

Slovenia & Croatia, 4th – 6th September 2017

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In August 2017, Jon Hall was invited to represent mammalwatching.com on a study tour to experience Brown Bear watching, which is becoming very popular in the region. As he was unable to attend, fellow site contributor Ralf Bürglin and I stepped in to the breach; being fed, watered and guided around this beautiful part of the world was an arduous task, but somehow we coped. It was a great few days, with superb wildlife, scenery and company; I'm already plotting a return to Slovenia to do this delightful country justice.

Ralf, being far more organised and efficient than me, within days of our return posted a great write-up (with superb photos) of his travels [here](#).

Logistics

The trip was organised as a joint venture between Discover Dinarics and Life DinAlp Bear, who took excellent care of us. Based on the service provided, I'd fully recommend them as tour operators. Any organised bear watching tours will presumably include accommodation similar to ours, as options are currently limited. In Kočevje we stayed at the brand new and rather smart [Bearlog](#) hostel; in Risnjak we were in the basic but comfortable Lazac forest hut.

After the tour I stayed in Hotel Center, Ljubljana, one of plenty of similar-priced good standard hotels and within walking distance of Tivoli Park.

Pre-trip correspondence was conducted through Irena Kavčič from the Biology Department of the University of Ljubljana, in her capacity as ecotourism coordinator of the project. Everything was communicated efficiently and clearly, and she couldn't have been more helpful. Jan Klavora was our local tourism expert and is clearly the go-to guy for any environmentally-minded outdoor tourism, with an inexhaustible knowledge of the area. Our third constant companion was Franc Kljun, also from the Biology Department, who drove one of the vehicles and was a constant source of information on landscape and wildlife matters. All worked tirelessly to make the trip a success and ensure we were well-informed (no mean feat with any large group, let alone one containing wildlife enthusiasts who are prone to wander off looking at something!). They were also great company, and are due huge thanks for their efforts.

In addition to the various local tourism agencies with us every step of the way, we had some great local help. Around Kočevje, Dr Petra Draškovič Pelc accompanied us in the Rog Forest; I can't imagine there's a better guide to the area – her website is [here](#). In Risnjak NP, we were also joined by Marina Habazin and Slaven Reljić, Croatian representatives of Life DinAlp Bear; again, it was a pleasure to have their knowledge and experience on hand.

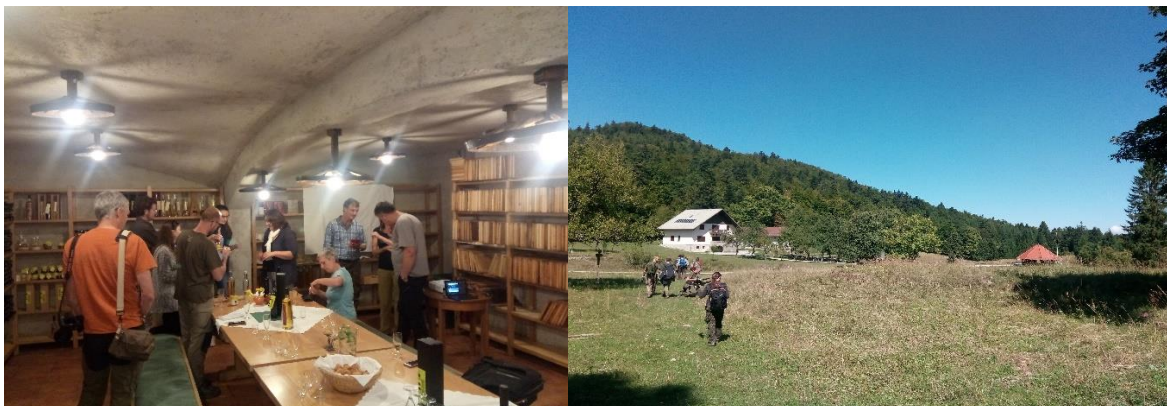
LIFE DinAlp Bear Project

The LIFE DinAlp Bear Project is a multifaceted conservation programme, comprising all aspects of Brown Bear ecology and conservation with the reduction of conflicts between bears and humans. In conjunction with Discover Dinarics, the aim is to promote both responsible ecotourism and local action to avoid problematic interactions with the species. One of the many commendable aspects which they are keen to expand is the "Bear Friendly" accreditation. This label is awarded to food producers, farmers and tour operators who are seen to contribute to the coexistence human activities and wild bears. Essentially, this means avoidance of animals seeing humans as a source of food, while protecting livestock via an effective deterrent. This reduces the incidence of 'problem bears', which would ultimately end up being shot. A great idea, as it reinforces the connections between people and wildlife, and results in some outstandingly tasty products! It would take up far too much space to go into all the details here, but should you want to read further (and you really should!) their respective websites are:

