

# BEAR WITNESS

THE MARSICAN BROWN BEAR IS TEETERING ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION — ITS NUMBERS BROUGHT PERILOUSLY LOW DUE TO HUMAN INTERFERENCE. BUT REWILDING AND CONSERVATION INITIATIVES IN ITALY'S ABRUZZO NATIONAL PARK MEAN THE ANIMAL'S NUMBERS ARE FINALLY ON THE RISE. WORDS: SIMON USBORNE

When Umberto Esposito was 14, he left his home in Pescasseroli to go for a hike with two friends. It was September, and the boys, who'd grown up in the mountain town in Abruzzo National Park, wanted to see deer during the breeding season. Esposito took with him an old film camera and some binoculars.

As the trio reached the edge of a high mountain meadow in the Central Apennines, heavy rain forced them to stop. Beneath beech trees, blueberry bushes were laden with fruit. The wind that had carried the rain was approaching from the trees, taking their human scent with it. "It was then that I saw them," Umberto recalls, as we hike in the same range, almost 25 years later.

The boys had disturbed a family of bears gorging on berries before their hibernation. There were three adults, one of which had two cubs. "She was standing up facing me, only 10 metres away, with a cub each side of her," Umberto says, recalling being rooted to the spot while his friends ran away. "I knew that if I didn't have pictures, nobody would believe me. I took the last two frames on my film and prayed."

Realising the teenagers posed no threat, the bears retreated into the woods. Umberto had never seen a bear and eyeballing a predator twice his size was to change his life. "I said in my mind then, 'I need to make something of this because it's one of the most magical things I have seen,'" he adds.

he adds. "Thinking back, it was the moment I decided I had to do something to protect them."

Abruzzo's bears remain in great need of protection. The Marsican brown bear (also known as the Apennine brown), a subspecies of the more numerous Eurasian brown bear, is critically endangered. There are no more than 60 left across a patchwork of national and regional parks, villages and farmland, with most found in the Abruzzo National Park, in central Italy. I'm hiking in its northeastern quarter with Umberto, not far from Pescasseroli — a town with a renowned pastry pit stop, Bar dell'Orso, named for the local bears.

In the middle of October, a few weeks before hibernation begins, the leaves of the centuries-old beech trees that cover the high valley are turning a glorious gold, which the autumn sun only burnishes further. Umberto, a guide with Wildlife Adventures, a company he cofounded in 2009, puts my chances of seeing a bear at "about two in five". To increase these odds, we'll be staying overnight in a *rifugio*, a mountain cabin that his company created on the site of an abandoned shepherd's hut.

Although Marsican brown bears pose little threat to humans, they've reason to fear us. In the past, the animal was treated as a pest due to its tendency to raid apiaries, as well as orchards and other crops. Dozens have died as a result of poaching, poisoning and encounters with cars, cattle and stray dogs. Their dwindling

numbers have only compounded their peril, with a high level inbreeding often resulting in depression and disease.

In 2011, when conservationists here spotted only one mother with cubs, extinction loomed like a storm cloud. In 2013, the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* ran a story detailing a plot to kill dozens of bears with poisoned bait.

## Conservation in action

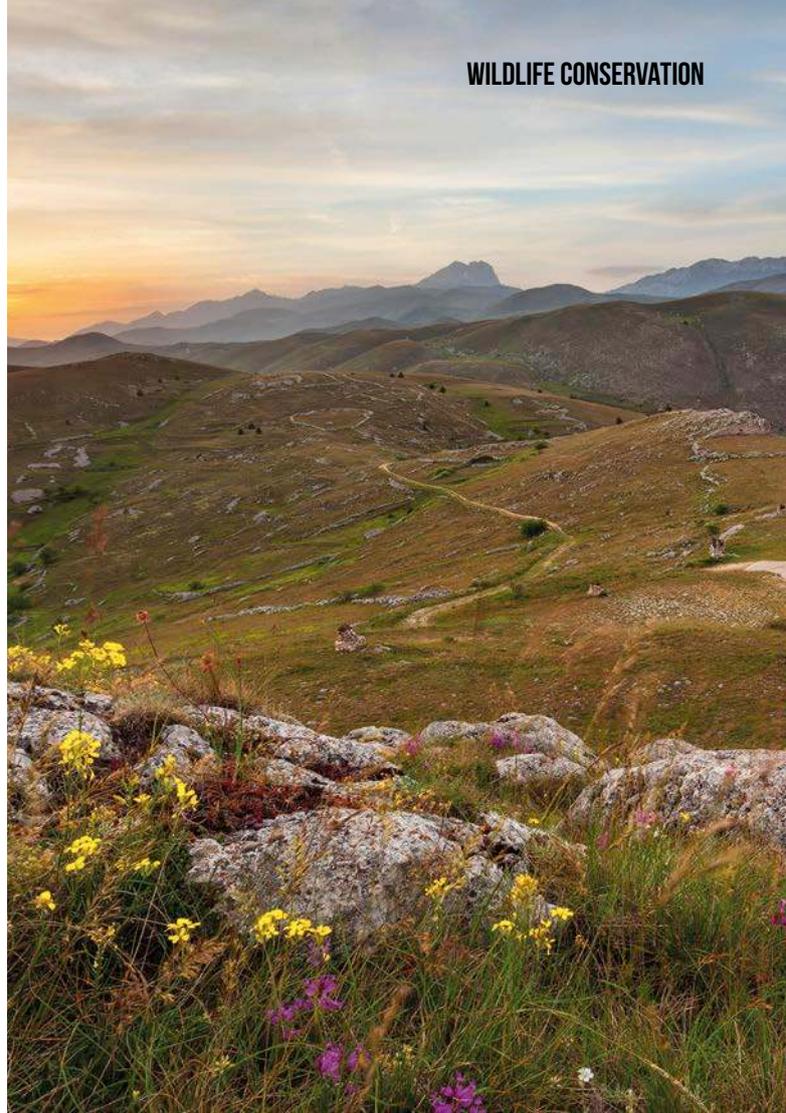
Umberto and his business partner and fellow guide, Valeria Roselli, who joins us for the weekend, have long fought to increase awareness and protection. But organised efforts have only recently gathered pace. In 2012, newly established Abruzzo-based non-profit association Salviamo L'Orso ('save the bear') began to focus minds and funds on a series of initiatives aimed at protecting the bear as an umbrella species, which is a group with large area requirements whose conservation is of particular benefit to the whole ecosystem.

