

Butterfly Surveying Trip to Aggtelek, Hungary in July 2008

In spring 2008 I was lucky enough to be asked to take part in the EUCAN Leonardo program run through the Kingcombe Trust. So on the 29th June 2008 I found myself on a train to London to meet some of the others that I would be joining on our trip to Hungary to survey butterflies. We spent the night in St Pancras Youth Hostel, so that we would not miss our early Eurostar train in the morning. The next day I think we all had butterflies in our stomachs in anticipation of the journey and what was to come after, but we managed to control our excitement and spent the trip getting to know one another. Our journey took us from London to Brussels, on to Cologne, then to Munich for the night train to Budapest.

We finally arrived in Budapest on the 1st July and were met at the station by the ever smiling Onita, who was to be our unofficial guide for much of our trip. She took us (tired and smelly as we were!) to Buda castle overlooking the city, where we spent a few peaceful hours wondering around and getting used to seeing the sun. Then it was onto the minibus for the drive to Aggtelek, with a small detour on the way to pick up János, our butterfly expert. We managed to beat the group that had driven across Europe with Nigel Spring, the trip organiser, and got to shower before heading to the restaurant for dinner. That night we were introduced to Sándor, from the National Park authority, as well as Palinka, the local home brewed spirit! Back at base we picked our rooms, and then set up the moth trap to get a head start on the species ID front.

The next day came far too quickly for all of us (after sleeping in a bed again!) and after a delicious breakfast prepared by Ester, we headed off to some fields near Kelemér to study the effects of mowing on invertebrates. Whilst one group conducted butterfly surveys on different areas of the field (basically reporting all the species and their abundance) the other followed behind a mower and sorted through the grass looking for mutilated invertebrates! We found very few injuries and it was concluded that mowing grass is not particularly detrimental to invertebrates. One of the highlights of the day was spotting bee eaters and a hoopoe on the drive back. On returning to the hostel, the mayor of Aggtelek, Katalin, came and spoke to the group and invited us to a local dance in the village hall later in the week.

Our second proper day in Hungary and we went out to explore the hills around Josvafo with Dr Peter Gyulai and his wife, Adrienne Gavai, both entomologists. We walked for miles and saw lots of new butterfly, plant and invertebrate species. We were hunting for a particular bushcricket, the Saga pedo, and just when Nigel offered a bottle of wine to the first person to spot one, Richard turned round with one on his shoulder! Onita had joined us on our walk, and as we thought we were nearing the end (we went crashing through the woods to find a shorter route!) we asked her how much further, to which she replied 20 minutes, and this went on for well over an hour! Arriving back in Josvafo we were all hot and thirsty, when we found a local water pump, absolute heaven! Waiting for the rest of the group by a little stream, we noticed a whole group of different butterflies sitting on a patch of mud – it was an amazing sight! The only way to make the day anymore perfect was to go for a pint of cold local lager in the bar. Little did we know that after dinner we were having a Hungarian lesson! It was a hilarious experience especially when we were asked to sing a song that we didn't know the tune to!

The following day we set out for more exploring with Roland Farkas, a local botanist, and visited



some old plough fields to look at arable weeds. We then went to the Rakoczi cave system (although I took one look at the steps and refused to go in!) and climbed above the mine up Esztramos hill to look at the unique limestone environment there. At the bottom we were greeted in the offices by Ester and a wild boar stew – completely unexpected, and absolutely delicious! We rushed back to the hostel for some talks on Natura 2000 and Pannonian grasslands, and one on butterflies and their food plants by Professor Zoltan Vargas, Hungary's leading expert on butterflies.

Saturday came far too soon, and although it was supposed to be a cultural day, we all decided to spend the day helping Sandor to bale the hay that we had cut in our mowing experiment. It was loads of fun, especially watching the man mountain picking up bales and stacking them on the trailer as if they were bags of feathers! We were all rather shocked when a horse drawn cart turned up to take the last load of hay, it highlighted the massive difference between supposedly equal EU countries. Saturday night was celebrated with a BBQ at the hostel, more wild boar caught by Ester's husband, and a few glasses of wine in the garden.

We were all a bit apprehensive the next day, as we were spending 6 hours of it in the Baradla cave system – and most of it in the dark! It was an amazing experience, but we didn't realise how long and how cold it would be – its so strange eating your lunch at a picnic table in the pitch black! After we got back to the hostel, I decided to take a bike out – it was the first time in about 15 years that I had ridden one, and it was a bit of a shock to the system. Tonight was the night of the dance in the village, and another shock was in store for us – I'd never heard of turbo folk before! It was an honour to be invited and the locals were really friendly (thanks to Simon for translating at the bar, apparently vodka and coke is a bit unusual).

So after our late night, we started our trip in earnest, and spent the next four days surveying butterflies, mostly in disused vineyards on the edge of the national park. We found an astounding 90 species of butterfly (see appendix 1) over the two week period – most of which were during this time. This is half the species present in Hungary, so it



was an astonishing experience for all of us. The species included Anomalous Blue, Mountain Alcon Blue and Geranium Argus, all of which are special species, and from the survey work which we conducted the National Park are hoping to get the land included within the protected area.

We also managed a walk up the hill below the castle where we discovered baby fire salamanders and fire bellied toads, the hunt was still on for larger specimens though!

By the Friday of the second week we were all beginning to get a bit weary, through late nights of moth trapping, and early mornings to set out looking for butterflies and insects. So it was a welcome relief to only be working a half day. We walked up into the hills behind the village of Szogliget, with Imre the park ranger to survey the areas which the previous group had performed management work on in September 2007. Sarah and Nigel were both impressed with the work they had done, and plenty of butterfly species were recorded here so they felt it had been worthwhile. Late again we hurried down the hill, hot and sweaty, to the local primary school where the mayor had laid on lunch (complete with her husbands palinka) for us. After a long lunch she took us on a tour of the highlights of the village, including the two churches, the museum and all the models of the castle that had been made over the years.

