

Leonardo Da Vinci
European Conservation
Action Network

Visit to Aggtelek National
Park

September 2nd to 19th

2007

Report by
Dave Dallimore

Sept 2nd

Left Stroud on the 16:22 train to Paddington and tube to Rotherhithe. The YHA youth hostel just down the road. Meet Mel and Sam in our room then we went down stairs and meet Sarah and Derick. We sat and chatted and waited for Nigel and the rest to arrive. Once they did we had dinner and sat in the bar and started to get to know each other.

Sept 3rd

At the silly time of 5;30 (yes in the mornig) we all got up to catch a bus to waterloo for the 7;45 Eurostar to Brussels where the adventure would really start. My fellow travellers and I all very excieted about the journey. We had 3 hours to spend in Brussels so we walked up to the Grande Place. A beautiful square with absolutly stunning gothic architerture. It was built between 16 and 1800, with lots of fine stone carvings some

with Gold reliefs depicting human activities, stories and animals on the lower floors with gods, deities and classical stories on the upper floors. Walked back to the station for the next leg of the journey to Koln and then to Munich. At Munich we boarded the sleeper train to Budapest. This was a great and funny experience, Six people in a approx 6 x 6 ft cabin, cosy and a good way to get to know some of my fellow travellers. At some time in the early morning we were woken by Austrian

border police to check passports,
then to minutes later by Hungarian
police for the same thing and then 5
minutes later the train guard came
round and took a bed sheets back, (I
have never meet a more stressed
man) every sheet was counted back.
Welcome to Eastern Europe I said
with a laugh, I found it all very
amusing.

Sept 4th

We arived at Budapest Keleti railway
station at 9;30 and meet our host

Sandor from the aggtelek NP and Marcin and Patrycja two polish volunteers who had come to work with us. Sandor took us to Heroes square and showed us round. This a big square with a big central statue with the 7 tribal leaders on horseback that founded Budapest and Hungary. Also there was two columns of status depicting the Kings of Hungary. A amazing place that really show Hungary's past. From Budapest we travelled by coach to the NP, arriving in Josvafo for super at the

Tengerszem restaurant. Saw a male
Fire Salamander on road to
restaurant. Then finally and very tired
we got to our guest house in
Szogliget. The guest house is a
former army boarder station as we
were very close to the Slovacion
boarder.

Sept 5th

Sandor gave us a talk on ANP, he
explained how it had become a
national park in 1985, but had been
protected since 1978. In 1926 the

Baradla caves were made a national heritage site and then in 1995 the caves of the Aggtelek and Slovak karst were made a world heritage site. A Karst is a limestone environment with the surface exposed with sinkholes, potholes, caves and springs. Hungary is in the Carpathian basin, which is a huge basin in the Carpathian mountains. This protected the basin from the worst of the ice age meaning some endemic species survived. Also Hungary is a converging point for

Atlantic, Mediterranean, Eastern Steps and Northern species, giving it high biodiversity. With Diverse Mezo and Micro climates there can be 30 to 60 cm of snow in the valleys till March where as on the south facing hillsides the snow is gone by February and flowers come out (Mediterranean species). Forests are primarily Hornbeam and Sessile Oak or Turkey and Sessile Oak. With some Thermophilous steppe forest and Beech forests.

The Ministry for Environment and

Water management run the NP's.
The NP's have a three fold function, 1)
Protection 2) Research 3)
Interpretation (Interpretation means
education and eco tourism). The
ANP is owned by several groups. Of
the 20 000 ha the ANP owns 4605
ha just 23%of the park. The
government forestry
company(Eszakerdo co) owns a
massive 59%with 12 013 ha. Co -ops
own 10%,municipalities own 4%,
3%is owned privately, other groups
own 1% and the church owns .03%.

77.02% of the park is forestry,
13.91% grassland, 5.68% arable,
3.08% is abandoned, orchards and
vinyards 0.61%.

Grasslands are getting overgrown due to no gattle grazing anymore, this is largely due to the population decline in yhe 1950's and since in the two villages of the ANP and the 21 surrounding villages. Also these villages have an ageing population because the youg people where moved to the towns and cities to work in factories during the soviet

era. Also when Hungary was split up all the cultural centres and markets of the aggtelek area were left on the Czechoslovakian side of the border.

Taking a lot of experience and commerce away from the area.

Nowadays around 150-200 000 people visit the park annually, however 130-150 000 of these only visit the Baradla caves, with only about 30 000 people doing other activities in the park, like walking, cycling, and bird/wildlife watching.