Conservation measures are varied. They include vaccinating dogs to reduce the chance of bears picking up infections; sturdy gates and electric fencing around orchards, beehives and livestock; thousands of blue reflectors along roads to deter bears at night; and increased monitoring, GPS tracking and camera traps.

Some of the funding for Salviamo L'Orso's work has come from an unlikely source: Paul Lister, heir to the MFI furniture fortune. In 2000, Paul established The European

## CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Marsican Brown Bear, a critically endangered species; Gran Sasso d'Italia, Apennines; bear footprints in Abruzzo National Park; signpost for the Rifugio Terraegna in the Coppo del Morto beech forest





Marsican brown bear,  
Abruzzo National Park

## REWILDING RETREATS: EUROPE'S EMERGING NATURE EXPERIENCES

### ENGLAND

Having spent years trying to make his family farm in Sussex viable, Charles Burrell and Isabella Tree gave up altogether and began rewilding the land. Almost 20 years later, Knepp Wildland is a haven for once-rare species such as the turtle dove and peregrine falcon, and only 12 miles from Gatwick Airport. It's also a tourist attraction, offering safaris and glamping. [knepp.co.uk](http://knepp.co.uk)

### GERMANY

Fanning out along the border of Poland and Germany, the Oder Delta is an increasingly wild region that contains both marine and freshwater ecosystems. A shift away from intensive agriculture in recent years has seen an influx of migratory waterbirds, as well as white-tailed eagles. The European Safari Company offers canoe and boat trips. [europeansafaricompany.com](http://europeansafaricompany.com)

### BULGARIA

The Rodopi Mountains, most of which lie in Bulgaria, have long been popular with hikers, thanks to an unspoilt landscape and a stunning array of bears, wolves, golden jackal and otters. The region is also a flagship project for Rewilding Europe, which is working to boost numbers of the once-threatened griffon vulture. [rewildingeurope.com](http://rewildingeurope.com)

### ROMANIA

The European Nature Trust (TENT) began its work in Romania's Carpathian Mountains. Only two-and-a-half hours east of Bucharest, wolves, bears and lynx roam Europe's most unfragmented forest, where bison have been reintroduced. A TENT trip includes a helicopter flight and time with the charity's local partner, Foundation Conservation Carpathia. [theeuropennaturetrust.com](http://theeuropennaturetrust.com)

Nature Trust (TENT); to date, the nature conservation charity has ploughed his family's millions into projects in Scotland — where he bought Highland estate Alladale in 2003 — Romania, Spain and, most recently, Abruzzo. "I've got a bit of a thing for bears and large carnivores," Paul tells me.

In 2019, TENT began offering trips to some of the projects it supports as part of a broader mission to raise awareness, as well as money. Working with Wildlife Adventures, the charity offers private group trips to help support its work and that of Salviamo L'Orso.

On the hike towards the refuge, I see signs of bear activity: hairs caught in a length of barbed wire (its points blunted with a file) pinned to a beech tree against which bears are known to rub. Bears are so loyal to specific trees that many develop curved trunks. They come in the spring to leave scent, as part of the mating process, or before hibernation to mark territory. The hairs left behind can be used to trace activity and for genetic testing.

