

## **SaveGREEN Pilot Area in Bulgaria**

### *Support to Capacity Building to Mainstream Ecological Connectivity*

The problem areas for wildlife in the road network of Bulgaria and the identification of priority points for planning long-term defragmentation measures have been recognized as a serious environmental issue. During the period 2006–2008 a study was conducted, as a result of which a project for restoration of ecological networks through transport corridors in Bulgaria was created, and integrated in the national transport strategy. It identifies problem areas where the natural migration routes of species intersect with transport infrastructure and suggests practical solutions.

The degree of fragmentation of natural habitats at the national level identifies priority points and suggests where long-term planning measures to mitigate fragmentation are most needed. The study provides recommendations for the implementation of specific measures that reduce the adverse impact of road and railway infrastructure.

Ecological corridors following the migratory routes of animals, especially mammals such as brown bears, grey wolves, foxes, deer, lynx and others quite naturally cross borders so trans-border eco-corridors in the Balkans and the wider Danube-Carpathian region have been identified. Crucial for the flow of wildlife along those corridors is the TEN-T transport infrastructure.

The pilot area of the SaveGREEN project in Bulgaria is situated along the important Struma Motorway in the south-west of the country, part of the Pan-European Corridor IV and E79, an important EU priority project. The area named Rila – Verila – Kraishte after the surrounding mountains is located on the 16-kilometer Lot 1 of the Struma Motorway and comprises 15 large facilities for wildlife crossing.

Among them are an overpass for large mammals, an underpass for medium and small mammals and a viaduct. There are bridges with dry paths and culverts designed as passages for amphibians. As mortality reducing measures, there are "rabbit fences" and guiding amphibian concrete fences. Those facilities have been constructed in a problematic area to mitigate the bottle neck effect and improve chances of the species to migrate and survive in the long term.

The SaveGREEN project is to monitor some of the facilities, investigate the effectiveness of the mitigation measures and suggest improvements based on suggestions of experts and consultation with local stakeholders from the nearby towns and villages.



Overpass on Lot 1 of Struma Motorway

Photo: Petko Tzvetkov, BBF

The partners are starting to use the QField GIS application on some facilities to collect monitoring data for target species. The pilot area is the only potential eco-corridor for large carnivores and their natural preys – roe deer, wild boar and others – in order to maintain and restore their populations. The SaveGREEN project is to use also an app for road/rail kill to involve partners in citizen science activities supporting the population of databases with information on the migratory routes of species crossing transport infrastructure. The pilot area has two distinct patches – arable lands with pastures influenced by settlements and industry, and forests fragmented by pastures. The local Cross-Sectoral Operational Plan for Rila – Verila – Kraishte is under preparation addressing sectors such as transport, development and spatial planning, agriculture, forestry, nature protection, tourism and nature protection.

The Struma Lot 1 intersects important ecological corridors between the neighbouring mountains, crosses or influences three of the main ecological corridors in Bulgaria and local migratory routes. Therefore, the SaveGREEN pilot area implementation and planning of specific measures would increase migration opportunities on key migration corridors between Bulgaria and Serbia and Bulgaria and North Macedonia.