



Leonardo da Vinci
European Training for the UK



European Conservation Action Network

Alex Bush – Visit Report Aggtelek National Park, September 2nd – 19th 2007

Day 0, Sept 2nd

Unfortunately last of the summer traffic combined with London in general meant a marathon journey from the Kingcombe Centre to Rotherhithe Youth Hostel. At least there was food!

Day1, Sept 3rd

Early-morning sense of direction meant we had fun looking for a suitable bus stop. The fact that a mixture of chainsaws, axes, knives and so on passed through x-ray machines at customs without trouble was funny if a little concerning! Harry Potter had barely had time to get detention before we were in Brussels. We sauntered over to some of the bigger fancier squares in town and had a great lunch accompanied of course with the first local beverage of the day (several more Belgian brands would aid sleep that night). Köln was my favourite stop purely for the awesome cathedral outside the station, which we had just enough time to climb to the top of and look over the city before we were off again. The train was rocketing along now and if Potter hadn't been so good I would have noticed more of the forest lakes and hills passing. Munich was dark and the station seemingly surrounded by Turkish kebab shops and strip bars. No time for that. Squeezing ourselves into the sleeper cabin was a good fun and at least we had no strangers, although we could have done without Little Dave's farts!

Day2, Sept 4th

The change from Austria to Hungary was not only noticeable in the countryside (wind turbines changed dilapidated towns) but thanks to policeman from both nations turfing you out of bed for passports. Go back to sleep? Nope, the conductor is collecting the bedding at 6:30am. Sandor met us at the station and along with two more Polish volunteers took us the long-way out of Budapest so we could see the baths, castle and massive houses of parliament. "Heroes Square" was also definitely worth taking time out for. Potter diced with death again on the drive to Aggtelek National Park, notably interrupted when we passed the enormous chemical plant on its edge. Just before arriving for our meal the bus driver spotted the parks iconic symbol and my absolute favourite sighting of the entire trip, a Fire-bellied Salamander! Very cool. We ate like kings at Josvafo and got introduced to the local variety of schnapps distilled from plums a pears usually called Palinka. One is normally enough. Finally we arrived at the Szalamandra Guest House in Szögliget. We had 60 beds for 15 of us so it was far from cramped.

Day3, Sept 5th

Sandor gave a morning talk on Aggtelek, how it is remarkable both geologically and biologically, and he tried to cover some of the main issues they struggle with such as bird deaths from electricity pylons, conflicts with forestry and the high unemployment of rural areas. We had a walk around some of the abandoned meadows we intended to clear but the weather wasn't great so work was postponed. During the afternoon we went to the Rakoczi cave in the Bodva valley. Among all the stalactites and stalagmites it had intricate coral-crystals covering the walls, but not below the water which stretched another 60m deeper! Later in the evening we experienced the UAZ, an ancient brand of soviet van, which was exciting because of the lack of suspension, gears, closing doors, seatbelts or even real seats! We were in search of wolf ululation but despite Imre doing a creditable impersonation of deer and crossing the unmanned Slovakian border, we had no luck.

Day4, Sept 6th

I'd started checking nearby streams in the morning for Fire Salamanders with no luck but there is a lot more including Great Green Bush crickets and guaranteed woodpecker sightings. The weather still sucked so we went to Rudabanya to visit the mining and mineral museums and pigged out at an amazing cake shop. More cream, wafer and chocolate combinations than back home.

We were itching to get started working so that afternoon we got in a couple of hours cutting scrub in the abandoned meadows. The scars bear testament that I was a bit too enthusiastic that day but you learn quickly! Dr Guylai and his wife introduced the range of butterflies and grasshoppers of ANP that evening and the mood certainly improved when Imre brought out his homemade Palinka.

Day 2 – Heroes square in Budapest



Day 2 – Fire Bellied Salamander!



Day 4 – Great Green Bush cricket on



Day 6 – Praying mantis from the Zemplen Hills



Day 5, Sept 7th

Our first full days work in the meadows was satisfying in how much we achieved but tempered by the fact that around every bend was more that could be done and the realisation that however hard we tried, we alone could not affect a great part of the huge forest. Better weather also meant butterflies at last including a Large Copper and praying mantises! In the evening Adam Szabo talked about his work with large carnivores and showed a film of the wolves in Hungary. Despite looking for wolves full-time all year he may only see them a couple of times! Marcin presented some of his work with butterflies in Poland. I

wouldn't have guessed how important railway sidings were otherwise. Despite the moth experts aware it was chilly outside, the moth-light still brought in many that a novice like myself had never seen.

Day 6, Sept 8th Day of Culture I

A long drive to the Zemplen Mountains was improved by Sandor's commentary on the state of the regions orchards, economy, wine etc and Boldogkovaralja, a spectacular castle. I also got my first taste of wild boar served by a biker festival outside. We lunched in part of the Zemplen Hills Protected Landscape Area (a bit like AONBs in the UK). Somehow Adam spotted an Imperial Eagle miles away and there were Great Banded-Greylings as well. An evening of wine tasting ensued at a family business near Tokaj. The meal was in the cellar with walls covered in a thick layer of mould although I can't remember why. The food was excellent, the wine selection better and most of us left carrying bottles to take home.

Day 7, Sept 9th Free Day

This was a free day but for some of us including myself who had energy we visited a bird ringing camp nearby who caught amongst other things a Hawfinch and a Lesser-spotted woodpecker during our visit. So many butterflies as well! Patrycja talked about her butterfly project in Poland in the evening. I'd like to add at this point all our meals were enormous and could stretch to 4 courses in the evening so I was always happy. The staple breakfast speciality of sausage omelette did not inspire everyone because the Hungarian's like their paprika and fortunately so do I!

