

## 09. Hutovo Blato – Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Situated in southern Herzegovina, Hutovo Blato is a natural reserve covering four major lakes, Deransko, Jelinsko, Svitavsko and Skrkino –all connected with the Krupa River. Krupa is the only river in the world that flows in both directions. It carries waters from the lakes to the Neretva River and when Neretva's water level is high, it carries water back to the lakes, causing flooding of the surrounding lands. Due to its morphology, Hutovo Blato (especially its upper zone), is relatively well protected from human impact. It is therefore a significant habitat for plant and animal species. Geomorphology, climate, vegetation and water abundance create an ideal environment for the wintering of ducks, waders, herons, cormorants, coots and many other birds, arriving there from northern Europe. In 1979, the large marsh Svitavsko Blato became a water storage lake of 1,200 ha, after the construction of a hydro-electric power plant. This caused a major deterioration of the environment, resulting in a significant reduction of bird and fish species.

The Herzegovina-Neretva canton has always been a place where various civilisations met, clashed and interwove. During the Middle Ages, the three great Mediterranean civilisations met and created a fascinating landscape: Western European with Catholicism, Byzantine and Orthodox, and Ottoman with Islam. When the Jews were banished from Spain and Portugal at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottomans offered them asylum, introducing a fourth cultural component in the region. In the canton of Herzegovina-Neretva, numerous carved and engraved stone funeral monuments, the *steak/stecci*, are scattered. They are attributed to the Bogomiles, a Christian sect whose followers inhabited the area between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Engraved are ancient symbols –all connected to earth, family, sun, moon, tribal warriors, dance and praise to the gods.

In the past, the locals were financially dependant on agriculture and fishing. Fishermen used to manufacture a special kind of boat, *trupa*, a practice which has unfortunately been abandoned. Modern activities carried out are greenhouse cultivation, cattle breeding and tourism. Water abundance and the connection to the sea, through the Neretva and Krupa River, has resulted in the development of very rich stocks.

In order to counterbalance the damage caused by the war and to preserve what was left of the wild game, fish and birds in the Park, the National Park Hutovo Blato was founded in 1995. Along with archaeological research, cultural activities such as the Caplina Festival are summer attractions that continue to draw locals and visitors to Hutovo Blato.