

PUSZTA – LAND OF SALT AND SAND

84060



MEDIENBEGLEITHEFT zum Video
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PUSZTA – LAND OF SALT AND SAND

Narration Text



0.15

This is not the African savannah --

0.19

nor is it America's Wild West.

0.31

It's not the Sahara desert.

0.40

This wilderness with its changing and fascinating faces
lies in the very heart of Europe:

0.49

It's Hungary's Puszta – land of salt and sand.

TITLE

1.05

Late January.

At twenty below zero, even a slight breeze cuts like a razor.

1.13

Yet this harsh landscape is the setting of a homecoming story.

1.25

For centuries, the big predators have been hunted to extinction.

1.32

Now they are on their way back.

After many decades, ecologist Emil Boros was one of the first to meet a wolf in the wild.

(ORIGINAL VOICE EMIL)

Hey – you will not believe this. I have just seen a wolf.

An adult male, ... (he wrote in his diary).

Some of my colleagues had already found tracks. It was one of the most exciting moments in my life. Meeting a wolf here was like returning into days long gone.

2.11 (slow)

In Central Europe, not far from Budapest, Hungary's capital, there is a landscape of sand dunes, salt lakes and grass -- the Puszta of Kiskunsag. In the 1970s, it was made a national park, and ever since, step by step, wildlife has been returning.

2.35

Suddenly, over night, just a few days after the wolf encounter, the frost is gone.

2.43

The abrupt weather change is characteristic of the Puszta.

2.49

Secret life begins to stir -- it's the season of awakening.

3.02

The wolf has passed the test of winter in the Puszta.

Now he meets characters he may have never seen before.

3.11

A European pond turtle meeting a wolf in central Europe is rarity put to the square.

3.34

Is it food?

3.41

To the wolf, the European pond turtle is as exotic as it is to most modern Europeans.

In the Dark Ages, this reptile was common across much of Europe --

until the Church decided it was a fish to be eaten on fasting days.

That was a death sentence as effective as the one pronounced over the wolf.

4.07

Another exotic species, and a rare spectacle.

4.23

Great bustards have gathered for their courtship ritual.

4.28

The males are practising grand poses to impress the females.

4.35

In the sidelines, the females wait for the show to begin and to make their choice.

4.41

The males are huge and weigh up to 25 kilos.

Before their great act, they need some refreshment.



4.52

There seems to be no shortage of grey voles around the lek, the bustards' traditional meeting place.

5.02

Some of the younger males are impatient and fly in early to stake their claims. That can cause friction – in a very physical sense.

5.16

In spring, the Puszta lakes serve as a stop-over for millions of migrant birds.

5.26

Some, like the lapwings, stay here to breed.

The shallow saltlakes -- faint echoes of an ancient sea -- quickly warm up and become a living soup, swarming with myriads of tiny crustaceans – a welcome feeding place after 2000 kilometers of strenuous flight.

These avocets have just arrived from Africa.

5.49

Almost one third of Europe's avocets breed in the Puszta.

6.08

When the coast is clear, the pond turtles reemerge.

6.15

One last dip, and then the spring sun lures them on land.

6.25

After spending the entire winter buried in the mud, this female now sets out to find a warm and safe place to bury her eggs. It may be a long and arduous journey.

Undeterred by heat and storms, the pond turtles often march for weeks through grassland and dunes until they feel they have found a perfect nesting ground.

6.49

During their wanderings through the desert, they hardly eat.

6.55

Locals call the tumbleweed or prickly glasswort “the devil’s wheel” because it is considered a bad omen, foreboding sand storms.

7.17

Only 50 years ago, the sands would often bury pasture land and cause great damage. “The sand is our enemy”, the Communist Party wrote on their red banners. “We will fight it, and we will win that war.” (7.29)

7.34

The fifties were a time of optimism in Hungary. People felt that anything was possible. Man, and not Nature, was to dominate the world. The sands burying roads and cutting off villages –

7.46

this was no longer to be tolerated.

8.01

There were state programmes to stabilise the dunes by planting bushes and trees. Irrigation canals were built. But man’s impact, brutal as it was, has been far from permanent.

8.20

The winner, in the end, seems to be Nature.
What **has** changed, is the human attitude toward it.

8.34

Today, this unique landscape is protected, and Hungarian scientists are trying to understand the life of the dunes.