The final Saturday was a rest day, and whilst some of the group decided to go to Slovakia, a few of us decided that we really wanted to spend the day in the village, and we had a nice, relaxed day (although we were all looking out for butterflies, frogs and

salamanders on the way!). That night was absolutely amazing, Sándor took us to an old mine system where we watched lesser horseshoe bats emerge from their roost – they were swooping directly over our heads! I was so inspired by this that I have now joined my local bat group!

Sunday and our final cultural (?) day arrived, we travelled to the Zemplen mountains where we visited Rakoczi castle, and then went on to Tokaj – one of the main wine making regions. We visited the river, and then had a delicious meal, along with wine tasting in a wine cellar. It was a wonderful evening, especially as the group had bonded so well and it was our last but one dinner together.

Our last day dawned like the mood we were all in, rainy and grey. After a couple of hours finishing off journals and creating the species lists, we set off to Josvafo where we had lunch in the education centre and then went for a trip round the village in a horse drawn carriage.

After this we went for a final hunt to find the elusive fire salamander and look what we managed to find!



The trip home was much the same as the way there, travelling across Europe by train is something that I have always wanted to do, and I would definitely like to do this again! I would like to say a huge thanks to Nigel Spring and Kathy Henderson for organising the trip, Sandor Boldogh and all the other staff at the National Park, for making us so welcome and all the talks and extra information they provided. Finally to Ester and her family for the amazing food that they always managed to produce!

Appendix 1: Butterflies

Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper
Grizzled Skipper
Dingy Skipper
Mallow Skipper
Small Skipper
Large Skipper
Lulworth Skipper
Essex Skipper

Wood White
Large White
Small White
Green-veined White
Bath White
Pale Clouded Yellow
Berger's Clouded Yellow
Clouded Yellow
Brimstone

Duke of Burgundy
Purple Hairstreak
Brown Hairstreak
Ilex Hairstreak
Sloe Hairstreak
Blue-spot Hairstreak
Green Hairstreak
White-letter Hairstreak
Silver-studded Blue
Idas Blue
Reverdin's Blue
Common Blue
Short-tailed Blue
Eastern Short-tailed Blue
Adonis Blue
Chalkhill Blue
Baton Blue
Small Blue
Osiris Blue
Chequered Blue
Meleager's Blue
Holly Blue
Anomalous Blue
Green-underside Blue
Mountain Alcon Blue
Large Blue
Mazarine Blue
Brown Argus
Mountain Argus
Geranium Argus
Large Copper
Sooty Copper
Scarce Copper
Small Copper

Common Glider

Pyrgus armoricanus
Pyrgus malvae
Erynnis tages
Charcharodus alceae
Thymelicus sylvestris
Ochlodes sylvanus
Thymelicus actaeon
Thymelicus lineola

Leptidea sinapis
Pieris brassicae
Pieris rapae
Artogeia napi
Pontia daplidice
Colias hyale
Colias alfacariensis
Colias crocea
Gonepteryx rhamni

Hamearis lucina
Quercusia quercus
Thecla betuli
Satyrium ilicis
Satyrium acaciae
Satyrium spini
Callophrys rubi
Satyrium w-album
Plebejus argus
Plebejus idas
Plebejus argyrognomon
Polyommatus icarus
Everes argiades
Everes decoloratus
Lysandra bellargus
Polyommatus coridon
Pseudopilotes baton
Cupido minimus
Cupido osiris
Scolitanides orion
Meleageria daphnis
Celastrina argiolus
Agrodiaetus admetus
Glaucopsyche alexis
Maculinea rebeli
Maculinea arion
Cyaniris semiargus
Aricia agestis
Aricia artaxerxes
Aricia eumedon
Lycaena dispar
Lycaena tityrus
Lycaena vigaureae
Lycaena phleas

Neptis sappho

Hungarian Glider
Painted lady
Red Admiral
White Admiral
Large Tortoiseshell
Peacock
Map
Lesser Purple Emperor
Purple Emperor
Camberwell Beauty

Weaver's (Violet) Fritillary
Spotted Fritillary
Silver-washed Fritillary
Heath Fritillary
Nickerl's Fritillary
Assmann's Fritillary
False Heath Fritillary
Marbled Fritillary
Lesser Marbled Fritillary
Twin-spot Fritillary
High-Brown Fritillary
Dark Green Fritillary
Queen of Spain Fritillary

Swallowtail
Scarce Swallowtail

Speckled Wood
Great Banded Grayling
Small Heath
Chestnut Heath
Pearly Heath
Wall Brown
Meadow Brown
Ringlet
Marbled White
Woodland Grayling
Grayling
Dryad
Woodland Brown

Neptis rivularis
Vanessa cardui
Vanessa atalanta
Limenitis camilla
Nymphalis polychloros
Inachis io
Araschnia levana
Apatura ilia
Apatura iris
Vanessa antiopa

Boloria dia
Melitaea didyma
Argynnis paphia
Mellitaea athalia
M. aurelia
M. britomartis
M. diamina
Brenthis daphne
Brenthis ino
Brenthis hecate
Argynnis adippe (var. cleodoxa)
Argynnis aglaja
Issoria lathonia

Papilio machaon
Iphiclides podalirius

Pararge aegeria
Brinthesia circe
Coenonympha pamphilus
Coenonympha glycerion
Coenonympha arcania
Lasiommata megera
Maniola jurtina
Aphantopus hipparantus
Melanargia galathea
Hipparchia fagi
Hipparchia semele
Minois dryas
Lopinga achine