaliningrad territory and in the southern Carpathian Mountains, Benek's home turf.

The Eurasian lynx is in far better shape than its critically-endangered Spanish and Portuguese cousin the [Iberian lynx](#), about 100 of which remain in the wild.

But life isn't easy and Benek -- Polish for "Benny" -- is lucky.

After becoming separated from his mother, and too young to hunt game properly, he emerged from the forest.

Locals called the care centre after finding him just before Christmas in Bircza, a village 27 kilometres (17 miles) from Przemyśl.



Map of Europe showing the distribution of the Eurasian lynx

"He was trying to catch chickens from the region's farms but got chased up a tree by some dogs. When we found him, he was starving, exhausted and needed our help," said Andrzej Fedaczynski, 52, who with his son Radoslaw runs the regular veterinary practice doubling as a voluntary care centre for [wild animals](#).

Benek has been getting the best care possible: shots, glucose and medication to boost his metabolism.

He's the fifth lynx to have passed through in three years.

"We don't want to be a lynx sanctuary. Our goal is to get them back to the wild," said Radoslaw. "They have an excellent instinct for self-preservation."

The tranquilised Benek is carried limp-limbed from the isolated cage where he is being kept to stop him getting used to humans, past a domestic cat about to be seen by a vet. It freezes in its owners lap.

"He weighed much less than he should, so we can't use his weight to determine his age. But size and external appearance tell us he's between six and 12 months old," said Kotowicz.

"It's hard to say when we'll be able to let him go. For now he's too weak. We only have 200 lynx in Poland, so each one is very valuable for the local ecosystem. We have to be 100 percent sure he'll cope in the wild," he added.

Benek is regaining his appetite for a normal lynx diet of deer and smaller game.

But if he reaches his third birthday -- and sexual maturity -- he will be an exception.

"Only one in four lynx actually make it to sexual maturity," according to Urs Breitenmoser of the Swiss-based International Union for Conservation of Nature.

"It's a balance between different odds," he told AFP in a telephone interview.

Hunted, often by the ruling elite, until the fall of Poland's communist regime in 1989, lynx have since enjoyed legal protection.

But Krzysztof Schmidt of Poland's Mammal Research Institute insists the threats are still manifold here.

Shrinking forests have restricted their territory, and the thinning of

woodlands makes it harder for lynx to stalk or hide out to rest, he said.

"Then there's the development of road networks in terms of further habitat fragmentation, roadkills to a lesser extent, and poaching, although that's not very significant," he added.

"Overall, I don't think it's a paradise for lynx. However, they're still lucky here," he said.

Schmidt contrasted Poland with the Baltic state of Estonia, home to around 800 lynx, between 80 and 180 of which are hunted annually for fur and skull trophies under a legal quota.

There is good news for some of those felines: plans are underway to use up to 40 Estonian lynx to repopulate the forest wilderness of northeast Poland's Mazuria region.

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Citation: Vets take action to save Poland's lynx (2012, January 30) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-01-vets-action-poland-lynx.html>

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