

# Israel studies new forest home for endangered mountain gazelle

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A mountain gazelle is pictured near a forest in Israel, where scientists say the animals are endangered as development is shrinking their natural habitat

Israel is one of the last places where the endangered mountain gazelle roams in the wild but, as development shrinks their natural savannah habitat, ecologists are studying if they can also thrive in forests.

Wildlife experts hope their population can recover in woodlands like the Forest of the Martyrs west of Jerusalem, where six million trees were planted after World War II, reflecting the number of Jews killed in the Holocaust.

To study how the animals are adapting to their new environment and [food sources](#), a team at the Volcani Center, Israel's agricultural research organisation, has been collecting their droppings to study the quality of their diets.

Armed with small shovels, they walked its foliage-covered paths recently which led team leader Guy Dovrat and his staff to what they call "a station", delighted to find the small dark pellets deposited by the animals.

Analysis already suggests the slender herbivores can indeed adapt to the [forest](#) ecosystem, Dovrat said.

Gazelles are still found in northern and southern Israel, near the coastline and in the Jerusalem area, Dovrat said, with forests now constituting "the last large open spaces where gazelles can live".

The International Union for Conservation of Nature placed the mountain gazelle on its "Red List" in 2017, saying its population was declining due to poaching, road kills and [habitat degradation](#).

Endemic to the Levant, their population in Israel is now estimated at about 5,000, but falling due to urbanisation and other pressures, according to Yoram Yom-Tov of Tel Aviv University and Uri Roll of Ben Gurion University in Beersheva.



A man rides a motorcycle past mountain gazelles, which face threats from such traffic as well as predators and hunting, despite it being prohibited in Israel

### **'Last stronghold'**

New roads, towns and homes in Israel have reduced the animals' habitat, fragmented their territories and isolated gazelle populations, the two scientists note in an article published in *Oryx*, The International Journal of Conservation.

The animals also face threats from cars, predators like wolves or jackals, and even hunting, although it is prohibited in Israel.





A researcher from the Volcani Center, Israel's agricultural research organisation, places a camera on a tree to monitor mountain gazelles in a forest near Moshav Mesilat Tzion, west of Jerusalem

The article noted that despite Israel being the mountain [gazelle's](#) "last stronghold", populations there too are declining and not meeting their full reproductive potential.

Dovrat, for his study, joined forces with the Jewish National Fund which manages the Forest of the Martyrs, planted in 1951.

"We have set up this partnership to see how in the future we can use data (on gazelles) to better manage the forest," said Yahel Porat, 45, an ecologist and landscape gardener at the JNF.



Conservationists have been planting vegetation that the gazelles favour in Israel's Forest of the Martyrs in the hope they can thrive there

One way of aiding the gazelles is planting vegetation they favour, Porat said.

Dovrat's team was also installing cameras on trees to capture the movement of gazelles and to estimate their number.

"It's important for us to know where there are gazelles to adapt our activity in the forest, to avoid disturbing them and to keep from pushing them towards the roads," Porat said.

The JNF has recently put in place ecological bridges over roads to allow gazelles to move from forest to forest, he said.

"It's one of the most important things we can do today to preserve them."

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