

Spotlight

LAST EUROPEAN REDOUBT OF *URSUS ARCTOS*

THE BEARS OF KOCEVJE



A visit to Slovenia's remote primeval forest to observe and photograph one of the last viable populations of the heavily persecuted plantigrade

On this page and the preceding one, two beautiful *Ursus arctos* mature individuals. This European species has been heavily persecuted for ages.



TEXT AND PHOTOS
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The Twentieth century marked the beginning of a slow and inexorable decline of the Brown Bear *Ursus arctos* in Trentino, the last region in which it was still present in the Italian Alps. Massive deforestation and reduction in size of their natural territory were the obvious cause of the dramatic fall in their numbers.

At the end of the Nineties the field research carried out for the realization of the Life Ursus Project confirmed the biological extinction of the bear, whose population was reduced to three old specimens which no longer able to breed. The ambitious and complicated Life Ursus Project was then born from the desire to preserve the presence of the Brown Bear in the Adamello-Brenta Natural Park (PNAB), its last redoubt in Italy. It was accepted by the European Commission in 1996. May 26th, 1999 is a very important date: on that day Masun, the first bear involved in the Life Ursus Project, was released in Val di Tovel, the wonderful, fairy tale-like valley in the Dolomites where the last three

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A female
with her cub.
In Kocevje
hides are
utilized to
observe
and
photograph
the bears.





specimens of the Italian bear still survived. As a follow-up, nine more individuals would be released until May 2002 - Kirka, Daniza (later killed), Joze, Irma, Jurka, Vida, Gasper, Brenta and Maja (which took the place of Irma, a female unfortunately killed by an avalanche). Thanks to the introduction of these specimens taken from the Slovenian forests, the *Ursus arctos* estimated population at the end of 2016 now ranges from 40 to 50 specimens. Having followed step by step the situation of this magnificent animal on the eastern Italian Alps, for a couple of years I had really wanted to visit some of the original forests Daniza and the other ten animals had been taken from. I then decided to spend a few days

exploring Kocevje forest, one of the two provenance areas of the Slovenian bears.

This region, located in the south-east of Slovenia, has 36 forest reserves and 4 old-growth forest areas with immense and most beautiful trees which only answer to nature and which can reach an age of 500 years. The most common trees are beech, white fir and spruce, but there are also oaks, maples, ash trees and lime trees. The wooden cover is two or three times thicker than in nearby forests.

Unfortunately, the very strong frost which hit the country at the beginning of February 2014 has caused serious damage to the forests. Many historical

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Left, Kocevje forest landscape. On this page, an adult European Brown bear *Ursus arctos*.



■ A portrait of a curious cub - its mother is in the immediate vicinity and can be very protective of her young.



An adult Brown bear *Ursus arctos* and - right - a typical image of the Kocevje woodland.



trees have broken due to the weight of the ice build-up. A phenomenon like this had never been seen before. Teams of woodmen worked to clean up the forest from the extensive damage suffered. Almost 40% of the forests have been destroyed or severely damaged. People think it will take at least eight months to cut and recover all the collapsed, broken and damaged trees, and experts estimate it will take at last another thirty years for the forests to complete their recovery. Almost 500,000 hectares of forest (more than the entire surface of Molise, an Italian region), almost half of all the Slovenian forest heritage, have been involved, with many millions of cubic meters of lost vegetation. Thousands of birds, small

mammals such as squirrels and dormice, and then deer, roe deer and large predators that have lost their habitat. In order to spot Brown Bears - which are animals with a very keen sense of hearing and smell - I took advantage of a couple of hides placed inside the forest, so that my presence could be as discreet as possible. The approach to the hides was made first by driving through dirt roads getting into this wonderful world and then, once near the hides, by walking through the wildest heart of the forest. The forest path which leads from the parking site of the vehicle to the hide is quite impervious, sometimes even slightly challenging. It winds among large stones and immense trees, with big

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■ A striking and potentially dangerous encounter in near darkness makes for a very atmospheric image.