Discover Dinarics - <http://www.discoverdinarics.org/about-us/>

Life DinAlp Bear - <http://dinalpbear.eu/en/>

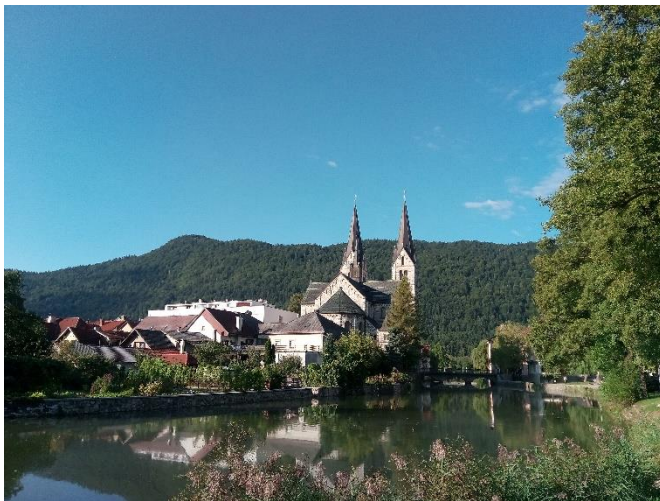
As an aside, the latter project is part-funded by the European Union's LIFE Programme, which financially supports environmental, conservation and climate action projects. One of those great positives of the EU which seems to get a sad lack of recognition, at least in my home country; it is well worth looking at [here](#).



Bears and Bear Watching

It's worth outlining the status of Brown Bears in the Dinaric Alps area; all this information was presented to us in huge detail (and very entertainingly) by Dr Tomaž Skrbinšek. The University of Ljubljana biology department has undertaken a mammoth amount of research on population trends and ecology in this politically fragmented part of Europe; there are still huge swathes of forest which cross these arbitrary borders, complicating conservation. While shooting of bears takes place in both Slovenia and Croatia, in the former it is undertaken as part of population management, whereas across the border trophy hunting occurs. Slovenia, in particular, supports a high density of Brown Bears, and is perhaps the only part of Europe where the species is thriving. The large population size (around 500 individuals) and tendency of immature males to traverse the country, leads to potential conflicts, usually of bears finding easy pickings on farms or around human refuse; once an individual associates humans with food, it usually ends badly for the bear. As part of the plan to reduce this, strictly regulated hunting is carried out; the numbers are negotiated with local communities, who also carry out the shooting, thus creating value to local communities. The hunting fraternity is credited with the maintaining of habitats and populations of both quarry species such as Wild Boar and deer, as well as carnivores (including enforcing protection, which came into force in the 1950s). Thus, any visitor needs to be aware of the role of hunting in the region, which will be unpalatable to some; shooting animals with anything other than a camera is generally anathema to me, but a pragmatic approach has to be taken at times.

A large part of the diet of Slovenian bears comprises maize kernels, which is used as bait for other shot species; while this means they can be relatively reliable from the hides, it also means they could be easily enticed into other areas. Responsible ecotourism is a must - for example, a local could easily bait their garden to make some easy money from tourists wanting to see bears on the cheap, but this can both create 'conflict' animals, and human issues with future access and relations with hunters.



Kočevje

a great view through binoculars. The setup is rather basic, but in my opinion perfectly good for the observations: essentially a wooden hut with a partially open front, on top of a tower. One thing to bear in mind is that access is via a ladder, so you need to be able to climb! The hides were perfectly comfortable, with cushioned seats and fabric over the interiors to muffle sounds. Clearly, such an arrangement requires observers to be capable of waiting patiently in total silence – as a quarry species, the local bears are understandably wary of any noise. And as a result of this, these hides aren't suitable for, say, relaxed family excursions, and no photography is allowed. The local tourism

As of September 2017, all bear watching around Kočevje is undertaken from what are somewhat euphemistically termed 'high stands'. In reality, they are hunting towers; some might balk at this, but as mentioned above, without the shooting community there might not be so many bears to watch. Visitors are accompanied by a local 'forest guide' to a hide overlooking a clearing, with a fairly limited field of view. Normally I'm keen on having a good area to scan, but the forest edge was only 50m or so away, so anything that appears was going to be close enough to be

department has, I understand, secured funds to construct a more modern hides suitable for photography over the next couple of years, but for now this isn't a suitable destination for those desperate to record every sighting. [Slovenian Bears](#) offer bear photography options; while I did visit their hides in Croatia, it should be stressed that we didn't try the bear watching services.

Kočevje area (Slovenia), 4th-5th September

Once our group had convened at the University's Biotechnical Institute, the majority of day 1 was spent being introduced to the project, bear ecology, and the region. I really can't overstate just what a packed and interesting itinerary this was - and how abundant and delicious the food was - but by early evening I was itching (read: annoyingly impatient) to get out and see some mammals. We were divided into two groups, each heading to slightly different areas of the forest, and then split again, so four different viewing towers were used. We were installed into the hide well before 7pm and before long a **Roe Deer** had emerged to feed. It was clearly on edge though, and it was soon apparent why: a few moments after it bolted into the forest, my first **Brown Bear** lumbered into view! Superb. It remained in the clearing on and off for a couple of hours, the full moon allowing us to continue observing it gorging itself on corn well after nightfall. Sharing the food were at least three **Wild Boars** (surprisingly, these and the bear tolerated each other, though each species maintained a respectful distance) and a **Eurasian Badger**; a **Forest Dormouse** also made a brief appearance on the 'table', although having to be quiet meant I couldn't alert the others in time. **Red Deer** could be heard rutting in the distance, and we encountered several herds on the way home, plus one group of **Fallow Deer** and several more Roes. A brilliant evening of wildlife watching.

