The Habitats of EU Importance in the Slovenský Raj National Park
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Introduction

Slovenský raj (Slovak Paradise) is a beautiful area that attracts visitors by its unique gorges and canyons. Annually, 750 000 tourists yearning to stay in unspoiled nature visit this area. To preserve nature in the state we know now, or yet a better one, it is not enough to simply declare this area as protected. The very visitors that come here to rest, can contribute to the protection and preservation of the area, if they respect nature and living organisms.

Each country entering the European Union has the duty of suggesting territories for the European network of protected areas Natura 2000. These areas represent the most precious natural values of Europe. Slovenský raj was proposed as a site of Community interest of the Natura 2000 network too. These special sites are to ensure protection of habitats as well as plant and animal species of EU importance listed in the Habitat Directive, which is one of the most important legislations of nature protection in the European Union.

This brochure introduces specific habitats of EU importance present in the Slovenský raj area. In total, there are 27 of them. They are divided into groups that are described according to their typical characteristics, plant and animal species, importance and level of endangerment. The first group is forest habitats, which cover approximately 90% of the Slovenský raj area. They are therefore, together with attractive rock habitats, the most significant, considering the opinions of impressed visitors of Slovenský raj. Grassland habitats constitute about 5% of the area. The rest are small-scale – but not less significant – habitats of fens, springs and stagnant and running waters.

The brochure additionally contains a number of photos and line drawings that aim to underscore the beauty and uniqueness of the individual habitats as well as the living organisms in their natural environment.

Tri Kopce; photo: Peter Olekšák
Forests

The forest habitat is the most common in Slovenský raj. Forests cover more than 90% of its area. Thanks to the extreme natural conditions and difficult accessibility of the terrain, they were spared from intensive exploitation and their natural character was preserved. Forests create living conditions for an enormous number of organisms. They take a significant part in oxygen production and climate regulation, purify the air from harmful gases and micro-organisms, regulate local country water cycles and prevent water sources and local areas from drying-up. We use them for walks, resting and recreation, admire their beauty and draw strength from them. While wandering around Slovenský raj, we are most of the time in a forest.
Because the most common rock in the Slovenský raj bedrock is limestone, the most prevailing forest habitat is the **calcareous beech forest**. It covers steep rocky slopes and therefore, it most often grows as a loose, sparse growth. A predominant tree is the *European beech*, mixed in as well are other trees – the *silver fir*, the *Norway spruce* and the *Scots pine*. The *European yew* rarely grows here too. The whole tree of this species, except of the red aril covering seeds, is poisonous. The aril is a favourite food of birds. The fact that soil on the limestone contains a lot of nutrients results in an abundance of herb species. The calcareous beech forest is a paradise for orchids. Protected species, such as the *red helleborine* and *lady’s slipper orchid* – a species that belongs to those of EU importance, grow here.

The second most common habitat is the **fir-beech forest** with a typical combination of the *European beech*, the *silver fir* and the *Norway spruce* trees. Here too, especially in the gorges, a scarce occurrence of the *European yew* is present. The thick tree canopy allows just a little sunlight to pass to the ground.
In such shade just a few shade-loving plants grow. If, at the same time, dead beech leaves pile up, the forest is nearly without any herbs whatsoever. Most plants, for example the European bittercress, therefore bloom in the spring before the beech grows leaves. The ferns are very common, but the dog’s mercury is significantly predominant in some places.
On limestone or dolomite crests and cliffs we are able to find the typical phenomenon of Slovenský raj – **relict calcareous pine and larch forests**. This habitat is very rare because it represents remnants of the after-glaciation evolution of the vegetation. This means that this type of forest, right after the end of the glaciation period, used to cover almost the entirety of Slovakia. It was slowly replaced by beech and fir-beech forests and stayed in its preserved state only at the most extreme rocky habitats. This habitat consists of sparse growths – often just by small groups of the *Scots pine* trees, which is replaced with the *European larch* in the southern part of Slovenský raj. The trees have often crooked trunks of bizarre shapes. The most preserved and extensive growths of relict pine forests can be found just in Slovenský raj.
Because this habitat lies on the limestone bedrock and on a boundary of the forest and non-forest vegetation, its biodiversity is relatively rich. Amongst herbs, there are a lot of endemic (spread only in some specific area), endangered and rare plant species. Some of the typical plant species are the *Slovak anemone*, a species of EU importance, a glacial relict the *mountain avens*, a procumbent evergreen shrub the *bearberry* and the *rose daphne*. 