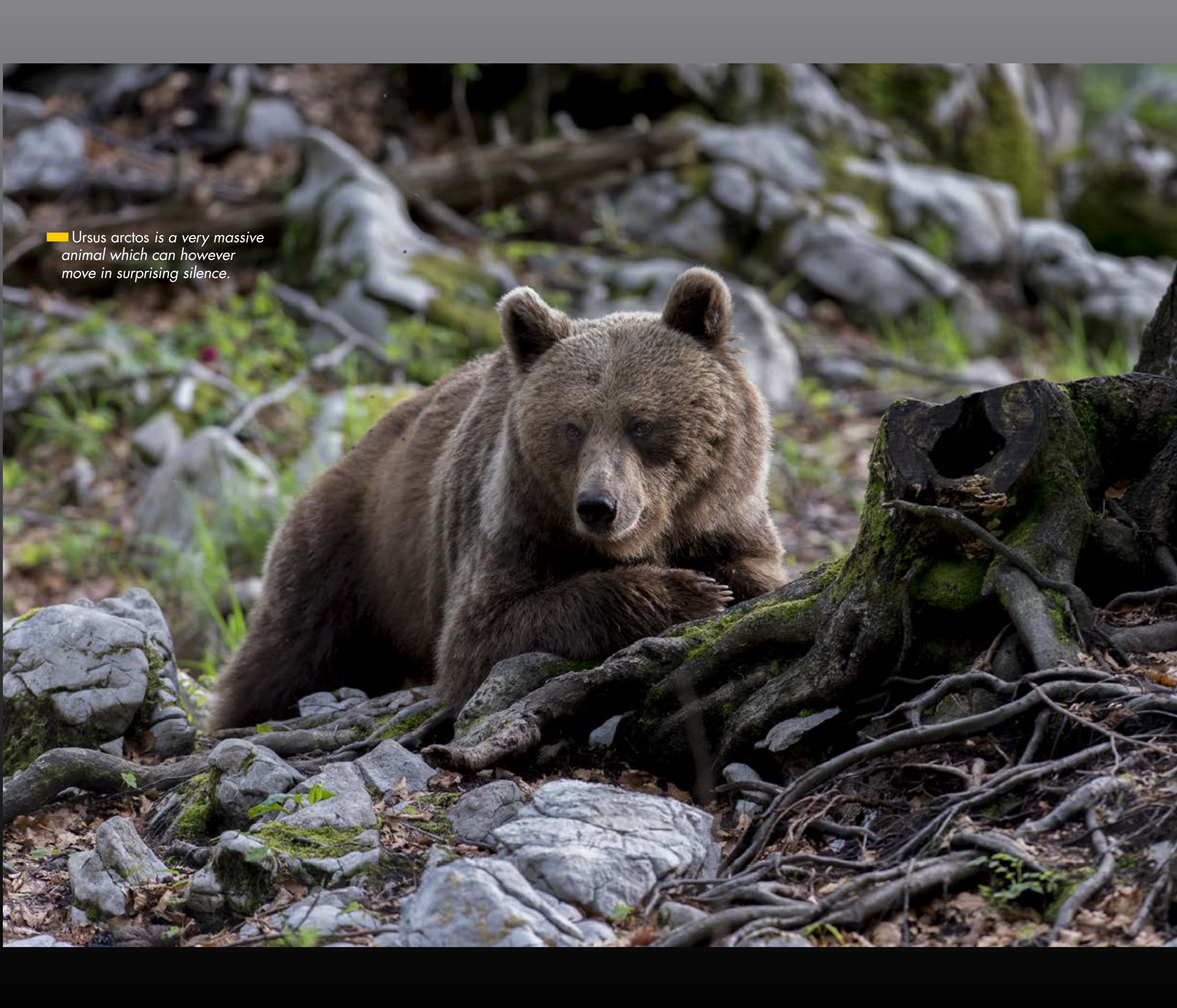


The long silent wait in the hides - hoping in the arrival of the bears - also allows observations of other shy fauna, including martens, foxes and roe deer.

