



Carpatian lynx (*lynx lynx carpati*) a relative of the Balkan lynx (*lynx lynx martinoi*) is seen in custody in the city zoo in Macedonia's capital Skopje on Friday, Sept. 29, 2006.(AP Photo/Boris Grdanoski)

Macedonia wildcats fight against extinction

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Associated Press

LESNICA, Macedonia -- It's considered a national symbol, displayed on the back of Macedonia's 5-

denar coin. But the Balkan lynx, the largest of European wildcats, is a very rare sight in the southern Balkans these days.

Conservationists say only about 100 remain scattered across the region, making it Europe's most endangered wildcat, and they're mounting an urgent effort to save it.

The cat roams the rugged hills of western Macedonia and is also found in parts of Montenegro, Albania, Serbia and Greece. Macedonia is home to the largest number, about 30 -- not nearly enough to stave off extinction, experts fear.

Zdravko Moteski, a 70-year-old hunter from the western village of Lesnica, is helping researchers gather information about the elusive cat.

"It's a very rare and sensitive animal, like a shadow moving in the trees," Moteski said during a visit by members of a conservation group to his home in Lesnica, a village 50 miles west of the capital, Skopje.

"I never had a chance to see a lynx. I've only traced its footprints during the winter," he said.

Shepherds and loggers also are being interviewed about the lynx, which can grow to a length of 4 feet, 3 inches and weight of nearly 80 pounds.

A distinct subspecies, the Balkan lynx is generally reddish brown or light gray. Because of its short tail, it largely relies on ear movements for communication.

The cat is adapted for surviving in heavy snow and it follows a largely solitary life. Males are not aggressive among themselves, preferring to avoid one another.

"It's believed the Balkan lynx inhabited the empty territory in the southeast Balkans. This type, like its European relatives, leads a solitary life, moving in territory up to 5 square kilometers (almost 2 square miles)," Svetozar Petkovski, a zoologist and program director at the Macedonian Museum of Natural History.

"Its favorite prey is mammals of different sizes, including mice and rabbits as well as the wild boar piglets. They usually ambush their prey," he added.

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Several European conservation groups are providing support for efforts to save the Balkan cat from extinction. They include the German-based Euronatur, the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research and the Swiss-based organization KORA.

The Balkan lynx shares the same fate as other European wildcats, all but vanishing from former roaming grounds. But several European countries, among them Austria, Switzerland, France and Germany, have halted the decline by reintroducing the animal.

Such efforts are a long way off in Macedonia, where the lynx is legally protected from hunting.

"Macedonia is just at the beginning of that road," said Dime Melovski, a 26-year-old biologist who works for a local conservation group.

"Our project is planned to last till the end of 2009. Within that time, after interviewing people, we will carry out field research, setting up photosensors to hopefully photograph a lynx," he said. "Then we hope to eventually capture one for DNA analysis and to reintroduce the Balkan lynx with breeding in captivity."

Melovski isn't optimistic.

"It's still a big cat with slim chances of survival," he said.

- Fonts: Bigger Smaller