(ORIGINAL VOICE EMIL)

In Hungary we have Europe’s last migrating dunes, yet we know very little about them. Carefully and with our bare hands, we stripped away some of the vegetation in order to study ecological relations between plants and insects.

9.08

The tiny inhabitants of the dunes appear as soon as the vegetation has been removed, – flashy spiders, ground bugs -- or this colourful ground beetle (9.19).

9.23

The ground beetle is a fast and deadly hunter.

9.28

Even when temperatures soar to 70 degrees Centigrade, which is hot enough to kill bacteria – it patrols the dunes, always on the lookout for a victim.

9.41

When the saphyr blue butterflies visit the Puszta’s wildflowers, summer has begun.

9.49

The saphyr blues live almost exclusively on the nectar of the milk vetch.

10.01

They also lay their eggs on this endemic plant, and their caterpillars depend on its leaves.

10.11

The caterpillars attract ants because they secrete a sugary sirup.

The ants build their sand nests right next to the plant, digging down among its roots.

10.25

Again and again they return to milk the caterpillars. They seem to be addicted to their sirup.

10.44

In turn, the ants protect the caterpillars and their pupae against predators.

The pupae secrete the same sirup as the caterpillar, enticing the ants to guard them inside their nest.

11.20

But the greatest danger to the little dune ants and the saphyr blue pupae are hostile armies of horse ants. The dune ant soldiers mobilise to fend off the attack.

11.45

In close combat, the invaders are dispatched one by one. Then the battlefield goes quiet. The fierce struggle has only lasted a few minutes.

12.12

Today, the dunes between the Danube and the Tisza River are a strictly guarded natural reserve where the original vegetation and wildlife can flourish.

12.24

In early summer, feather grass sways in the wind.

12.31

When the grass seeds mature, the wind carries them for miles.

12.38

The grass has always wandered with the dunes.

12.55

Feather grass seeds is able to germinate on pure sand where no other seed can survive.

Gently carried by the breeze, the tip of the seed probes the sand for a perfect place to anchor.

13.05

As soon as it sinks in the sand, the wind movement drives the tip deeper and deeper.

13.30

In the end, the young grass is so well anchored that even a storm cannot tear it loose.

13.40

The Kiskunsag Puszta boasts Europe's vastest feather grass meadows. Their silky sheen and rustle gives the Puszta its summer outfit.

14.00

Meanwhile, the pond turtle is approaching its destiny.

The turtle is looking for a vale between the dunes with just the right mix of open, unshaded sand and stabilizing plants.

14.25

Many miles from the pond she lays a clutch of up to 10 eggs.

14.38

She covers the clutch carefully with sand to hide them from predators and keep the temperature stable.

Why the turtles of the Kiskunsag Puszta travel so far to lay their eggs is unexplained, but it may be one of the reasons why European pond turtles have survived here.

15.03

Once the great bustards are ready for their courtship dance, the spectacle goes on for several days.

Necks bloated, feathers waving and beards raised, the males perform with elegance, each trying to outdo the competitors.

15.43

Love seems to make them blind, and some dancers are so enthralled in their own movements that they even seem to forget the females.

16.02

The wolf is becoming a frequent visitor – but he's not coming for the bustards.

16.08

The young geese have hatched.

16.16

After only a few days they are excellent swimmers.

16.30

Out on the open water they are relatively safe from predators, and their parents guard them aggressively.

16.48

Wolves are pack hunters. For an individual alone it is hard to make enough kills. The success rate is less than 10%.

17.06

In early summer, this is the nostalgic Puszta scenery – knee-deep grass, a cart pulled by gray cattle and herds of grazing horses.

17.40

This, however, is unusual:
a walking bundle of straw.
Inside is Emil.

(ORIGINAL VOICE EMIL)

Great bustards are extremely shy. I wanted to watch them at the nest.

But the chicks had already hatched. It couldn't have been long – the egg skins were still soft.

The chicks could be anywhere near. For more than one hour I crawled around.

When I saw the badger I worried.

But when I discovered the mother, I knew that the chicks were all right.

It was the first time I had seen bustard chicks in the wild.

18.51

The air is electric.

The horses are getting nervous.

19.15

Dry thunderstorms are frequent between Danube and Tisza.

Mile-high cumulus clouds shoot up into the sky.

19.35

Then comes a complete calm. Even the slightest breeze abates.

19.50

The rain begins reluctantly, with no sign of the coming cloudburst.

20.12

For the animals, the rain is just a brief relief from the heat.