*Slovak anemone* photo: Peter Olekšák

*Mountain avens* photo: Andrea Viceníková

*Bearberry*; photo: Peter Olekšák

*Rose daphne*; photo: Tomáš Dražil
Lime-maple scree forests settle slope and gorge debris. Soils contain a lot of small rock fragments, mostly of limestone origin, and are rich in nutrients. Occurrence of this habitat in Slovenský raj is of mosaic character, it occurs mostly in the gorges. Among the tree species, the sycamore maple and the Norway maple, the large-leaved lime and the small-leaved lime, the wych elm and at some places as well the European ash are the most common. Amongst herbs species, those that prefer higher levels of nitrogen in the soil, e.g. protected the hart’s tongue fern or striking the perennial honesty, which comes into bloom in June with violet, intensely smelling flowers, are present.
At a higher elevation where debris areas have mountainous character, they are wooded by **maple-beech montane forests**. However, this habitat is very rare in Slovenský raj. It is located especially in the tail ends of big gorges, such as Malý Sokol for example. Harsh climate conditions result in lower and crooked tree growth.

At the edges of Slovenský raj on acid soil poor in minerals, e.g. on the shale and sandstone, we can find **acidophylic beech forests**. Beech trees are often dwarfed and from among herb species, just a few acidophylic ones grow here. Grasses prevail, such as the **white wood-rush**.
Only rarely and covering just very small areas, native spruce forests are present in Slovenský raj. They are found in places of a mountainous character in the Predná hola massif. Or, they as well descend into some cold valleys, e.g. the valley of the Hnilec River. The Norway spruce prevails in these woods. The European rowan, attracting attention especially in the autumn by its red-orange berries, is present too. In the spruce brushwood, the bilberry and the cowberry with delicious edible fruit are the most widespread. Places without herb vegetation with only mosses and lichens growing are common. At the top of the Predná Hola mountain (1,545 m), extreme climate conditions cause the spruce not to grow to its normal height, but is rather dwarfed. This is the alpine tree-line. If the hill were just a few metres higher, the scrub would grow here, as we can see it on the top of the not very distant Králova hola mountain. Where mountain springs are and the soil is soggy, we can occasionally find mire spruce forests. The presence of peat moss is a typical feature of these places.
On the floodplain deposits, **ash-alder submontane riparian forests** and **montane alder forests** grow. These are described in the part on running water habitats.

Forest habitats provide suitable living conditions for a number of forest animal species. At warmer and sunny rocky places, the **common lizard** that lives as well high in the mountains often sunbathes. On the opposite, in colder places of gorges we can find the **fire salamander**.

In the old beech woods we can still, although only very rarely, see blue-coloured the **rosalia longicorn** whose larvae live in old beech trunks.

Tree cavities provide a home for the largest of our woodpecker species – the **white-backed woodpecker**. It is, similarly to other woodpeckers, adjusted to the life on the bark of trees. From the springtime on, it is possible to hear songs of the most common bird species of Central European forests the **chaffinch** signing in the tree canopy.
In coniferous forests, our smallest owl species – the *Eurasian pygmy owl* and rare and majestic the *capercaillie* nest.

Forest habitats are favourable places as well for rodents, such as protected the *birch mouse* which has survived in the region since the glaciation period, then another protected species the *forest dormouse*, and a small species the *bank vole*. In May and June, when this vole mates and builds its nest, it is easy to hear the rustling sounds it makes in the forest.
Carnivorous mammals live in the forest as well. Among them are e.g. solitary living big cats, such as Eurasian lynx, the biggest felid predator in Europe, and wild cat. The biggest carnivore in Europe, brown bear, is a species of EU importance. The grey wolf is a natural regulator of populations of ungulate group species. Owing to prejudices, the wolf was almost extirpated in Slovakia. The pine marten is active especially at night. Although it moves very skilfully on trees, it prefers hunting on the ground.
Grasslands

Meadows and pastures cover only something more than 5% of the area of Slovenský raj. Still they are of great importance both for nature and humans. Grasslands have been tied with people’s lives for centuries and they have become part of our tradition and cultural heritage.

