



4K **DEHESA**
THE SPANISH SERENGETI

2 × 50 min. + 1 × 90 min. Written and directed by **Joaquín Gutiérrez Acha**
4K, 5.1 and Stereo Executive producers: **Birgit Peters, Sabine Holzer**



TERRA MATER
Factual Studios

The Dehesa is the Iberian Peninsula's best kept secret—sometimes called the Spanish Serengeti, it is an ancient, wild grassland dotted with trees.

But these are no ordinary trees—holm oaks, cork trees and gall-oaks have shaped this landscape and, today, large herbivores graze the landscape, stealthy Iberian lynxes prowl the shadows, formidable eagles patrol the skies, and colourful wildflowers conceal predators that have such astonishing camouflage they seem to completely disappear.

Every year, the Dehesa welcomes thousands of long-distance travellers—migrating birds arrive for the winter, following the warmer climate and the most sought-after food, the treasure of the Dehesa: acorns.

This story begins in one of the oldest forests in Europe, the primitive forests of the Tertiary Era. Surrounded by perpetual mists and the unique climate, archaic species have survived. Above the canopy, three large eagles guard the lower areas. The short-toed eagle has just crossed the Strait of Gibraltar on its journey from its African winter home. The Bonelli's Eagle, living in this area all year round, is an unusually swift and aggressive hunter, and just the shadow of the Iberian Imperial eagle, endemic to the region and the largest of the three, is enough to evoke terror in its prey.

The eagles will guide us on our journey through the vast realm of the Dehesa.

But while life plays out above the canopy, in a miniature world at ground level, crab spiders can adjust their own colour to match their surroundings, becoming invisible to hunt down prey nearly twice their size. Praying mantis spread terror not only amongst insects, but amongst each other, as the females turn on the males after mating.

Spanish lavender, hedge mustard, orchids, poppies and many more coat the ground in vivid colour across the dehesas of Andalusia, Extremadura, Castilla y León and Portugal. New visitors arrive from distant lands; wood pigeons, kites, yellow-faded vultures or Egyptian vultures gather in dozens before moving on to their breeding grounds.

Central to this landscape, mountain rabbits are the engineers of the ecosystem, as their grazing controls the plant growth and their warrens provide shelter for other small creatures. Yet they live in such numbers, they are food themselves for the hunters in this pasture.

Hundreds of years ago, forests had been cleared to improve visibility and reduce the risk of ambushes. With the trees removed and thickets eliminated, the vegetation cover has become grazing pasture for domestic livestock such as bulls, sheep, cattle such as Andalusian cardenas, along with wild herbivores such as deer, fallow deer and mouflons.

The populations of rodents, rabbits and reptiles are held in check by Egyptian mongooses but they need to watch out for the lynx. Lynx are very partial to rabbit meat and see any mongoose or fox that crosses their path as competition to be killed immediately to remove a rival. Our glimpses into the private life of the Iberian lynx will reveal its secret and complex behaviour.

It seems that in the dehesas, there is nowhere to hide, but reptiles will always find somewhere to wait out the heat of the day. Ocellated lizards and great bastard snakes hunt during the cooler hours and go into hiding as temperatures rise with the sun.

But all is not what it seems in this idyllic landscape. Giant millenary trees are being attacked by aggressive fungi that mutilate them slowly, denying them the ability to absorb nutrients. If not strangled by fungi, in this climate trees are also in danger of dehydration and water distress. Holm oaks have ingeniously developed strategies to cope.

In the dry heat, the few remaining water holes in the countryside become meeting places for wild animals desperately seeking to quench their thirst. But for the unwary animals, there are predators ... small rodents, hares and rabbits try to avoid them by drinking at dusk but they are still at risk from night-time predators such as owls, masters of the darkness, hunting with their deathly silent flight. Meanwhile, scorpions wait patiently in strategic positions, waiting for the passage of some unfortunate insect.



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Others already prepare for their next day's work. As the first rays of sunlight cross the forests, human voices can be heard in the distance—the locals are harvesting cork. Cork is a fire-retardant material made by cork trees to protect themselves from forest fires. Every nine years, workers extract cork from these cork oaks—and to do so, must cross steep valleys and tortuous ravines with their mules, a dangerous price to pay for this valuable resource. Also hard at work, not too far away, the most dedicated fisherman of Iberia can be found—the kingfisher. Incredible high-speed recordings will reveal this small, brilliantly coloured bird hard at work.