20.19

But for these mosses, the short rainfall means life.

A few minutes of rain can turn the brown dunescape into an oasis dotted with lush green pillows.

20.36

The moist sand and the lush plants have lured snails from their hides.

The weather has triggered something in their hormone system and made them start their mating ritual.

20.53

Snails in love may not just lose their minds but also their balance.

21.08

An edible snail may be mouth-watering, but for the pond turtle its not exactly an easy meal.

21.33

The turtle carries her catch into the water to make it leave its shell and to eat in safety.



21.46

The otter might have a similar problem with the turtle.

21.50

Fish may be harder to catch but they are easier on your teeth.

21.58

Life is most prolific along the water's edge.

A musk rat family has settled here, and the young are just beginning their diving practice.

22.19

These aquatic rodents originally come from South America.

They were brought to Europe at the turn of the 20th century and have quickly spread out.

22.38

In the Puszta, the musk rats have perfectly merged into the ecosystem.

Alongside the European otter, they have colonised almost all the freshwater bodies in the national park.

22.54

Just before the height of summer, the entire Puszta, land and water, abounds with wildflowers.

23.11

The last feather grasses are maturing and give the land a golden luster.

Even the caustic soils around the salt lakes are veiled in blossoms.

23.28

Some of these salt-resistant plants are also found along the Mediterranean sea-board.

23.49

South of Budapest the Tisza river meanders, winding through almost pristine riverine lowlands.

24.05

Grey herons fish the backwaters of the Tisza.

24.10

The quiet scene offers no hint at what is about to happen –except a few huge insects on the bushes along the banks.

24.26

All of a sudden, the river erupts. As if on command, myriads of mayflies emerge from the water.

24.45

For all the predators in the rivers, this is the feast of the year.

24.50

Tediously, the insects wiggle from their pupal cover. Their life is short, just a few days.

All they do is mate, then they die.

24.58

“The river is in blossom” is how the locals put it.

25.09

Mediterranean gulls have chosen an island in a salt lake to breed, because here they feel safe.

25.25

But their circling and their cries have alerted a badger. The gulls try to frighten it off.

25.33

Badgers are a ground breeder's nightmare.

In a single raid, it can destroy all the nests on the island.

And once a badger knows where to look, it will not hesitate.

26.01

Almost every summer, badgers and foxes reduce the breeding success, but the bird populations are strong enough to deal with the losses over the years.

26.17

In the end, the intruder is enervated by the gulls' screams, or his hunger was not so great after all.

26.37

At sunset, the gulls fall silent. Other voices are heard. Emil notes in his diary:

(ORIGINAL VOICE EMIL)

June 29th. To attract a legendary master of camouflage, I played a recording of its own call.

It's a nightjar.

Its flight is absolutely noiseless, like that of an owl.

Its eyes gave a ghostly reflection of my torch.

And then I believe I heard a rustle. Maybe I had dozed off and was dreaming, but I remember seeing a wolf family.

In the morning, the nightjar's call woke me. I was dazed. A night outdoors takes you into a different world.

It can suddenly shift our perspectives. I found it hard to leave this for my desk.

28.24

The only chance to find this master of camouflage in broad daylight is when other birds approach his nest. Then he tries to frighten them off with a his.

28.35

But the magpie is not impressed.

28.45

If threatened, the nightjar sits motionless. The way he sits parallel to the branch and the bark-pattern of his feathers make him all but invisible.

29.06

In the Puszta, sand and sun are the cradle of life.

29.30

These tiny baby pond turtles measure less than an inch.

29.38

Their mother had not laid her eggs anywhere near the water – a strategy that seems to work.

No predator has found the nest and all the eggs have hatched.

30.10

The little turtles march off in different directions, so predators can never can get all of them.

30.23

But the journey of each little individual through the summer is still full of dangers.

30.31

The summer wind is hot and dry,

30.36

and it blows from an unpleasant side.

30.52

Ground breeders are not only threatened by predators. Plants at large like the prickly glasswort can also be a menace.

31.08

If the avocet mother does not get back on its eggs soon, the mid-day sun will kill the embryos in their egg shells.



31.32

The mother refuses to give up – and she does make it just in time.

31.57

The summer sun has dried out the sand to some depth. When the wind now picks up, the dry, light sand begins to fly, and the dunes begin to wander.

32.49

A wandering dune buries everything in its path.
Every day of wind brings subtle changes to the landscape.

32.59

The dune itself changes its shape as it slowly rolls on.

