

# Folkloric and a national symbol: saving the Balkan Lynx

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In Albania, legend has it that staring into the almond-shaped eyes of the Balkan Lynx renders you blind.

But today, sightings of the rare wildcat have become so unlikely that conservationists have raised a red flag about its future.

Only about 40 individuals of the animal still roam the mountains of Albania and neighbouring Macedonia, according to estimates by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which in 2015 classed the "Lynx lynx balcanicus" as critically endangered.

Since 2006 a regional initiative has been under way aimed at preventing the lynx from becoming extinct.

Now, Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro are all part of the programme to expand protection zones for the Balkan Lynx, raise awareness, especially among youngsters, and combat deforestation and poaching.

It is a challenge, but there are signs of hope.

## **Sightings**

"This lynx was spotted on April 16 at 3:50 a.m.", says Aleksander Trajce, head of Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania.

Examining the photograph of what looks like a big spotted cat with very pointed ears walking in the snow through the night, his excitement is obvious.



In the 1970s, the region had about 280 Balkan Lynxes, according to biodiversity experts, but civil unrest, poaching and habitat destruction have all taken a toll

The image was captured, he explains, by dedicated cameras, set up on the mountain of Munella, in northeastern Albania.

The possible sighting of the Balkan Lynx—an adult female—is encouraging for those fighting to save it.

"All proof documenting the presence and the reproduction of lynx, little or adult, is a hope for the survival" of the species, said Dime Melovski, of the Macedonian Ecological Society.

The Balkan Lynx "is the most jeopardised lynx in the world", he added.

## Patchy regional presence

The population is currently concentrated in Albania and Macedonia.

"Two, or even possibly three, individuals have equally been spotted in the mountains of Kosovo," Trajce said.

But he added that it was not possible to say if they originated from among those already known about in Albania and had wandered across, or were a separate line of reproduction.



Albania suffered rampant deforestation in the 1990s, destroying the habitat and hunting ground of the lynx

And Melovski said it was "currently considered unlikely" for there to be any Balkan Lynx in Montenegro and Greece.

## 'Critical'

The number of Balkan Lynx has been falling strongly "for years", said Elvana Ramaj, the Albanian environment ministry's official in charge of biodiversity.

She said it had now reached a "critical" point for the animal's existence.

In the 1970s, the region had had about 280 individual Balkan Lynxes, according to biodiversity experts.

But the impact of civil unrest, an unstable socioeconomic transition, poaching and habitat destruction have all taken a toll.

Albania suffered rampant deforestation in the 1990s, destroying the habitat and hunting ground of the lynx.

Poaching has been another factor in its demise, although in Albania it is becoming increasingly rare and much less socially accepted.



As well as the IUCN, the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats has also reinforced the level of protection for the Balkans Lynx since March

In March 2015, a baby lynx was killed by a hunter in the Munella mountain forest, sparking a strong reaction throughout the country.

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## **National symbol**

In a zoo on northern Albania's Shkodra Lake, a yowling male Balkan

Lynx is testimony to the injury that humans can inflict on animals.

Trailing its left leg, whose tendons were cut in a trap nine years ago, it limps around its cage.

In the wild, "he would be dead, he would not feed himself, nor withstand the cold," said Sokol Kota, the 37-year old zookeeper.

Apart from behind the bars of a cage, or on the face of Macedonia's five denar coin—the animal is the Macedonian national symbol—it is difficult to see a lynx.

As well as their rarity, the felines usually only venture out in the evening or at night to feed on squirrels and rabbits.



In the wild, lynxes usually only venture out in the evening or at night to feed on squirrels and rabbits

During the day, they sleep, safely hidden away in western Macedonia's mountainous national park of Mavrovo and Albania's Munella peak.

## **Tracking**

But to protect the species, it is also necessary to observe it in order to understand its movements.

For that reason, Albanian researchers in March set up a trap to capture a lynx in the Munella region so they could put a transmitter collar on to track it.

They hope to be able to intervene and rescue it, if necessary.

In February last year, a female lynx named Maya was tagged—as a result, Macedonian scientists have been able to confirm that she gave birth the following spring.

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