

Although it's a small eastern European country, Montenegro contains large areas of quietly beautiful and unspoilt mountains, forests, rivers and lakes, which are globally important habitats for resident and migrating birds, as well as brown bears and wolves. Lake Skadar, in particular, is a hidden gem just waiting to be discovered

One hundred and one dalmatians

WORDS BY RICHARD WEBBER



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A dalmatian pelican in its breeding colours

THE OLDER I GET, THE MORE I SEEM TO APPRECIATE THE BEAUTY OF OUR LIVING WORLD. THE “WOW” MOMENTS ARE INCREASING AND ON THIS OCCASION ANOTHER ONE WAS UNFOLDING BEFORE MY EYES.

While the boat cut slowly through the peaceful water, its occupants – myself and five other passengers – gazed with undeniable awe.

“It’s like a pterodactyl,” cried the boy next to me, pointing excitedly at the marvel soaring over our heads. I stared up at the huge bulk and had to agree: its angular shape, broad wings and elongated beak shining in the sun

resembled those frightening flying reptiles from the Jurassic Period. Thankfully, our lives weren’t in danger.

We were gliding along the still waters of Montenegro’s Lake Skadar admiring the dalmatian pelicans at this stunning spot, which has been a protected national park since 1983. For a tiny country, Montenegro has more than its fair share of treasures: not satisfied with the world’s second deepest canyon and Europe’s most southerly fjord, this 27-mile long lake straddling the border with Albania is the largest in the Balkans.

Tranquillity emanates from here and the air is filled with birdsong – not surprisingly it’s an ornithologist’s dream. Home to around 270 bird species – permanent residents and those passing through – it has lain in the shadow of Europe’s more fashionable lakes for far too long.

The national park’s potential for specialist birding and wildlife trips has so far been largely untapped. Today, just a handful of companies spotlight the lake’s many birding opportunities. One such is Undiscovered Montenegro, launched by my hosts, British husband-and-wife team and Lake Skadar residents, Ben and Emma Haywood.

Lake Skadar is a freshwater lake fed by the Moracea – originating high in the northern mountains 70 miles away – as well as myriad underwater springs. It’s best known for the dalmatian pelican colony which has existed here for over 150 years and is among the oldest such colonies recorded.

Surrounded by lofty peaks, the lake marks the westerly edge of the species’ breeding sites. This year has been a record for the birds with over 100 residents. But fluctuating water levels (the lake’s circumference can increase from 360 sq km to 520 [140 to 200 sq miles] in winter) pose a serious risk and can devastate the colony’s fragile nests.

Pelicans breed on small islets of accumulated peat, sometimes no bigger than a few ➤



Surrounded by lofty peaks, Lake Skadar marks the westerly edge of the pelicans' breeding sites



This page, clockwise from top: Lake Skadar and its surrounding mountains; a demoiselle dragonfly; the rich wetland habitat of this area of Montenegro; Dalmatian pelicans are now a protected species on Lake Skadar. *Right:* an adult fat dormouse



square feet – enough to keep them relatively safe from land predators. But the breeding zone, on the northern section of the lake close to the Albanian border in an area called Hum Bay, remains vulnerable to the elements. Ideas being considered to increase its stability include building a raft-like structure, a solid platform secured to the bottom of the lake by pillars. Unfortunately, potential problems include an unstable lake bed of layered peat.

This year, no sudden water rises, coupled with major improvements in the practices of national park wardens, have helped the pelicans. However, other threats exist, including disturbance. From 2001, hunting has been prohibited but the breeding area is still used as a short-cut for fishing and recreational purposes.

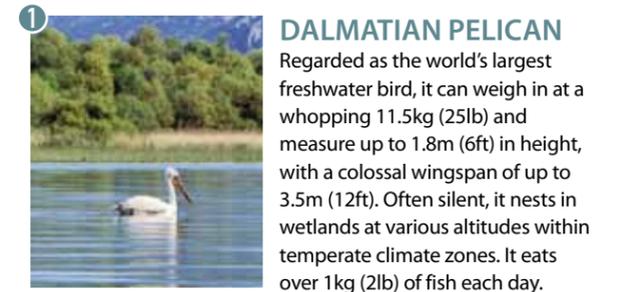
In summer the pelicans are scattered across the lake. Observing the bird is an experience at any time but its appearance is most impressive during the breeding season when its pouch and lower mandible turn bright orange. If you're lucky enough to see them roosting on a sunny day, have your camera ready because they open their bill – which at around 45cm (18in) is the second longest in the bird world – and flap their pouch to cool off.