clumps of mosses and lichens clinging to the rocks and huge fallen trunks on the ground. As we walked we could see the wonderful firs "wounded" by the frost and the beeches marked by the real lumberjack of the forests, the Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius*. With its dagger-like beak and thanks to its very powerful neck, this species pierces the trunks in search of larvae to feed, to create its breeding nest or as a sign of territorial dominance in the area of its range, sometimes transforming the wood into a real work of art. Once at the hide, the long wait begins. I love those moments of absolute silence when one is totally immersed inside nature, a timeless suspension interrupted only by the singing of some bird, the distant

drumming of the Black Woodpecker on some ancient tree, the rain that suddenly comes and which just as suddenly goes away, letting some magical moments of light to show up. Once inside the hide I constantly look around, hoping to spot a bear coming. Then there she is, without even a little sound she arrives, and I'm suddenly transported into a magical dimension. A female with a cub from the previous year appears, in absolute silence. It is really surprising how such a massive animal can move so silently. I did not even hear them coming. The only faint sounds we hear are those of the rocks being overturned, and then repositioned, while the female is looking for food or the tender calls of the cub as it approaches its mother.






■ *Ursus arctos is a very massive animal which can however move in surprising silence.*

The Kocevje forest does not reflect the typical environments in which we are normally used to see Brown Bears photographed in, such as the cleanly landscaped Finnish forests, or while they are fishing along the rivers of Alaska. Here the environment is very wild and "messy", a confusing mixture of fallen trunks and very light rocks which greatly contrast to the dark green-brown of the trees trunks and their foliage. I liked the idea of representing animals showing their habitat - not only bears, but also a very nice fawn, a very suspicious fox, some jay and some roe deer, which I took photos of. In short, to highlight also the surrounding nature characterized, sometimes, by ancient trees and in the background the mountain in shades of blue, dominated by the lighter blue of the sky.

After some time spent in the company of the plantigrades, our day nears its end. Twilight is falling and the time to leave the hide has finally arrived. Once we leave it we have a stretch of forest to cross to reach the car. The light is now very faint. I take a fairly sturdy branch and start beating it here and there, now on the trunks of majestic trees, now on some other fallen trunk lying on the ground, almost immersed in it. I try to make myself conspicuous by making some noise in order to alert of my presence any bear in the area, trying to avoid surprising them. Usually bears do

A brown bear is standing on a rocky, moss-covered hillside in a forest. The bear is facing left, looking towards the viewer. The forest is dense with tall, thin trees and green foliage. The ground is covered with rocks, moss, and fallen leaves. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

■ A typical sighting of *Ursus arctos* from one of Kocevje's well-camouflaged hides.



■ Another image of a Brown bear juvenile. The Kocevje region, in the south-east of Slovenia, has 36 forest reserves and 4 old-growth forest areas where trees are sometimes 500 years old.