Majority of grasslands were created by deforestation. Mowed meadows and pastures represented an important source of living in the past. Annually mowed meadows were the most common, while today sheep, cattle and horses graze on them. Nowadays, mowed meadows are less common and usually lie at the edges of villages. After people stop using grasslands, they slowly change into forests. In this way we lose a number of plant and animal species and overall diversity of the area would decrease and thus as well its attractiveness for humans.

We can find grasslands from the lowest places of the Hornád river basin (500 m AMSL) to mountainous places (Predná Hola, 1 545 m AMSL). Typical in Slovenský raj are grassland enclaves that are combined with forests on the plains, such as along the green-marked trail from Rumanová to Glacká poľana and Geravy, than on the Pelc plain where you can get along the blue-marked trail leading from Stratená through Tiesňava to the Dobšinská Ice Cave. The most extensive and impressive are Kopanecké lúky, which lie about 1 000 m AMSL in the surrounding of the Vernár village – between Hrabušice and the Dobšinská Ice Cave. They belong to the grasslands richest on biodiversity in Europe – no fewer than 74 vascular plant species on m² grow here.
The species composition of grasslands mainly relates to bedrock, wetness and elevation. Predominant on grasslands are grasses, to them other herbs add. Grasslands on limestone have the highest biodiversity and a great number of flowering plants, while grasslands on acidic rocks are more of a grassy character and have fewer species. Prevalent are so called montane and submontane meadows and pastures. Early in the spring, they are covered with a protected species of the Crocus genus, *Crocus heuffelianus*. During the summer, their green carpets are livened up with tens of other flowering plants of various colours, such as common species of the *maiden pink*, the *golden cinquefoil*, striking the *orange lily* and many others.
Grasslands are important as well in view of occurrence of many orchid species. Among the most significant of them is protected and endangered species the pyramidal orchid which, in Slovakia, is the most abundant right here. It is easy to identify another orchid species, round-headed orchid, blooming in June and July. The elder-flowered orchid comes into flower early in the spring. It has two forms, one with yellow and the other with red flowers.

Grasslands are important as well from a medicinal point of view. Around one third of vascular plants have medicinal effects. Well-known is amazingly smelling wild thyme or the St. John’s wort.
Along streams and on wet lowlands there are wet and soggy grasslands. The most attractive are in the spring when they are covered by hundreds of flowering plants of protected the *European globe flower*.

Grasslands are important also for animals that can find appropriate shelter and food there. A lot of insect species are present. Everybody is familiar with ant-hills, the result of ant building activity, or wasps and bees flying around. Thinking of grassland, we most often imagine a number of flying colourful butterflies, such as protected the *common yellow swallowtail* or the *peacock butterfly*, which belongs to the most well-known butterflies in Europe. This species is abundant everywhere where the stinging nettle grows. A number of rodents find attractive conditions here as well, for example the *common vole* or a species of EU importance, the *European ground squirrel*, which prefers low-grazed grass in order to have good view.
An important bird species, which is difficult to notice but easy to hear, is worldwide endangered the corn crake. This bird flies in at the beginning of May and manifests its presence by a loud “creks-creks” sound. The grassland is a great hunting grounds of birds of prey, such as an owl species the long-eared owl, which preys on voles at night. Anyway, herbivores, such as cows, sheep, goats, horses and deer play the most important role in the life of the meadow. By grazing, they ensure existence of the grassland habitats.
Rocky habitats

From geological point of view, Slovenský raj is made mainly of the limestone and dolomite. At many places, these rocks have raised from the surface in the form of rocky cliffs, towers and other spectacular rock formations. They are covered by vegetation, which divers according to elevation, slope orientation and soil quality. Rock formations are visible especially when visiting attractive gorges. Just here it is easy to observe differences in vegetation. On southward oriented rocky slopes and cliffs we would find other species than those turned northward.