The breeding zone is remote and unapproachable by car or foot. The only way to see it is by boat. Small motor launches sail from various small towns and villages fringing the shoreline, particularly Virpazar, the Gateway to the National Park, which sits at the confluence of three rivers.

For 2015, Undiscovered Montenegro is planning small-group kayaking trips, exploring the lake's old smuggling channels, paddling through swathes of lily pads and getting close to the birds' habitat without disturbing the residents. All pelicans' well-being is paramount and kayakers are



TOP 5 BIRDS TO SEE IN MONTENEGRO



DALMATIAN PELICAN

Regarded as the world's largest freshwater bird, it can weigh in at a whopping 11.5kg (25lb) and measure up to 1.8m (6ft) in height, with a colossal wingspan of up to 3.5m (12ft). Often silent, it nests in wetlands at various altitudes within temperate climate zones. It eats over 1kg (2lb) of fish each day.



PYGMY CORMORANT

The smallest of all cormorants and most dependent on freshwater, the pygmy breeds in southeast Europe and southwest Asia and is partially migratory. It chooses rivers, lakes and large pools, using sticks and reeds for its nests. Both parents play a part in incubating young which become independent after 70 days.



SQUACCO HERON

Inhabiting lakes and freshwater wetlands, the squacco heron chooses trees, dense vegetation or other areas above water level for its nest. It is small and stocky with a distinctive brown back and snow white wings, tail and stomach. Its diet consists of larval insects but it's also known to eat small fish.



GOLDEN EAGLE

Spotted in the mountainous regions, golden eagles like to nest on cliffs, where the female lays up to four eggs. With a wing-span up to 2.5m (8ft), adults are dark brown with paler colouring on the back of their crown and nape. It's reputedly the most widely distributed eagle, and the best-known raptor in Europe.



SHORT-TOED SNAKE EAGLE

Usually identified by its white underside and short neck, this eagle has been declining in recent years. It feeds mainly on snakes and lizards and lives up to 17 years. It hovers like a kestrel and has bright yellow eyes. Adults have a wing-span of around 1.8m (6ft).

EuroNatur

One of the internationally active nature conservation foundation's aims is to protect migrating birds as they cross Europe

Based in Germany, EuroNatur was established to protect the European nature heritage. One of the main aims is safeguarding migrating birds' breeding grounds and winter resting places in Europe. The wetlands of Montenegro's Lake Skadar and nearby salt flats at Ulcinj are globally important resting places for at least 23 migratory water birds species.



The outflow of Lake Skadar (known as Buna in Albania and Bojana in Montenegro) creates a natural corridor of various habitats, including wet meadows, saltwater lagoons and riparian forests. The

river also forms a large delta with extraordinary biodiversity.

EuroNatur (www.euronatur.org) regards the pressure on nature to be great, especially since the political upheaval of the early 1990s. Since then there are dangers from, among others, the uncontrolled development, illegal poaching, unregulated leisure activities and the construction of dams in areas that will impact directly on Lake Skadar and its surroundings. EuroNatur, together with local partner organisations in Montenegro and Albania, has mapped the precious natural features of the region to prove its ecological value and show how proposed

nature reserves can function successfully. The organisation has been working intensively to ensure the proper management of nature reserves and protective regulations are enforced, which is key to achieving the aim of protecting the wildlife in these regions.

To date, EuroNatur's efforts in Montenegro have seen areas of the country's most unique landscape come under statutory protection; some environmental information structure has been established, not only to offer information on the conservation areas but to point out the hunting bans in force in the salt flats of Ulcinj. Regular controls of illegal bird-hunting activities have been improving the situation for migrating birds to a significant extent too.