After this interesting and instructive

talk Sandor took us on a walk to see some of the areas we will be working at. These hills and forest are truly beautiful. We walked through abandoned meadows of the old and gone village of Acsko. After a lovely lunch of Toetott Koponta (which is a Hungarian dish of stuffed cabbage leaves with pork, cabbage and paprika) we went to Rakoczi cave in the Esztramos hill above Bodva valley.

This was an amazing experience.

The cave was surprisingly colourful and very beautiful. with blues, reds

and golds, pools that shone blue and green all due to the different metals and substances in the rock.

Before supper we discussed our aims for the project and each shared why we are here. After supper we had our first trip in the UAZ (a Russian 4 wheel drive troop carrier) to hopefully hear wolves. Unfortunately we didn't but it was still a great evening. I loved traveling in the UAZ, a fantastic bit of kit and very funny as you get thrown about. Back to the guest house for a chat and game of

cards before bed.

Sept 6th

After breakfast we went for a walk from the guest house down the valley towards the castles old fishing lake looking for wildlife and admiring the scenery. The Castle is on top of the hill next to the hostel, now in ruins. On the walk we found a Great Green Cricket. Huge great big thing about 10 foot long with legs that can clear skyscappers and teeth the lenth of my arm, no but seriously it was about

3/4 inches but still biggest gricket i've ever seen. After the walk we went to a mining museum which was interesting and then a mineral museum which I found a bit dull. The highlight of the day was the cake shop by the museums, fantastic cakes!

In the afternoon we started work clearing scrub from the abandoned medows of Acsko. It was great to get stuck in and do some work.

In the evening we had a talk about the butterflies and grasshoppers of

the ANP by Dr Peter Gyulai and his
wife.

Sept 7th

Our first full days work clearing scrub
in the abandoned meadows of
Acsko. I enjoyed working with the
group, we had a good laugh and got
a lot done. Hard work but good fun,
also we saw a Praying Mantis and
common Blue Butterflies.

In the evening Adam Szabo gave us
a fascinating talk about his work with

large carnivores and showed a film of wolves in Hungary. I learnt a lot of things about wolves that I did not know, like how they organise themselves in a hunt and how big their territory is (150 sq km for a family)

Wolf families are small in Hungary just 3 or 4 compared with 6 or 7 in Slovakia. Distemper in the wolf population is increasing, this is thought to be due to foxes who are thought to spread distemper. The fox population is increasing because of

foxes being inoculated against rabies. This and illegal hunting is putting the species under threat in Hungary and other surrounding countries. I really enjoyed this talk as I'm very interested in Wolves and other large carnivours. After this talk Marcin presented a summary of some of his work with Butterflies in Poland. Negel set up a light to attract moths, but little was seen due to the evening being a bit cold, however we did catch a Green Toad.

Sept 8th

Today we went to the Zemplen Mountains. In the morning we went to a spectacular castle called Boldogkovaralja. This was a seriously impressive place and very beautiful. After the castle we went to a grassland reserve which is part of the Zeplin Hills protected landscape area. We sat and had lunch and watched Imperial Eagles(all be it from a distance). After lunch we went for a walk around the reserve where we saw various grikets and

grasshoppers In the evening we went for a meal and wine testing in Bodrogkiszfalud. Even though I don't drink it was still a nice evening as it was a very good meal and a good laugh.

Sept 9th

Sunday and free day. 8 of us got on some bicycles and rode to a bird ringing camp run by Eszter Gati. This was very interesting and informative experience. They showed us how they collect the birds from the nets

and weigh them, measure them and ring them. Species we saw included, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Chif Chaf, Hawfinch, Blue and Great Tits. I was absolutely nackerd by time got back to the hostel as it was about 12/13 mile round trip and not been on a bike since I was about 15. After dinner when it was dark a few of us walked through the woods to the fishing lake. Along the way we saw a few glow worms. At the lake we herd a Wild Boar or Deer.

Sept 10th

Worked all day around the meadows of Acsko, mostly sunshine with some clouds, a lovely day. In the evening got an absolutely amazing chance to go to a bat cave with Sandor. Imre drove us up to a clearing in the forest a hundred or so yards from the cave. We could only go in small groups to the cave and I went in the first group where we saw a Brown long eared Bat. Then walked back to the clearing and the other group went

up. Whilst they were gone I went and lay in the dry leaves and did some mindfulness meditation where you concentrate on one sense at a time, sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste.

After going through my senses I concentrated on hearing. After a few minutes I could hear everything, insects and bugs crawling around in the dry leaves. Small animals in the undergrowth and deer in the forest. I can't really describe it just that it was a wonderful experience. When the group came back to the clearing we

got back together to decide what to do next, when Sandor brought another bat down a large Mouse Eared Bat. Sandor said he would be staying at the cave for another hour or so and some of us could stay. I stayed and we caught 3 more species, Long Winged Bat, Mediterranean Horseshoe Bat and a Barbastell bat. This was one of the best nights of my life it just incredible and a night I'll never forget.

