

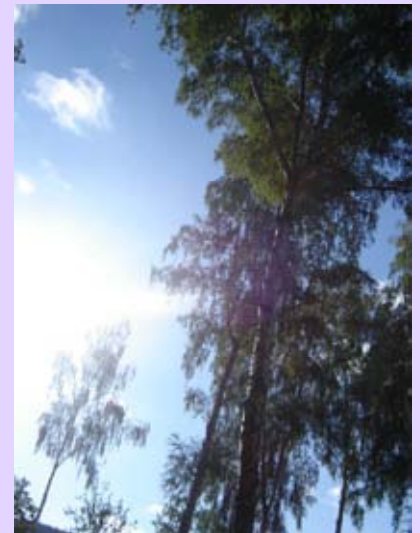
A butterfly's gift...

The European Conservation Action Network was established in 2007 by The Kingcombe Trust, a charity based at The Kingcombe Centre in west Dorset, dedicated to conservation and environmental education (Reg. Charity no. 1054758), in association with the Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation. The project is funded through the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme and has partners in France, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland.

Further information can be obtained from www.kingcombecentre.org.uk or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044196323559; email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk).

Camping

On the 6th of August 2008, I struggled to Waterloo Station with my heavy rucksack to meet my friend Kareem (who was late of course) and catch a train to Basingstoke. When we got there we were greeted by Nigel, Kathy and the familiar faces of people that we had met at the preparation weekend at the Kingcombe Centre earlier that summer. I gladly loaded my bag onto the trailer, and when everyone that we were waiting for had done the same, we were off! Next stop, Dover, where we picked up 'Uncle Geoffrey' just before driving onto the ferry. I had a good feeling about the group and was so excited about the 3 weeks that lay ahead, but I never imagined that they would be so memorable, full of precious moments that I will remember forever.



Over the next 3 days, Nigel drove us from Calais to Žďánice in the minibus and we camped along the way. We stayed in beautiful campsites and it was a great way to get to know each other, over dinner, during the drive, or just chilling by the river Main with a few beers under the stars.

The campsite where we stayed in Germany was full of birch trees, and as the storm got closer that night I remember hearing them rustle fiercely in the winds as I watched the tent light up from inside as the lightning struck!

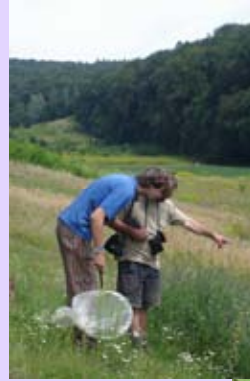


I remember thinking just how pretty Austria was as we drove through, and the view across the river Danube from our campsite at night was breathtaking. And lets not forget about the gorgeous apricot jam from the café in Krems...

We arrive!

On Saturday the 9th of August 2008, we arrived in the small town of Žďánice, Czech Republic. Our accommodation was the local football club complete with bunk beds, a bar and the towns public outdoor swimming pool just a stones throw away from our balconies!

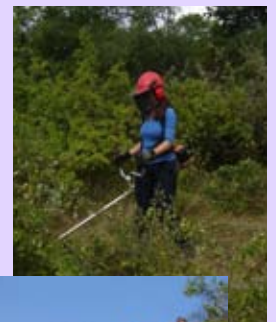
We all had so much fun making our way to Žďánice, but now that we were there it was time to get to work and we were all raring to go! During our first visit to the valley where we would be working, it became clear that this place was special. We recorded 29 different species of butterfly that morning, and it was great to improve my ID skills. The area was an unimproved grassland, and we were there to work with local people to carry out practical conservation work to remove vast amounts of scrub that was encroaching on the land.



We were greeted by the mayor of Žďánice shortly after arriving, and we were given tours of the local museum and talks on the towns interesting history. We worked with local volunteers who helped us most days with the practical work. It was great to engage the local community and find out about their lives. The local people of Žďánice made us all feel

very welcome, and we had the best time getting to know them and their town. Some of the boys played a few games with the local football team, and at night the locals were always pleased to see us!

The practical conservation work that we did during the day turned out to be so much fun! Everybody got on so well, and we worked hard to make sure that 'butterfly paradise' remained for many more years to come. It was hot, steep, thorny and it was tiring, but I loved every second and we finished each day with a great sense of achievement and a massive lunch! With our bellies full we would spend most afternoons exploring the nearby towns or on butterfly hunts. I remember catching my first butterfly that I had ever caught in a net. He was a Chestnut Heath, and I caught him with one, easy, elegant swoop. My second was a beautiful Scarce Swallowtail.



Making friends...

I met so many great people on this trip, and I have memories that make me smile when I think of them even now. To say that everyone in the group got on well is an understatement - the whole experience was so great, that it was almost surreal. There were so many opportunities to socialise and get to know each other, and we played as hard as we worked!



There were so many things to do there! The folk and local Histopedal festivals were great fun, and everybody enjoyed the opportunity to dance outdoors and experience the culture and traditions of this small town.

I went fishing for the first time with my friend Kareem at a nearby lake. It was the morning after the Histopedal festival, and after returning to the football club at around 4am, we got kitted up and headed back out before sunrise!



On our last day we visited an open air Folk Museum at Strážnice, followed by a boat ride. That night we were invited to join the Mayor at his personal wine cellar. The night was full of music, dancing, food and of course, wine. It was the perfect end to a warm, friendly stay in Ždánice.

The journey home was full of laughter, with little time to feel sad about the fact that we would all soon be parting ways. I remember contemplating our time together however, as we watched fireworks through the window of our sleeper train as we left Berlin. My visit to the Czech Republic was unforgettable. I feel proud when I think about what we all achieved at butterfly paradise, and I have new friends that will always be special to me. As I sat enjoying ginger nuts and tea with Kareem, Toby and Steve by the Regents Canal in Kings Cross, I knew that the strangers I had left England with, were now good friends upon my return.