The organisation is campaigning for the connection of the separate habitats found in Montenegro with those found in neighbouring Albania. The aim of this is to create a "cross-border paradise" for the benefit of birds and many other forms of wildlife.

required to maintain a distance of at least 300m (984ft), a national park rule which applies until the chicks are 15 days old. Pelicans are delicate breeders and if spooked can flee their nests, leaving eggs exposed for hours. Inclement weather can mean eggs not hatching.

If you're hiking, you should head for the observation point at the top of a hill named Hum, above the village of Podhum; it's the only elevated point on this portion of the shore. Being some two miles away from the breeding site, though, a good pair of binoculars is essential.

But Lake Skadar, which averages around 4.5m (15ft) in depth during summer, isn't just about dalmatian pelicans. Its rocky shoreline and wetland areas are home to a myriad of birds, including 20,000 pygmy cormorants, the world's second largest colony. Although the cormorant is common around the globe, the pygmy variation is only found in shallow freshwater wetlands. While the birds suffered a rapid decline during the 20th century, they're now flourishing.

Pygmy cormorants favour the southern part of the lake, nesting in deep, cup-shaped masses of reeds and sticks. Keep your eyes peeled for these black bodied birds, the distinctive characteristics of which include long tail feathers and a fluffed-up, quiff-like hairdo.

Various herons, including the squacco, are often seen mingling with colonies of pygmy cormorants. If you can't spot one, you'll certainly know they're present by their ear-piercing squawk, often given at night. Their almost tan-coloured back

and white feathers on stomach and wings mean they are a particularly attractive bird, as are the kingfishers and little egrets – the list is endless. Other members of the species seen on the lake include the black heron. Normally found in Africa, south of the Sahara Desert, it was a frequent visitor to this birding hotspot during the 1980s. Later, sightings became virtually non-existent but in more recent times the occasional bird has been recorded. With

An adult dice snake on the shores of Lake Skadar





There are plans for kayaking trips, paddling through swathes of lily pads and getting close to the birds' habitat without disturbing them



Clockwise from right: a young European brown bear; the Bjelovac Cascade on the River Tara; whiskered terns guarding a nest; a Hermann's tortoise; the River Crnojevica flowing round Pavlova Strana



their distinctive dark plumage, black herons boast an unusual method of hunting – canopy feeding – where they utilise their wings like an umbrella to create an area of shade over the water to attract prey.

But it's not just birdlife living in and around Lake Skadar. Cast your eyes into the water itself to see terrapins, including the highly endangered Balkan terrapin. Research financed by the UK-based Rufford Foundation, which offers grants for conservation projects, is being conducted by the Montenegro Ecologists Society to establish, if possible, the distribution and population status of the terrapin.

In no such trouble are the Hermann's tortoises with their attractive black and yellow patterned carapace. They leave their shelter – usually hollows under bushes – in the early morning to warm up their bodies and forage for food before returning at the hottest part of the day.

Evident in central and southern parts of Montenegro, usually in forests, the tortoises also wander into villages,

looking for food in gardens and orchards. Little research has been conducted on the reptile but it's believed the number living within a hectare of land can be as high as 200.

No trip to Montenegro would be complete without exploring the mountains. With the entire coastline enjoying a mountainous backdrop you don't have to travel far before you're surrounded by soaring peaks and deep gorges such as the Tara Canyon, the second deepest in the world at more than 1,200m (4,000ft).

If you can brave the vertiginous E80 highway snaking its way inland, head for the Moracea Canyon. Despite being dwarfed by its big brother, the Tara, it's still impressive, with perpendicular walls of rock stretching to more than 365m (1,200ft), as the road travels towards the Serbian border.

Durmitor National Park in northwestern Montenegro comprises Mount Durmitor Plateau, with its highest peak over 2,400m (8,000ft), and the vast valley created by the River Tara. Much of the region boasts dense, primeval forests

clinging to mountainous slopes, cliffs and deep gorges, including 500-year-old black pines which have disappeared elsewhere in Europe. Here, areas are so remote that they're virtually inaccessible to humans.

