

The Carpathian Mountains: A refuge for wildlife and a “paradise” for the people of Slovakia

by Ted Bailey

Although the fireweed was in bloom and brown bears, wolves, lynx roamed the surrounding forests; we were not hiking on the Kenai Peninsula or even in Alaska. Despite the similarities we were thousands of miles away in Central Europe’s Carpathian Mountains in eastern Slovakia. My wife, daughter and I had traveled here in July to find four little villages where my grandparents lived over a hundred years ago before they emigrated at a young age to America in search of a better life. We eventually found the villages as we traveled by car throughout the eastern regions of Slovakia known as Spis and Zemplin. Spis is a mountainous region that borders the southern boundary of Poland. Zemplin has wide valleys separated by mountainous ridges that border the western boundary of the Ukraine.

The Carpathian Mountains extend in a wide arc from Romania in the east northwestward through the Ukraine, Slovakia, southern Poland to the Czech Republic and the eastern tip of Austria; they cover more of Slovakia—seventy-one percent of the country’s area—than any of these other Central European countries. Geologically speaking the Carpathians are relatively young mountains that were formed less than 65 million years ago during the early Tertiary Period. Although they are mainly composed of flysch formations—alternating layers of sandstone and shale—they also contain regions of limestone deposits known as ‘karst’ that contain numerous and deep caves. They are relatively low mountains with only about five percent of the mountains extending above timberline.

Visiting Slovakia was an enjoyable experience. The countryside we traveled in was picturesque with gently rolling to rugged topography covered with forests and fields. Tiny villages clustered around churches with colorful tall spires. In some places we felt like we were in Alaska, in other places we felt like we were in the hardwood forests of the eastern United States because over forty percent of Slovakia is forested.

Slovakia is a relatively small country only about

half the size of state of Kentucky. It is also a relatively new country having gained its most recent independence a mere twelve years ago after the collapse of the Soviet Union. And Slovakia joined the European Union in 2004 only a year ago. The huge, stark, tall and gray housing complexes built in the country’s largest cities of Bratislava and Kosice during the communist era contrasted with the beautifully restored old city centers where Gothic cathedrals and old palaces are attractions for visitors.

One day we hiked a trail into the Slovensky Raj, one of nine national parks and fourteen protected nature territories in Slovakia. The park was the first protected nature area established in Slovakia back in 1964 when the country was still a part of the Czechoslovak Republic. Slovensky Raj was established as a national park in 1988 and was recognized as an important area of biodiversity in Europe in 1994. Although brown bears, wolves, lynx inhabit the park; we did not expect to be so fortunate to actually see one of these most endangered large carnivores in Europe. And after conducting studies on lynx, wolves and brown bears on the Kenai Peninsula, I also knew the chance of observing such elusive carnivores while hiking a highly used public trail was low.

In most of Europe, with the exception of the boreal forest regions of the Scandinavian countries and Russia, the large carnivores—brown bears, wolves and lynx—had been driven to extinction or extreme rarity long ago primarily to protect livestock as the human population expanded. These carnivores were even extirpated from the rugged Alps Mountains areas of Europe. But brown bears, wolves and lynx continued to survive in the countries within Central Europe’s Carpathian Mountains region including Slovakia.

Despite the vast distance, the Eurasian brown bears in Slovakia were the same species, *Ursus arctos*, as those living here on the Kenai Peninsula. Brown bears along with many other species of animals and plants are a circumpolar species, which means brown bears are the most numerous of the three large European carnivores. Their population is currently es-

timated at around 8,000 in the Carpathian Mountain region. Except for problem individuals, brown bears are protected throughout Slovakia and the country currently supports the second highest population of brown bears, about 700-800, in the Carpathian Mountain region; Romania supports most of Europe's brown bears. In the fall, brown bears feed on beechnuts and acorns. According to one report I read brown bears have never killed a human in Slovakia during the past 100 years.

The Eurasian wolf is also the same species of wolf, *Canus lupus*, which we have on the Kenai Peninsula. It is also the second-most abundant large carnivore and is widespread throughout the Carpathian Mountain region numbering an estimated 3,900 individuals; Slovakia supports an estimated 300-450 wolves. Wolves in the Carpathians feed mainly on red and roe deer and wild boar. They are now considered a game animal and are regularly hunted except in the nature reserves. The wolf population in Slovakia is believed to be declining from overhunting and poaching but there is currently an effort to educate the public about the ecological value of wolves and use trained guard dogs to prevent wolves from attacking livestock.

The lynx inhabiting the Carpathian Mountains is the Eurasian lynx, or *Lynx lynx*, a much larger species than the North American lynx, *Lynx canadensis* that inhabits the Kenai Peninsula. The Eurasian lynx commonly weighs around 40 pounds and often has large spots on its pelage. It preys on roe deer—a small European deer, as well as other small game species. There are about 400-500 lynx in Slovakia, and Slovak lynx have been used for reintroduction purposes in Slovenia, Italy, France, Switzerland, Austria, Germany and the Czech Republic. Some now believe that lynx in the Carpathian Mountain region are the most vulnerable species of the three large carnivores (brown bears, wolves and lynx) because of over hunting, poaching, and decreasing populations of natural prey.

In addition to these large carnivores the Slovensky Raj park supports a diversity of plants and other animals. Forests cover 90 percent of the park in three elevation zones: oak forests are found in the lowest, fir forests in middle, and fir-spruce forests at the high-

est elevations. There are over 930 plant species in the park including 35 protected species and six endemics (species that are found only in Slovensky Raj park). The park's brochure said there are over 4000 species of invertebrates, including an amazing 2000 species of butterflies, 400 species of beetles and 150 species of mollusks in the park. There are also 200 species of vertebrates including bear, fox, wolf, wildcat, deer, boar, and marten. A total of 165 protected or threatened animals live in the park.

The English translation of the park's name Slovensky Raj, means "Slovak Paradise". Carthusian monks first used the Slovak word for "paradise" to describe a secluded monastery they built in this peaceful region in 1543. Today the park is indeed a "paradise" for the Slovak people and other Europeans who converge on the park primarily to seek peace and solitude by hiking its extensive system of trails and viewing its beautiful scenery.

We never saw a brown bear, wolf, or a lynx while hiking in the park but as we were leaving a dark-brown mammal with a bushy tail dashed across the trail in front of us. I wanted to believe it was a European pine marten but my wife and daughter convinced me that it was a squirrel, probably the Eurasian tree squirrel. But like hiking the trails on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, it was gratifying just to know that brown bears, wolves and lynx may have been watching us from their secluded hiding places as we hiked along the trail. And after traveling through the wooded countryside of eastern Slovakia I was struck by the thought that perhaps my grandparents who left this area so long ago probably felt right at home in the rural and wooded landscapes of North America where they eventually settled and lived for the remainder of their lives.

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