

Treasure of the forest

By David Quammen

The common supposition, among distant people who don't know better, is that Eastern Europe, after decades of communist-style mismanagement and exploitation, might be the least likely place on Earth to harbour great areas of forest filled with magnificent wild beasts. But the common supposition is wrong. Just as gold is where you find it, so are biological riches. And in Romania, as one instance, reside some of the biggest populations of large, carnivorous mammals surviving anywhere between the Atlantic Ocean and the Russian border. Most notably: five thousand individuals of *Ursus arctos*, the brown bear. When I first learned this fact, about eight years ago, I was thrilled, fascinated, and puzzled.

My first reaction was: How can it be ~ five thousand brown bears in Romania? My second reaction: I've got to go there and find out. So I began visiting Romania, travelling by car and by foot through the Carpathian Mountains (where most of the large carnivores are concentrated), talking with biologists, forestry officials, gamekeepers and other people, searching for explanations. Throughout all my conversations and interviews, I kept returning to three general questions:

- 1) How did it happen that Romania has retained such a sizeable abundance of bears?
- 2) What are the urgent challenges involved in preserving this population into the future?
- 3) How do the people of Romania—especially the rural people, such as shepherds cope with the inherent difficulties of sharing landscape with *Ursus arctos*?

The answers I heard were complicated and various. Anomalies of Romanian history (in particular, the anomaly named Nicolae Ceausescu) had played a crucial role. Opinions were divided as to how bear management should be conducted now. However, the response I remember most vividly came from an elderly shepherd named Ion Dinca, whom I encountered one day on a patch of high meadow near the Trans-Fagaras Highway, just over the pass from Transylvania. He was sixty-seven years old, retired from the Forest Department, and shepherding again, as he had in his boyhood, not for income but because he enjoyed it. Mountain air. Freedom to walk. Fresh cheese. True, this work was hard and occasional bear

attacks on the sheep and donkeys he tended made it harder still. “What if the bears were gone?”, I asked. “What if they disappeared? Wouldn’t that make life easier and better?”. His life? “Well, yes”, Ion Dinca admitted, “it would”.

But this shepherd was a man of sensitive imagination. There was more at stake than the convenience of his life. The bear, he told me, it’s *podoaba padurii*, the treasure of the forest. “If you lose this, you lose the treasure,” he added. “A forest without bears – it’s empty.”