Even more than at Lake Skadar, wildlife holidays are seemingly non-existent here, although trips are undertaken by some operators as part of a larger itinerary. Most wildlife sightings in the isolated northern regions occur while hiking or being involved in other forms of adventure holidays.

Brown bears still roam the thick forests and this year some were spotted crossing mountain roads. It's believed that the population is increasing, although no sophisticated programmes to monitor their habits, movements or population have been implemented. National Park research estimates, however, that Montenegro's bear population numbers are in the hundreds.

Bears, which can measure nearly 4m (13ft) when standing

on hind legs, are forest dwellers, usually moving during the night. Normally, signs of their movement can be seen, but not the animal itself. The timid Balkan lynx is even more elusive and exceptionally scarce – it's believed that only 100 survive.

Sometimes in the mountains the plaintive howl of wolves echoes through the seemingly impenetrable forests. While Durmitor, being a preserved ecosystem, is a good habitat for them, it's believed that their numbers are low. One threat to their survival is humans: people still kill the animal, regarding them as pests and a threat to cattle.

If you are visiting this region, it's best to go with a wide focus: to enjoy the scenery, with any sightings of wildlife or birds viewed as a bonus.

Among the 130 species of birds recorded as breeding in the national park you're most likely to spot black woodpeckers, honey buzzards – normally seen in the coniferous forests feeding on bees and wasps – and, hopefully, golden eagle. The latter patrols a huge territory and is believed to still nest in

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Montenegro; until the 1970s, it was breeding in the hills surrounding Lake Skadar, too.

It may not be as dramatic as other wildlife living in the national park but you're most likely to see the mountain goat called the chamois in this region, especially with the population growing.

There are over 400 within Durmitor and in summer they're seen scampering around open grassland below the peaks. While females and young are seen in herds, adult males lead a solitary life. When the first signs of winter appear, most chamois descend into the canyons to find food and shelter from the harsh months ahead.

All in all, Montenegro has a rich complex of habitats largely unknown by foreign visitors. It's a wildlife secret ripe for exploration.

Above: mist over the Durmitor Plateau. **Right:** great crested grebe



TRIP ADVISER

COST RATING ★★☆☆☆☆

SAMPLE PACKAGE TOUR:

Undiscovered Montenegro offers a guided birdwatching tour of Lake Skadar and nearby Bojana Delta (based on a minimum of two people) from £730 per person, including seven nights' accommodation, welcome dinner and five guided birding excursions with lunch. Flights not included. Tel: 020 3287 0015; www.undiscoveredmontenegro.com

GETTING THERE: Montenegrin Airlines fly direct from Gatwick to Tivat in the southwest between May and October. The only other direct

flight is with Ryanair from Stansted to Podgorica, the capital, which is a 20-minute drive from Lake Skadar. Several airlines from a host of UK airports fly to the Croatian city of Dubrovnik (around 24km [15 miles] from the Montenegrin border), including British Airways and easyJet. The easiest way to travel around Montenegro is by car, and many rental companies operate at the airports.

VISA REQUIREMENTS FROM THE UK: UK passport holders do not need a visa to visit Montenegro.

TIPS & WARNINGS: Crime levels in Montenegro are relatively low, especially in terms of personal violence. Like most destinations, though, there is some petty crime so

keep cars locked and belongings out of sight. During the summer the sun is intense, so bring plenty of sun cream and lip protector. Remember, if you're spending time in a boat, water reflects and intensifies the sun's rays so you're more at risk of sunburn. Drink plenty of liquid, too, to avoid dehydration. For travel advice on vaccinations and health risks, check the National Travel Health Network and Centre's website (www.nathnac.org).

WHEN TO GO: Peak summer months can be busy, particularly along the coast, and temperatures are regularly in the 30s. The high season is arguably the period when birdlife is at its least impressive, too. The shoulder months in spring and autumn are worth considering because the

weather is still very clement and temperatures decent. Winter months can be wet with heavy snow in the mountainous regions, often leaving isolated villages cut off. April and May, in particular, are good months for birdwatchers because it's the breeding season, while September and October are worth considering if migrating birds are your objective.

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