In high meadows, I see more evidence of the animals: paw prints in the mud at a watering hole. The sun is beginning to set, and I sit on a hill above the water, binoculars raised. I spot deer,

chamois and golden eagles — all of this just two hours by road from Rome — but not even a glimpse of a bear. Valeria puts their reduced activity this season down to a shortage of beech nuts, an ursine staple. "When there are a lot of nuts you know there'll be a good number of cubs," she says. Males can chomp through 12kg of beech nuts in a day.

As darkness falls, we climb further up the valley to the Rifugio Terraegna, easily the best-appointed mountain hut I've stayed in, with flushing toilets and duvets. Over a rustic dinner of sausage and broccoli pasta, Valeria and Umberto tell me that doubling the bear population would secure its future. But to do that, the animals need to be safe and free to roam twice their current territory — adult males require a breeding area of up to 40sq miles.

### Natural defences

By creating protected natural corridors, Salviamo L'Orso hopes to encourage bears to repopulate parts of the Apennines from which they retreated centuries ago. This means planting swathes of beech trees on deforested mountains; their nuts would also sustain wild boars, voles and bird species, boosting the food chain.



Wildlife watching at sunrise,  
Central Apennines

Bear conservation in Abruzzo fits into the wider global movement to rewild landscapes that have been shaped and scarred by human activity. Working with a range of landscapes, from deforested mountain regions such as this to intensively farmed areas, rewilding conservationists want nature to take its course again — even if that means giving it the occasional nudge, where necessary, to help it along in the right direction.

Paul Lister, for example, is a major proponent of the movement in the Scottish Highlands, where wild beasts once roamed thick forest. In the 1980s, his family invested in commercial forestry to fuel its furniture empire. Now he only wants to plant trees and has so far added over a million Scots pine saplings and other native species to Alladale in the past decade. In 2022, a number of Scottish wildcats are due to be released from captivity in the Cairngorms in an attempt to halt their decline. Elsewhere, campaign groups are also calling for the reintroduction of lynx, wolves and — eventually — bears. “I think there’s a growing realisation that denuded landscapes aren’t healthy,” Paul had told me. Rewilding, he argues, also stops soil being stripped away by rain,

thus reducing the risk of floods, and increases the amount of carbon dioxide removed from the atmosphere.

After breakfast, I walk with Umberto and Valeria back down to the valley towards Pescasseroli. We stop in a small clearing for Umberto to check a camera trap. The sealed box has been strapped to a tree facing a rubbing trunk. Motion sensors trigger the recording.

“Take a look,” Umberto says, as he hits ‘play’ on the little screen inside the box. A mother is embracing the tree like it’s an old friend, while two five-month-old cubs copy her, one on either side. “When they were born, they were only 30g, like a packet of pasta,” Valeria says. They’re now 10 times that weight. A third cub died in the summer, probably as a result of a dog attack. The short clip, recorded two days earlier, is captivating — and will be the closest I come to seeing a bear.

Further down the valley, a solitary park ranger climbs quickly through the forest. Germano Palozzi, one of 35 rangers in Abruzzo, is looking for tracks and evidence of illegal hunting. He, too, grew up here. I notice a bear tattoo peeking out from the short sleeve of his khaki uniform. “They’re my passion,” he

says. One of the new challenges they face, Germano explains, is the unintended consequences of raising awareness of bears as an umbrella species and regional mascot (it’s the symbol of the Abruzzo National Park). “Now if a person Instagrams a picture of a bear at an apple tree in the village, 100 people come and surround it,” he explains. The unintended consequences of this are twofold, he adds: bears may feel threatened and attack, while frequent close contact with humans risks weakening the natural fear response wild animals need for survival.

Umberto’s own close encounter as a teenager inspired him to become a guide and champion of the bear, but he says he’d try to avoid it today, preferring instead to marvel at the animals from a distance. Recently, Umberto tells me, he watched through binoculars as two cubs rolled down a hill alongside their mother. It was a moment of carefree play that belied their species’ uncertain future. “It was wonderful, and when we came back down to the village, we knew the bears were in the area for the rest of the evening without disturbance,” he adds, as we end our hike by the road. “This is the best kind of moment we can share.” ☐

## HOW TO DO IT

The European Nature Trust (TENT) can arrange trips to Abruzzo National Park for private groups (8-12). From £1,450 per person for three nights, including two nights’ full-board, at Albergo Villino Quintilliani, and an overnight at Refugio Terraegna, plus a £500 donation to Salviamo l’Orso. Airport transfers from Rome included, but not flights. [theeuropennaturetrust.com](http://theeuropennaturetrust.com)

## MORE INFO

[salviamolorso.it](http://salviamolorso.it)  
[theeuropennaturetrust.com](http://theeuropennaturetrust.com)  
[wildlifeadventures.it/en/terraegna-mountain-hut/villinoquintilliani.it/alladale.com](http://wildlifeadventures.it/en/terraegna-mountain-hut/villinoquintilliani.it/alladale.com)  
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