The other hides had experienced mixed success: one had also had a single bear present (although not for as long as us), the nearest group to us had been extremely unlucky and seen none, while the remainder had up to seven individuals at any one time! Such area the vagaries of mammal watching... Missing out entirely seems quite unusual, and I think my experience is more typical than the large numbers. All groups had recorded boars and deer, plus either Badger or Red Fox; one car also saw a marten (presumably Beech Marten) near Kočevje on the drive home.

The following day we were able to explore the primeval Kočevski Rog forest including the 'Queen of Rog', a vast silver fir estimated to be well over 500 years old. Petra was an inexhaustible source of knowledge on the habitat with a nice habit of getting the participants to really look at and experience the surroundings. The hike took us along part of the Roška trail, which wasn't too taxing; for me it was a real privilege to see untouched forests, an experience we don't often get in northwestern Europe.

Of course, mammal sightings are likely to be limited in such habitats, especially by day, though the number of signs - scratch marks, fresh excavations of wasp nests, scratch marks, scat - attested to the abundance of Brown Bears. Over a superb buffet lunch, we had a surprise visit from a **Beech Marten**; this gave great views hunting around some buildings at 2.30pm (at 45.675954, 15.005312).

Risnjak (Croatia), 5th-6th September

The second night of the tour was spent in Risnjak National Park. We entered the country mid-afternoon (note that Croatia has not yet entered the Schengen agreement, so the border crossings are manned and documents checked), and picked up Marina and Slaven before driving up into the steep, forested karst. Overnight accommodation was the forest rest house in the remote Lazac meadow; this is fairly basic, but in a stunning location and ideal for viewing wildlife. It can be booked through the park website. We only had a short time to explore the area before settling down for a dusk watch over the meadow. Unfortunately - and despite our nearly 20-strong group maintaining



Bear-friendly breakfast

an impressive level of silence - any bears in the vicinity were not tempted into the clearing by the proffered corn. Slaven had rated our chances as better than 50%, so I think a couple of nights here in summer would be an excellent option for those wanting a more independent crack at bear-watching. After dark we were treated to another informative talk on research into local bear ecology, and a delicious barbecue; I had hoped to get out spotlighting, but mist put paid to any chance of that.

The only mammal species noted were **Red Fox** (presumably the same individual seen several times including feasting on the corn bait), several **Roe Deer** and **Brown Hare** (all at Lazac), plus a **Wood Mouse** crossing the track on the way up. The meadow was peppered with rodent holes, though I never spotted the occupants. A short visit to lower parts of Risnjak (around the main visitor complex) the next day didn't produce any further mammals during a fascinating walk exploring forest ecology.

Wolf and Lynx are both present, though rarely seen, and presumably all three dormice species will be present (at least at lower elevations). Two small herds of Chamois are present in the park, although not in areas we visited. One of these is apparently reliably seen near the rest house at Risnjak summit, which must have incredible views; the other group is usually near the source of the River Kupa, which can be reached via a hike.

Delnice area (Croatia), 6th September

A quick stop to sample (yet more) delicious local produce near Leskova Draga produced an unexpected bonus: a **Lesser Horseshoe Bat** roosting in the cellar of the traditional sawmill on the property.



Croatian bear hides

After lunch, Ralf and I visited the steep forested karst slopes above Delnice with Miha of [Slovenian Bears](#) to check out their hides. In contrast to the hunter's towers in Slovenia, these are designed specifically for observation and photography. This site is something of a work in progress, the terrain may

presenting a challenge in terms of getting prolonged views; nonetheless, interesting to see an attempt to diversify the bear watching opportunities. Mid-afternoon is clearly not optimal mammal time, but an unidentified vole was seen dashing amongst the rocks in front of the hide, and fresh bear prints were present. A nearly black **Red Squirrel** ran across the road nearby.

Ljubljana, 6th September

Prior to my visit, I'd earmarked Tivoli Park and the adjacent Rožnik hill as worthy of investigation. I entered Tivoli Park opposite the national gallery and followed the path through the overly-manicured park; from here there are a couple of paths climbing the first hill, with better woodland. In less than an hour after dark I saw a **Northern White-breasted Hedgehog** which ran across the path and disappeared too quickly into cover, and great looks at an **Edible Dormouse** (with others heard). While Ljubljana felt like a very safe city generally, I did see a couple of unsavoury-looking characters while leaving the park so in hindsight it may not be that wise to go wandering alone!

At dusk a couple of unidentified trawling *Myotis* bats were over the Ljubljanica river below the castle.