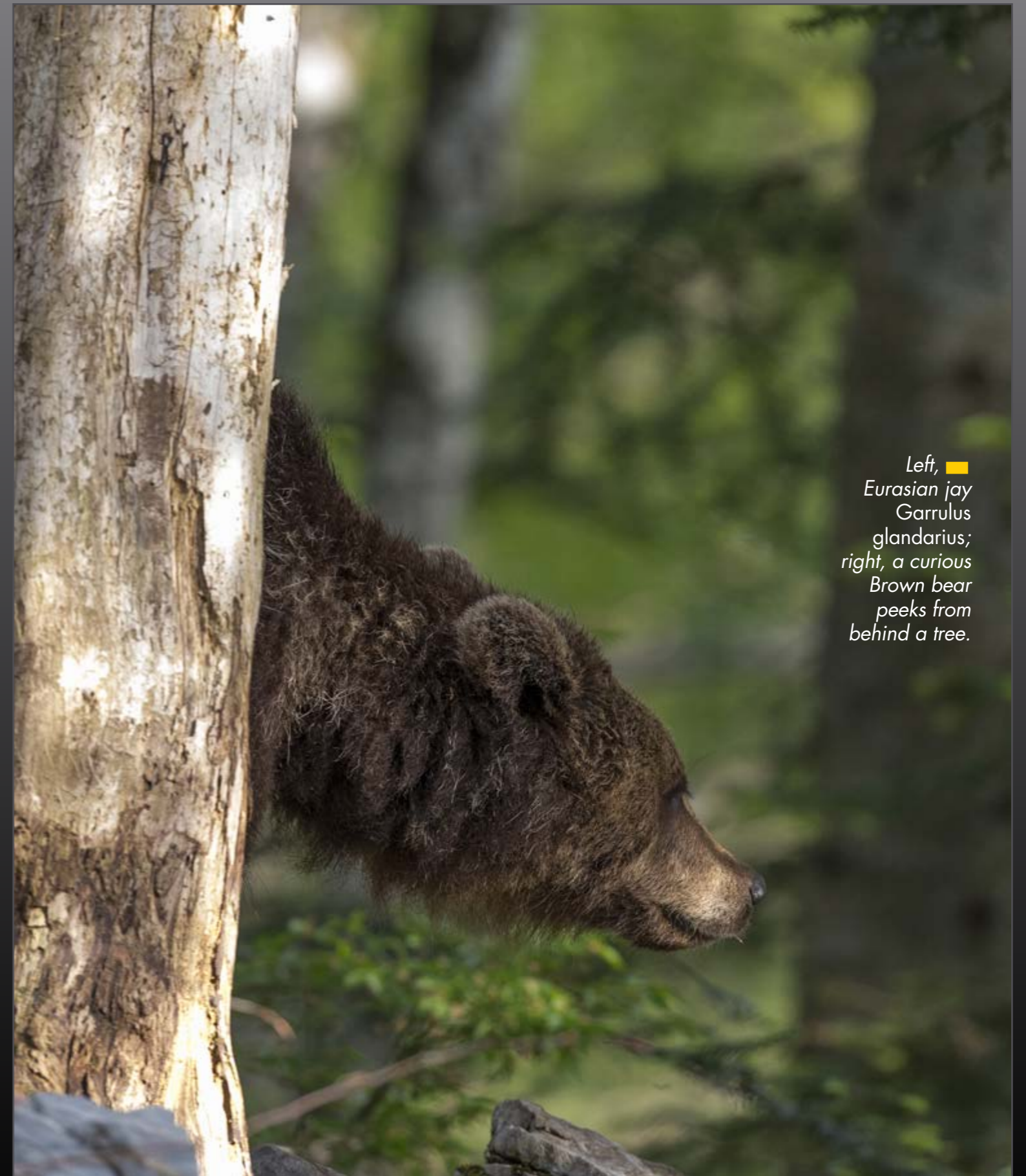


■ Where they still occur in Europe, Brown bears *Ursus arctos* are barely tolerated and in fact often actively persecuted by humans - despite their protected status.



not show aggressive behavior to humans in this area; they just move away, instead. But it is always better to warn them of our presence by speaking in a loud voice or producing some alerting sound in order to be heard from a distance. Females with cubs could perceive the presence of human beings as a danger for the little ones, for example, especially if faced suddenly. Even simply getting around in this wild environment in the low remaining light requires some attention. There are obstacles everywhere - slippery rocks, branches coming out from the ground, cracks between stones in which one risks getting stuck with one foot and possibly even breaking an ankle. Once at the car I send my last goodbye to those

wonderful animals that have kept me company during the time spent in the hide, then I start driving back to the room which, for few more days, will be my home. Even outside the forest there is an unbelievable peace, as I slowly drive through small villages where time seems to have stopped. Everywhere you breath calm and tranquility. The local inhabitants are very hospitable and willing to tell about their places. Slovenia is certainly a land to take as an example of the good coexistence between the "feared" bears and human beings. Here the density of the plantigrades is quite high, but this does not bother the people I met during my time spent in Kocevje; instead, they speak about brown bears with love and tenderness. ●



Left, ■
Eurasian jay
*Garrulus
glandarius*;
right, a curious
Brown bear
peeks from
behind a tree.

Another ■
image of a
Brown bear
juvenile.
Kocevje forest
represents a
good and
much-needed
example of how
humans and
bears can
peacefully
coexist.