Warmer and drier south-facing rocks and rocky slopes create habitat for thermophilic species, so called pre-alpines, sensitive to temperature conditions.

May be the most well-known species and the first spring herald is the Slovak anemone. Visitors can find this plant in almost every gorge, but as well in the Prielom Hornádu canyon or in the Hnilec canyon in Stratenská tiesňava.
Grasses, e.g. a Fescue genus species *Festuca pallens*, determine character of the vegetation. They are accompanied by tens of attractive flowering species with flowers of various colours, such as the *white mountain saxifrage*, the *squarrose knapweed* and on the rocks in the Prielom Hornádu canyon as well a protected plant of EU importance, *Iris aphylla subsp. hungarica*. A succulent feature – fleshy leaves covered with protective wax layer, is a typical plant adjustment for warmer and dry conditions. Such is for example a species *Jovibarba hirta*. Sunny and warm places attract a butterfly species the *apollo* whose caterpillars live on the *Sedum* genus. A lizard species *Lacerta muralis* prefers warm limestone rocks as well. This lizard creeps very skillfully and it takes it just a moment to disappear into a rocky crack.
Northward oriented rocks and slopes are covered with cold-loving vegetation with so called de-alpine species that are adapted to cold, wetness and shade. We can observe this vegetation when walking in the gorges because its typical habitat is rocks at the bottom of the gorges.

Protected species, such as the *auricula*, the *Alpine bells* and *Bellidiastrum michelii* from the aster family grow in these places. Various ferns are common, for example a small species called the *green spleenwort*.
Cold and wet rocks create a typical habitat for insectivorous and protected plant of Alpine butterwort. The Carpathian harebell is a common species.

On inaccessible rocks a critically endangered species the *golden eagle* makes its nests. Its hunting grounds are elsewhere though – in the open countryside. The common kestrel preying on small rodents sometimes circles above the rocks.
Caves

385 caves have been found in Slovenský raj so far. Regarding the number of caves, it is one of the most significant places in Slovakia. Because they usually lie on the slopes of canyons and gorges, they are often hidden from a visitor’s view. Opening of one of the most well-known caves, Čertova diera, is visible from Tomášovský výhľad – we must look for it on the opposite lying slopes of Čertova sihoť.
In the past, caves provided shelter for people. Numerous archaeological relics were found in many of them. The Cave Bear used to live in the caves in Slovenský raj as well. This bear was much bigger than the recent brown bear. Bones of the cave bear were found e.g. in the well-known Medvedia jaskyňa (the Bear’s Cave).

Cave formations, which are not open to the public, create a significant habitat for fauna, especially for some beetle species, water crustaceans, but we can find here as well bear’s or badger’s den. Typical inhabitants of caves are bats. They are perfectly suited to fly and we often mistake them for birds. However, they do not have wings but flying webs. When moving on the ground, they creep and when resting, they hang upside down. All the species living in Slovakia are insectivorous and catch their prey when flying. They are nocturnal animals and for orientation use the so called echolocation. They make sounds humans cannot hear and catch their echo by using their large ears. Like this they avoid obstacles and prey for insects. 12 bat species live in Slovenský raj.
Fens

Fens (type of peatland) are only very rare in Slovenský raj. They are formed at places where, because of surplus of water, dead and not entirely decomposed plant particles accumulate and thus peat is created.

Larger areas of fens lie in the southern part of the national park, in the surrounding of Dobšiná, Stratená and in the Hnilec valley, for example below the Dobšinská Ice Cave train station. Smaller fens are at Podlesok, in the Veľká Biela voda surrounding and at Vernár.

Mires generally belong to the most endangered habitats in Slovakia. They are threatened mostly by peat mining, melioration and becoming overgrown, especially with shrubs and trees. They provide the habitat for many endangered and rare species.
In fens, **Ligularia sibirica**, a glacial relict from the aster family, grows. This species of EU importance is relatively widespread in Slovenský raj, anyway, elsewhere in Slovakia it survives only at two small localities.

Among other species we can admire the **grass of parnassus**. Another attractive plant is the **bird's-eye primrose**, which we can find blooming in abundance in May in the fen at Podlesok. The bottom part of its leaves is white and looks as if it were dusted with flour.