33.45

As soon as the breeze slackens, the sun regains its full power.

33.57

At the height of summer, the lakes begin to shrink.

34.11

Some may shrink by several kilometres to half their size -- others dry out completely.

34.35

In the treeless landscape, the sheep press together to escape the dry heat, seeking each other's shades. In the midday sun, they stay motionless for hours.

34.55

Only a few weeks ago, this was a lake. Every summer, it dries out. Its inhabitants must hold out until autumn when the rains return.

35.10

For the badger, the dried-up lakes are a great place to hunt.

In the cracked ground, insects, snails, frogs and toads seek shelter from the sun.

35.24

Sometimes, young turtles try to make it across to the water's edge.

In a few months, all this will be soft mud to hide in, but now the ground is hard to get into.



35.57

Badgers are truly omnivorous – opportunists that find food anywhere.

36.05

The young turtle is still too small to rely on the protection of its shell. A badger's powerful jaws could crack it with ease.

36.38

The little turtle gets help from an unexpected side.

37.05

A few young turtles have made it to the water. Instinctively, this is where they feel at home.

37.22

Others will spend the first winter on land and begin their diving and swimming careers next spring.

37.33

The otter has slept all day in his den. As the evening settles, he comes down to the water to hunt.

37.44

Otters are playful creatures, snapping after everything that moves, even moths.

38.10

But before the night is over, he needs to make a serious catch.

38.22

The freshwater lakes of the Kiskunsag Puszta are full of fish and attract ever more otters. To them, the hidden, overgrown ponds offer ideal hunting grounds.

38.52

Apart from the glasswort incident, the young avocets have grown up without problems.

39.03

They are learning fast to find their own food.

39.10

One of the parents is always close by.

39.15

Intruders are immediately warned off, even if it's a harmless lapwing.

40.00

Most of the young birds on the Puszta have left their parents by now, only a few rollers are still feeding their young.

Today, frogs are on the menu.

40.19

These fast hunters make up to 40 sorties a day to keep their brood fed.



40.42

Other young rollers have already left their hollow tree and are fending for themselves.

40.52

The snouted grasshopper is well camouflaged,
but not well enough to escape the roller's gaze.

41.09

To the human eye, this insect looks like a blade of grass.

41.22

This young roller has just left the nest but can already boast perfect hunting skills.

41.43

In late summer, flocks of young starlings and their parents circle around the Kiskunsag herds.

41.51

The sheep tolerate the birds because they keep the millions of blood-thirsty gnats and horseflies at bay.

42.16

Often a flock of birds stays with a herd for several days, then they move on to find another one.

42.33

Autumn comes early in the Puszta.

42.59

Peacefully, the wolf family enjoys the last sunrays.

43.11

The wolves seem totally relaxed,

43.18

but suddenly the group begins to move.

Wolves are brilliant hunters when they work in a pack – the days of the lone and hungry wolf are over.

44.29

Like in spring, the Puszta once more becomes a turn-table of bird migration.
Thousands of waterfowls come to rest at the salt lakes and ponds.

44.40

Highly sensitive organs on their long beaks allow the curlews to feel for food in the soil.

44.54

Before the long flight south the birds gather strength one last time.

(ORIGINAL VOICE EMIL)

Every time I see this, I wonder how the world would be without birds, without their calls and songs – with the skies deserted.

Under the tumbleweed was the leg of a wild boar. The wolves had returned and already formed a pack. We decreed a shooting ban.

Hello everyone! Good news – I have found tracks. The wolves are back!

45.39

When winter comes, the colours of the Kiskunsag Pusza fade away and it becomes a lonely place.

But in recent years, big predators have made the winter landscape come to life.



46.11

People were afraid that the wolves would attack domestic animals. But they haven't. The 70 kilometer march of the grey cattle to their winter pastures has not been disturbed by wolves.

46.30

For centuries, grey cattle have been kept out in the open. They are familiar with wild nature and its dangers.

For 26 years, the Kiskunsag Puszta has been a national park. More and more wild animals have found refuge here and colonised the lakes and ponds between the dunes.

46.53

The European otter is again a familiar sight.

47.13

By making it a national park, the Kiskunsag Puszta has been given back to Nature.

47.32

The wolves have been the last of the exiles to return.

47.57

With a little courage, the wild can be given back the space it needs to unfold its wonders – like those of the Puszta, land of salt and sand.

48.18 **CREDITS**