

Velebit Mountain-Unique Dinaric Karst Region in the World

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Opinion

Velebit Nature Park is the largest and most complex protected area in Croatia. In terms of relief and vegetation, it covers the most important mountain in Croatia and the Mediterranean. It also belongs to one of the most impressive karst units in the world-the Dinaric karst. The highest part of the nature park is built of carbonate rocks-limestones, dolomites and breccia carbonates. In addition to the immense karst relief forms, ravines, oysters, sinkholes, rocks, there are a large number of speleological objects-caves and pits. Due to its exceptional natural values and importance for the preservation of the planet's bio-and geodiversity, it is included in the network of international biosphere reserves (Man and the Biosphere Program-MAB) 1978 as a center-focus of plants and animals endemism in Croatia. In 1981, the space also becomes a nature park, the largest protected area in Croatia. Within the ecological network, the Velebit Nature Park has been designated as a core of international importance. It is also an area of the Natura 2000 ecological network. Velebit has included WWF on the list of 10 hotspots within the Mediterranean Forest Protection Program. In 2017, in NP North and NP Paklenica, beech forests are included in the UNESCO World Heritage List within 12 European countries.

Located in the western part of Croatia along the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea, between 44°04'55" and 44°59'17" northern latitudes and 14°53'00" and 16°05'32" eastern latitudes rises from the coast to peaks of over 1700m-habitat diversity, geomorphology and exceptional biodiversity. On an area of 2200km² 1854 plant species, 79 endemics were recorded for Croatia and Dinaric mountain. The peculiarity belongs to the steno endemic plant species Velebit degenia (*Degenia velebitica*) described by A Degen from family Brassicaceae. A particularly valuable species is the bush from family Rosaceae, Croatian Siberia (*Sibiraea altaica* *ssb. croatica*) widespread in the northern and central part of Velebit.

Among the rare endangered species, lady's slipper orchid (*Cypripedium calceolus*), the most beautiful European orchid, has a special place. Among the plant communities of rocks and boulders that grow in extreme conditions, pink thistle (*Rhodiola rosea*), mountain barberry (*Berberis croatica*), two-flowered violet (*Viola biflora*), dryas (*Dryas octopetala*), mountain edelweiss (*Leontopodium alpinum*) and others. Speleofauna is cultivated in a small number of caves and pits. Cave animals have been recorded with 36 species. Thus, 24 taxa from 14 typical localities have been described for the nature park, and 23 taxa are endemic for Croatia (e.g., snail (*Zospeum pretneri*), spiders (*Stalita pretneri* and *Troglyphantes roberti*). Amphibians were recorded with 10 species, reptiles with 26 species, small mammals with 23 and bats with 24 species. Day butterflies are represented by 140 species and nocturnal moths are represented by more than 600 species. So far, 280 bird species have been recorded

in the Velebit area. Of these, 154 species were recorded in the wider area of Northern Velebit, 124 in the middle, 265 in the south and 129 in the southeastern part of Velebit. The largest number of species was recorded in the Paklenica National Park, 173 species, or in the wider area of the national park in 175km², as many as 262 bird species. Compared to other nature parks in Croatia, Velebit is ranked just behind Kopački rit in terms of richness and diversity of species, which is a nature park with the largest number of bird species recorded so far, almost 300.

Velebit Nature Park in relation to other national parks and nature parks is extremely rich and diverse in the number and species of birds of prey. In the wider area of the Velebit Nature Park, 31 species of birds of prey have been recorded so far, of which 9 species nest in the national park or in the wider vicinity of the nature park. As many as 26 species are classified in one of the endangered categories, while 5 species are of stable numbers (*Accipiter nisus*, *A. gentilis*, *Buteo*, *Circus cyaneus* and *Falco tinnunculus*). Two species have become extinct from Croatia, the black vulture (*Aegypius*

monachus) and the Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*), while the Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) is a regionally extinct nesting bird, and a rare migratory bird in the coastal area of the Velebit Nature Park and Paklenica National Park has been recorded twice. In other parts of Croatia, it is a regular flyover during spring and autumn migration. The griffon vulture remained as a nesting bird until the end of 1999. when it stopped nesting in the Paklenica National Park. This was also the only terrestrial nesting ground in Croatia. Of the rare species that have been recorded so far only once in flight in the Paklenica National Park or in the wider Velebit Nature Park, there are 6 species, Lesser Spotted Eagle (*Aquila pomarina*), short-toed sparrowhawk (*Accipiter brevipes*), black vulture (*Aegypius monachus*), black Milan (*Milvus migrans*), Red Milan (*Milvus milvus*) and Merlin (*Falco columbarius*).

Today, due to climate change and warming, the challenge is to preserve this biodiversity and richness. A special problem in recent times is the danger of fires, which are caused by natural dry storms or irresponsible visitors to these areas.

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