

EUROPEAN CONSERVATION ACTION NETWORK LEONARDO DA VINCI

Conservation visit to Zdanice, Czech Republic 2008



The London Wildlife Trust (LWT) is a charity based organisation dedicated to protecting the capital's wildlife and wild spaces through community engagement and involvement. I currently volunteer at LWT, through networking I learnt about the Kingcombe Trust and was given the opportunity to undertake conservation work in Europe with this organisation. The Kingcombe Trust is dedicated to conservation and environmental education, in association with the Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation. The Trust established The European Conservation Action Network in 2007 and completed numerous conservation projects this year in France, Czech Republic and Hungary. These projects were funded through the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme. Further information can be obtained from www.kingcombecentre.org.uk.

The conservation project which I was involved in took place in Zdanice, Czech Republic. The entire trip lasted for 18 days with all traveling expenses, food and accommodation included. Zdanice is a small town in Southern Moravia. It currently has a population of approximately 2600 people and from my visit I concluded that the dominant land use was farming/agricultural. Orchards were very common along with fields of maize and sunflowers. Many properties seemed to be self sufficient with gardens consisting of an array of fruit and vegetable plants. However the lack of livestock was very noticeable.

The aim of the conservation project was to assist in the conservation management of a site known by the local community as "butterfly valley". This site has a rich mosaic of habitats including grasslands, woodlands and orchards and is home to a diversity of butterfly and insect species. Local entomologists and botanists consider this area to be of high conservation value and interest. The increasing concern for this area is that there are poor funds available and little effort contributed by the local community to help preserve it. Consequently, the grasslands which are a primary habitat for butterflies and other insects is disappearing, as the woodland vegetation has taken over much of the site. The type of work which we undertook on the trip consisted of the removal of trees such as false acacia (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) and large shrubs such as dog rose (*Rosa sp*), blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) and hawthorn (*Crateagus monogyna*). Tools which were utilised for the removal of these plants included chainsaws, brushcutters, bow saws, loppers and machetes. Health and safety measures were always taken and everyone wore protective clothing, shoes and only licensed workers operated the power equipment.

The project initiated on the 13th June when all the volunteers attended a preparation weekend at the Kingcombe Trust centre in Dorset. This consisted of meeting and liaising with team members and project organisers and it gave everybody an insight into the type of work we would be completing in the Czech Republic. The weekend was amazing. Not only did I get to visit Dorset, a beautiful town in west England, but also undertook activities in the field that enabled me to gain species identification skills. This included setting up moth traps and bat detectors at night, completing butterfly identification transects, and some volunteers completed brushcutter operator courses.

On Wednesday 6th of August the trip began and I left with two other volunteers from London Waterloo station and took the train to Basingstoke station. This was where we were greeted by the other 12 volunteers including Nigel Spring and Kathy Henderson (project organisers) and departed in a van towards Czech Republic. It took us approximately 4 days to reach our destination and the drives were filled with dreams, music or for the more astute volunteers a book on European wildlife and nature. Over this time we camped in a number of different locations including Bernissart (Belgium), Wertheim (Germany) and Durnstein (Austria). The drive gave us an opportunity to learn a bit about the culture in the different countries and see the beautiful landscape, in particular the Danube River, which flows through Germany and Austria.

On Saturday the 9th August we finally arrived in a town called Kyov, which was approx. 10km southeast of Zdanice. It was here that we met our Czech work crew. Zuzka and David were local entomologists and our host organises in Zdanice. They were an important source of information about the culture, history and environment in the Czech Republic, and just as importantly our translators. After a monstrous lunch in Kyov, we made our way to the football stadium in Zdanice, which was our accommodation. To sum it up, it consisted of bunk beds, a pool and a bar which were all used frequently, particularly the latter.

The first weekend was crammed with a mixture of festival entertainment; eating, drinking and of course wildlife and nature sight seeing (*Photo 1*). The countryside was magnificent and just from glancing out of the car window we spotted wildlife such as Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), Hares (*Lepus capensis*) and Common Buzzards (*Buteos buteos*). There were fields and fields of crops particularly sunflowers which seemed to extend out past the horizon. On Sunday we got to see “butterfly valley” for the first time and David caught us an array of butterflies in the field to be identified. The number of different species present was incredible, amongst them was the Meadow Brown (*Maniola jurtina*), Adonis Blue (*Lysandrabellargus*), Swallowtail (*Papilio machaon*) (*Photo 2*), Great Banded Grailing (*Brinthesia circe*) and the Mountain Alcon Blue (*Maculinea rebeli* eggs). This butterfly is an extremely rare species and was one of the butterflies we were hoping to encourage back to the Czech Republic through the conservation work we were completing.



Photo 1: Looking for sousliks (*Spermophilus citellus*) in an airfield.



Photo 2: A Common Swallowtail butterfly.

On Monday the 11th of August we began our work on “butterfly valley”. After this day all the weekdays seemed to amalgamate into one as we got into a steady routine. Breakfast was served at 7:15am, we were on site by 8am and would work until around lunch time. Everybody was split into groups according to what tools they were utilising and team work became an important aspect of the work, along with good communication and simple hard labour (*Photo 3*). To avoid work becoming tedious everyone would swap teams and jobs as much as possible which I particularly enjoyed. Most of the days were hot which made the physical work even harder. This didn't bother me since I was just happy to be breathing the fresh air and seeing the sun shine, as this is a rare experience in London. On some days when I was physically exhausted I got my motivation from knowing that at lunch time we would get a big home cooked meal at Marketa's house and an ice cold drink. Marketa was a local woman in the town who owned a tiny bar/restaurant. She prepared all of our meals which were traditional. Czech food is very meat orientated, so being vegetarian was slightly difficult for me and my staple diet became a mixture of eggs, dumplings and potatoes (*Photo 4*). Despite the fact that I had cravings for vegetables, by the end of the trip the food became something I really looked forward to and the company with the locals was even better.



Photo 3: Grace, Karen, myself and Will were part of the hand tool team.



Photo 4: A traditional vegetarian lunch: eggs, dumplings and sauce.

By the end of the first week we had really started to settle into Zdanice and make progress on “butterfly valley”. It was evident that our presence in this tiny village had made a huge impact on the local community. Film crews and news reporters interviewed us in the field on several occasions and our conservation efforts were publicised in the local newspapers and on T.V. This resulted in more of the Czech Republic inhabitants being educated about the conservation issue at hand and encouraged them to become involved. By the end of the trip I was satisfied with the result since we had a Hungarian entomologist and at least 7 new Czech volunteers on the team, some of which had come from as far as Prague.

Thursday 21st August was our last day in Zdanice. We had completed our conservation work two days prior to this. In the morning we drove to a town called Strazince and visited a museum that consisted of model villages with old style Czech houses. Following on from this we went on a boat trip along the canal and learnt about the history and environmental influences in the area. In the evening back in Zdanice we arranged to have dinner with the Mayor in his wine cellar. This was an amazing night full of wonderful food, wine and musical entertainment (*Photo 6 & 7*).

In conclusion I can honestly say that being a part of this conservation trip has been an amazing experience and a great privilege. It did not only change my attitude towards traveling through remote villages like Zdanice but I got a taste of the unique culture and history and it made me want to learn more. I gained important skills during the work placement that are relevant towards my future work in the environmental industry and I made some life long friends from the UK, Czech Republic and Hungary. I got great satisfaction from this opportunity as I believe I made a positive contribution towards the future conservation of “butterfly valley” and assisted in environmental awareness and education along the way.



Photo 5: Dinner at the Mayor's wine cellar.