Let us now pay a little bit of attention to a plant that “catches”, decomposes and uses insect bodies. Thus this plant solves the problem with lack of nitrogen nutrients in the soil. This interesting insectivorous species is called the **common butterwort** and belongs to endangered and protected ones. Little secretions excreting sticky liquid and digestive enzymes cover its leaves.

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At many fens, in the summer, our attention is often captured by cotton-grasses that are recognisable by their little white fluffy flowers. A number of moss species find their home here. Among islands of mosses, another insectivorous plant species of the round-leaved sundew catches its prey.

Among animals living in peat bogs are amphibians – the yellow-bellied toad with conspicuous yellow patches on its belly and the common frog. From the bird species we should mention the meadow pipit and the whinchat that likes perching in elevated places. Both species make their nests on the ground, leave the area in the autumn and return in the springtime.
Springs

Springs are characteristic of running water that comes to the surface as seepage of groundwater – a spring. The water temperature is relatively stable all year round and water is well oxygenated. The springs are significant as a source and storage of water and provide habitat to many endangered or glacial relict species.

Although no big stream has its headwaters in Slovenský raj, there are several interesting and precious springs. Water from these springs often spills 10 – 20 m wide, which creates appropriate living conditions for many microorganisms, plant and animal species.
Travertine springs are the most common type of spring in the Slovenský raj. Because they are formed in limestone areas, water is rich in calcium. When the groundwater with high content of carbon dioxide gets into touch with the air, the calcium turns to calcium carbonate and settles on the surface of little stones and plants. Like this, porous travertine is formed.

Because of the extreme conditions in springs, mosses are the most abundant there. They are able to absorb nutrients from the whole surface of their bodies. Great number of microscopic cyanophytes and algae observable just by microscope live on them.
At the edges of springs the *marsh marigold* and a species of the butterbur genus, *Petasites kablikianus*, bloom in the springtime. A little bit later the *Alpine bells* join in. These places provide a habitat for a number of rare snails that acquire calcium from porous travertine for their shells. We can find here as well the *fire salamander* – a newt species with conspicuous black-and-yellow colouring and venomous glands behind its eyes. It preys for its food at night, consisting of insects, snails and worms.

And where we can find this precious biotope? A really significant spring lies at the left side of the tourist trail in the Sokol gorge and at several places in the Velká Biela voda valley.
Stagnant waters involve natural and created water bodies, such as lakes, ponds, dams and ox-bows. They involve several types of habitats. Some of them are directly tied with deep-water environment settled by water plants, others lie in shallow bank zones called littoral where wetland plant species grow.

Something quite interesting as a landscape feature, but as well for tourists are reservoirs, which were in the past built for various reasons. Amongst these are the Palcmanská Maša hydroelectric dam and special-purpose-built reservoirs Klauzy, Blajzloch and Hansjakubová. Almost all of them involve habitats of EU and national importance with presence of several endangered and rare plant and animal species.

The Palcmanská Maša hydroelectric dam was built as a part of energy system on the upper reaches of the Hnilec River. The way in which the water is released from the reservoir is very interesting. For this purpose, a tunnel built in the Dobšinský hill following the natural sloping of the terrain and leading to the Dobšiná village, is used. In time of intense energy demand the water is pumped back to the reservoir.
From a biological point of view, a shallow drainage reservoir on the eastern bank fed by a temporary stream, is significant. The water line changes in relation to fluctuations of the Palcanská Maša dam water line, or eventually in relation to precipitation, whereas the bottom of this reservoir is periodically bared. Only in this part endangered species the *water mudwort* and the *toad rush* grow. From among fish species, introduced the *European perch* and native the *European chub* live here.

The Klauzy reservoir was built on the upper reaches of the Biely potok creek as a special-purpose dam. It provided water for timber floating – downstream the Biely potok creek and the Hornad River to the Smižany village in the past. In 1917, the Glesinger firm built a stone dam serving this purpose till the middle of the 20th century.