Day 8, Sept 10

Worked all day around Acsko. Saw loads of Silver-washed Fritillaries and Weaver's Fritillaries and someone even managed to catch a small sand lizard. But the best was yet to come because another night jaunt in the UAZ brought us to a cave in the woods to see bats. There are 26 species in the park and we saw 5 of them that night including a Mouse-eared bat.

Day 9, Sept 11th

We had been joined by another 5 Hungarian students but work stopped around midday due to the rain being somewhat heavy. Attila talked in the afternoon about the different habitats of the ANP and the protected insect species associated with them and we ate lots of cake. Its great sometimes to pass time learning to juggle, playing pool...

A chance meeting in the village of a local called Joseph and some rusty German conversation meant we met Simon (another village resident) after supper who told us what it was like to move from England to Hungary. Credit to Simon, he's learnt the language and seems to have a great life there.

Day 10, Sept 12th

Another day's work in another meadow still brought several interesting surprises like a dormouse, which far from scampering away from the chainsaws, stayed fast asleep. By this point I would add I was an expert tree dragger, hole enlarger-er and jump-on-pile-to-make-it-smaller-er. The help of an extra 20 students from Debrecen University had boosted the team again and we made swift progress. Nigel gave a talk about the Butterfly Conservation projects he and Kathy run in Dorset. Though this was primarily for the benefit of the Hungarian contingent I actually learnt a lot too. That evening we finally visited the village bar. There aren't many Hungarian beers but if you avoid the cheap stuff it can be very good!

Day 11, Sept 13th

A change of scenery was welcome so today we cleared willow and blackthorn from a damp valley called Gomorszolos. We had lost the university student but with nowhere to put the wood we were now burning instead which is a very satisfying way of clearing debris. It was quite an impressive bonfire too once we got going. We took time-out in the afternoon to visit an abandoned orchard further up the valley. With no one picking it, the fruit was going to waste so everyone stocked up on apples and varieties of plums. A lady called Monika talked about Hungarian culture and history in the evening and some aspects were very interesting such as the former size of the Hungarian empire not so long ago.

UAZ

Day 10 – The adorable dormouse



Day 13 – A spotted fritillary

**Day 12, Sept 14th**

More burning at Gomorszolos. It really was a lovely place and if we had had time I would have loved to explore more but by the afternoon we stopped work and left again to have a look at some of the different parts of the park. In fact floating peat bogs are good fun and Mr Bodnar also showed us around his environmental centre too. Katarina, the Mayor of Szögliget, came to talk to us in the evening. Szögliget has seen a turn in fortune recently with a new school and the prospect of more jobs in a local distillery but the main issues of rural villages remains as jobs are still hard to come by and the population is ageing with few tempting prospects for the young. In the spirit of international exchange David recited a poem by William Barnes in true Dorset dialect. I only understood half...

Day 13, Sept 15th

Our final day clearing and we were at another new meadow on the top of a hill overlooking the valley and Szögliget below. However, always distracted the highlight for was a Spotted Fritillary. In the afternoon we went to Aggtelek where Sandor took us on a private tour of the beginning of the cave system that not only opens up into massive pillared caverns but is over 15kms long and comes out in Slovakia! This was followed by a classical concert in the main cave, an enormous space bigger than most warehouses. The karst limestone around the outside of the cave was also worth checking out not least for the brief glimpse of a so-far elusive Swallowtail butterfly.

Day 14, Sept 16th Free day

I was pretty enthusiastic to fit stuff in so I walked up to castle above Szögliget before breakfast and then took the opportunity for some off-road cycling up the valley and over the hill towards Josvafo. It was certainly hard work getting up there but the downhill led me through rolling grass hills with no one else in sight and a close encounter with the parks native breed of horse. I met up with Nigel and Kathy in Josvafo and we then walked back to the hostel. It was a gorgeous day and the walk gave me more time to look around me than on a bike. An excellent BBQ wild boar stew for dinner, along with "how to make a stool using this tree" by Gabriel was great.

Day 15, Sept 17th

The day was spent mostly in Josvafo, visiting the museum and church, followed by a carriage ride. We searched for Fire-Bellied Toads but they were just too quick. I did find an ant's nest emerging though and a Great Diving Beetle, which was cool. There was a farewell party at Tengersizem restaurant with all of the people we had met during the week but clearly they had been expecting twice as many people because again there was too much food to go around. We spent the rest of the evening being lazy and finishing off the crafted chair.

Day 12 – View over the fields and orchard at Gomorszolos.



Day 16, Sept 18th

Leaving the ANP was strange because the area is so unlike anything else in Hungary. For one thing the ANP is at least hilly and has a lot of forest whereas the open plain going towards Budapest is dominated by farmland as far as the eye can see. We had time in the capital to visit Parliament Square and wander a little. Who knew you could buy Swiss Cannabis Tea on the continent? The return train stopped first at Vienna (an hour was only time enough to get something to eat), and then the sleeper train to Köln.

Day 17, Sept 19th

Still not enough time for much but had a look round the river and shops early morning in Köln before advancing on another express train to Brussels, and finally via the Eurostar to Waterloo. It was a shame the project had ended so soon because I had a fantastic time so as a final note to anyone interested in what I got to do on this trip don't hesitate to contact Nigel and the next trip will probably be even better.