Sept 11th

Worked around Acsko till midday
until rain unfortunately stopped play.

In the arvo we had a talk by Attila
Huber about the different habitats of
the ANP and the protected insect
species associated with it.

In the evening we were joined by
simon, a english man who has made
the local village of Szogliget his
home along with his freind Joseph.

Sept 12th

A full day clearing scrub around
Acsko moving to new areas, can

really start to see how much we are
achieving, though really enjoying the
work.

We were joined by 20 students and
there teachers from Debrecen
university, which meant there was a
really big group of us and we could
work a couple of sites. ANP is a
really beautiful place, I'm seeing so
much and enjoying the whole
experience more than I thought I
could.

Nigel gave a talk about Butterfly
conservation projects he and Kathy

run in Dorset. It was good to here
about there work and a good
evening.

Sept 13th

Today we worked on a diferent part
of the NP at Gomorszolos. This was
a wet valley bottom full of Willow and
Blackthorn , with grass and flower
meadow running up hill on one side
of the valley. Our job was to clear a
line of Willow and Blackthorn to
expand the grass and flower
meadow.

Once the trees were cut down we made some big fires to burn the waste. Beautiful weather beautiful day! Plus Nigel got his 15 minutes of Hungarian fame as he was interviewed about our trip by Hungarian tv. After supper Monika Bodnar gave a interesting talk on Hungarian culture and history.

Sept 14th

More work at Gomorszolos till luach then visited a local craft shop. In the afternoon we went to a environment

centre in Kelemer where we meet Mr Bodnar who showed us round and then took us to woods above the village to see some floating peat bogs. The bogs were quite incredible and fascinating and set in a beautiful wood, a really lovely walk. In the evening Katarina the mayor of Szogliget came to speak to us. It was very good to hear a different point of view about the park and its relationship with the village. It gave me a more rounded knowledge of the local politics and how the park fits in.

After this David recited a poem by William Barnes which was very amusing, we even let him say the D word (Dorset) which he had been banned from.

Sept 15th

Another work site today above Szogliget, again clearing scrub and young trees from overgrown abandoned meadows. Sadly the trip was coming to an end as this was

our last morning of work. In the afternoon we went to the Baradla caves at Aggtelek for shopping and a tour of the amazing gaves. I've never seen anything like it and we got to see where we would be watching the concert later. The concert was simply unforgettable, listening to great music in an incredible setting. Sat in this cavernous cave with huge stalactites and wonderful colour, textures and shapes. Fantastic! Dinner at the Tengersizem restaurant. A great great day and evening.

Sept 16th

Sunday free day. Spent the day making bush furniture with Gabriel learn more woodcraft. A lovely really chilled out day. Thourally beautiful day full of joy and very relaxing. Gabriel started making a chair for Sandor, whilst I made a stool for Ester. In the evening Ester, Istvan and Dia prepared a delightful Boar stew and we sat round the fire talking and playing games. Great food, great company life can't get much better.

Sept 17th

Very early Sarah and I got up and walked up the hill to look around the castle, it was a beautiful morning and the view from the castle was spectacular. As the sun came up we could hear Red Deer stags calling in all the valleys around us. back to the hostel for breakfast. After breakfast we discussed our aims for the project and what we had achieved. Spent the day in Josvafo visiting the cultural/agricultural museum, the

painted church and learnt more about the culture, history and traditions of the area. This was followed by a horse and carriage ride, I stood on the back plate with Sarah and Gabriel which was good fun. After the ride we went for a walk to look for Fire Bellied Toads. Didn't see any toads but a lovely walk, we did see some deer and horses In the evening we had a farewell party at the restuarant with all the people we had worked with, After the party we returned to the Szalamandra hostel

to finish the chair for Sandor.

Sept 18th

The sad day had come it was time to leave. Before we left we present Sandor with his chair and Ester, Istvan and Dia there stools and took a group photograph. Left for Budapest and the journey home. In Budapest we had time to visit Parliament Square and have short look round Budapest. Before leaving on the train to Vienna and then the sleeper train to Koln.

Sept 19th

Arrived in Koln at 10am, had couple of hours so walked down to the river and along the bank. From there back to Brussels with time for some shopping in Brussels before train to Waterloo and then back to Stroud. It was sad to say goodbye to everyone at Waterloo after such a fantastic trip.

I got a lot from this trip to Hungary. Confidence, self worth, experience, new skills, knowledge of other cultures

and ways of doing things.

It was a great experience that I enjoyed very much and would recommend it to anyone who loves conservation work and travelling.