Nowadays, this reservoir is only a natural pond. In the surrounding of water reservoirs the *European toad*, which lays eggs amongst water plants, lives. This toad has, above its eyes, venomous glands with secret poisonous for people.
The Blajzloch reservoir is also a special-purpose dam and is built on the right bank of the Velká Biela voda creek. It is really an attractive landscape feature pleasing to the eye. Water vegetation covers almost one fourth of the water surface. The reservoir provides good living conditions for the beaked sedge, the simplestem bur-reed and under water surface for the slender pondweed and various algae species from the Chara genus.

The Hansjakubová reservoir lies in the Stratená surrounding in the southern part of the Slovenský raj. It is a stop-log reservoir fed by creek water entering the reservoir from the north. On parts with creek deposits, water plants from the pondweed and the horsetail genuses grow. The brooklime, typical of the relatively large glossy leaves and tiny blue flowers, is common on these muddy deposits as well.
**Running waters**

Only two bigger streams drain the Slovenský raj area. They, in the limestone bedrock, created impressive deep canyons. They have several significant tributaries with hems of bank vegetation. This vegetation grows on flood plain deposits full of rocks and gravel. The soil, influenced by a high level of groundwater, is wet. The plants have adjusted to surface floods that can come several times a year, although usually last just for a few days. This bank vegetation makes the stream banks firm, protect them from erosion and provide appropriate living conditions for a number of organisms tied with water environment.

The Hornád River in the northern part of Slovenský raj flows through a narrow canyon. Bank vegetation is present only at places where the valley widens – that is at the Hornád’s entrance as well as way out from the canyon. In the vegetation of **ash-alder submontane riparian forests**, the **European alder**, the **crack willow** and the **bird cherry** prevail. Yellow flowers of the **oxlip** attract visitor’s attention in the springtime. In the summer, they are replaced by violet flowers of the **ground ivy**. Both plants have medicinal effects.
In the southern part of Slovenský raj, along the Hnilec River and its tributaries, **montane alder forests** with the *grey alder*, the *purple willow* and the *almond willow* grow. It is easy to notice the conspicuous species of the aconite genus, *Aconitum firmum*, in the thriving herbaceous undergrowth. This plant species contains deadly poisonous aconitin, which is one of the most acute plant poisons and is used for medicinal purposes.
Populations of the butterburs are noteworthy as well. We can find them in the gorges at places where gravely-stony banks do not provide good habitat for brushes or trees.

In the clean waters, the European crayfish lives. His body is covered by a strong mail. From among fish species, the brown trout, the Alpine bullhead and the common gudgeon are common.
Close to the water surface, the *white-throated dipper*, living on water insects, flies. This species often dives when catching its prey. It is the only songbird species living in Slovakia that can be classified as a water bird. Running waters with bank vegetation create appropriate habitat for the *European otter*. The otter is a species best adjusted to living in a water environment of all mammal species living in the country. Its populations have been negatively impacted by water pollution, stream regulation and bank vegetation liquidation. The otter is considered one of the most endangered mammal species in Europe.
Visitor’s behaviour guidelines for respecting the nature of the Slovenský raj National Park

Dear visitors,

1. Stay on the marked tourist trails only. The mountainous terrain of Slovenský raj is challenging and you can easily go astray. Staying on the trail, you as well protect the natural habitat of plants and animals.

2. Remember that hiking in the gorges of Slovenský raj, with the exception of the Hornád canyon, is possible only in one direction – from the bottom up.

3. When the snow is melting in the spring and after heavy storms in the summer, the water level in the gorges can be high and passing them is therefore difficult. You should wear appropriate shoes. Use ladders, rungs and foot bridges and don’t make new trails on the slopes of the gorges. By doing this you prevent the destruction of unique plant communities that have been evolving here for hundreds of years.

4. Remember that you can visit the open nature of the natural park only during the day. Let nature rest at night!

5. No litter should be left in the natural environment. After refreshing yourselves, take all leftovers and packaging with you.

6. Do not pick any flowers so that other visitors can admire them too. Instead, you can “capture” them with your camera.

7. Remember that by being loud you disturb animals and spoil the experience of other visitors.

8. You are not allowed to build a tent, camp or bivouac in open nature. Use official camping areas for this purpose.

9. Never make a campfire in nature.

10. If you have a dog with you, it should not move around freely. Be respectful to others and have your dog on a leash and with a muzzle.