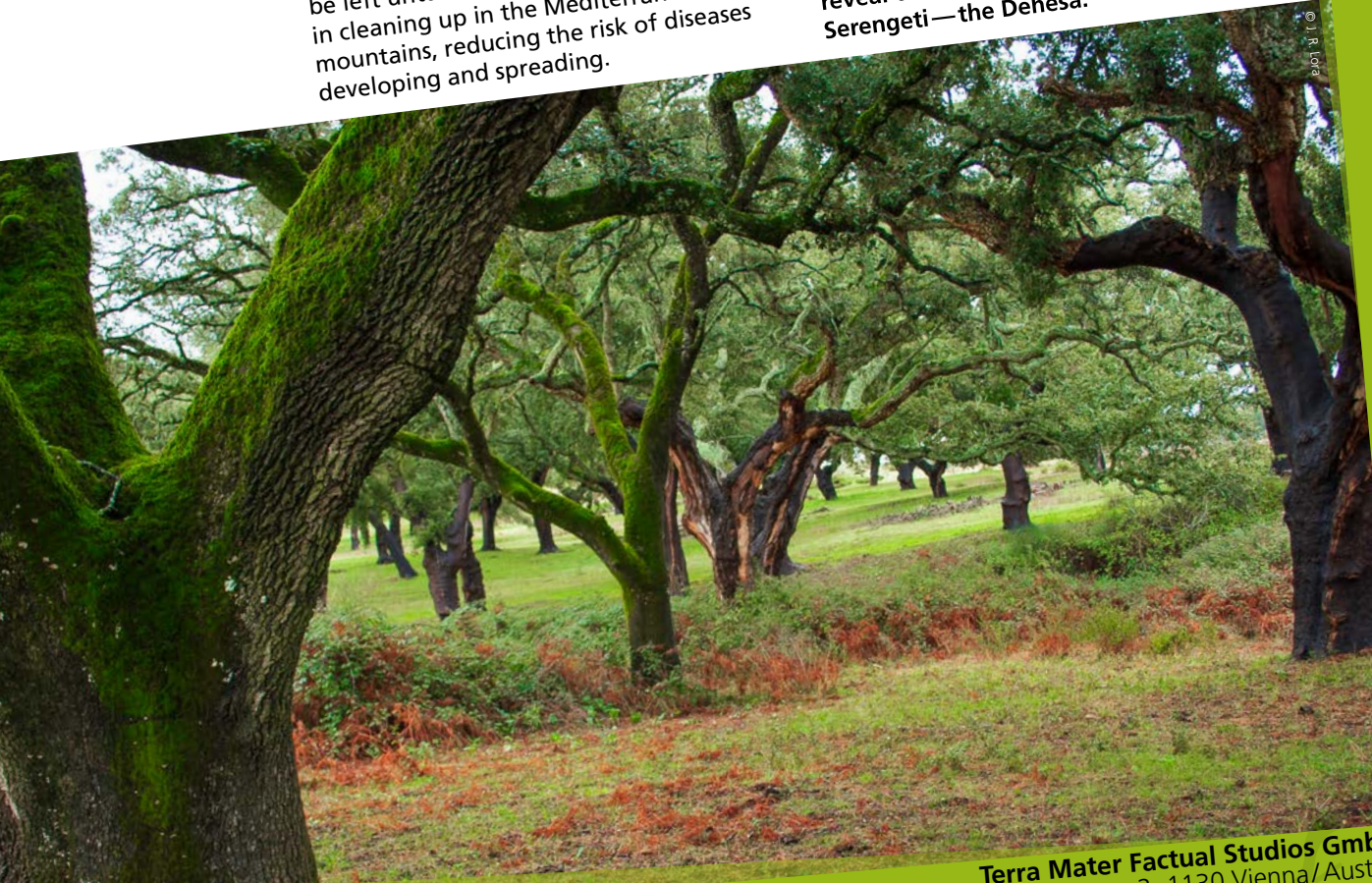
The appearance of clouds in the sky announce a change. Birds that flew to these lands to breed know it is as a sign to return to Africa. Soon, the water will completely transform the now golden aspect of the pastures. From deep inside the dense forests surrounding the open grassland come the bellows of deer; they are ready for battle. Some will win—and some will lose, left badly wounded, and some will surrender to these wounds.

When this happens, an army appears in the sky: griffon and black vultures circle overhead and once they land, no bone will be left unturned. They play a crucial part in cleaning up in the Mediterranean mountains, reducing the risk of diseases developing and spreading.

The clouds burst, and rains drenches the soil and fills the streams. Otters play together, hunting for fish, bringing joy to a landscape that has once again survived the hot dry summer for another year. Healthy trees begin to bear fruit—acorns, gold for the pasture and the manna many animals had been waiting for. From the north, thousands of birds have already begun the long journey south to feast on this precious food resource.

The Dehesa—the Spanish Serengeti—is a crucially important ecosystem with awe-inspiring biodiversity. For all its apparent serenity and tranquillity, this is a wild territory, where the battle for life is never far away and every living creature struggles to survive from day to day—until the next sunrise.

By using the latest standards in high-speed filming techniques and macrophotography we capture intimate moments, often invisible to the naked human eye, while exclusive aerial photography will reveal the vastness of the Spanish Serengeti—the Dehesa.



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