

Mad Dogs and Central Europeans

Saving Butterfly Paradise in the Czech Republic

Marty Kelly, Bristol, October 17th 2008

For me, Britain is a special place that has captured my heart in many ways: I enjoy getting lost and treading in cowpat in the countryside; I like walking to the shop to buy a tin of baked beans from Sam, my newsagent, and it makes me happy when I meet someone new on the train and share with them a proper whinge about something that actually doesn't bother us that much - the complaining is quite fun in itself. What concerns me about my home country is our isolation from the cultural melting pot that is Continental Europe, and the fear, probably entirely unfounded, that



A praying mantis sunbathing

other Europeans see us as a bit odd from having spent so much time separated from the mainland. In fact, I don't have anything against being labelled odd, or against actually being odd, for that matter, but this summer I found out that Continental Europeans might have inherited some British quirkiness, or indeed developed their own by themselves, making us all just about as odd as each other.

An opportunity developed earlier this year for me to



Removing invaders with the brushcutter

travel to the Czech Republic to carry out some conservation work, which would bring the BTCV environmental conservation course I was close to finishing at the time to an exciting end. It would also be a chance for me to travel through countries I hadn't visited before and meet many different people, from my British and Czech team mates to the various Europeans and Czech locals along the way.

My trip was organised by Nigel Spring and Kathy Henderson from Dorset, who operate three similar trips every year with funding from the EU. Each expedition has a particular conservation aim, and ours was to begin

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: 0044.1963.23559; email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk).

Our accommodation in Zdanice was five bunk rooms on butterfly communities in different parts of Europe. Another aspect to the project is for more Europeans to get to know each other better and share ideas about how things work in each other's countries.

My team included fifteen people from a range of different backgrounds in the UK, from full-time professional conservationists and teachers, through students and office administrators, to the unemployed and those seeking inspiration. We instead all shared the desire to travel, explore a different natural environment and experience new culture.

The journey from Dorset to Žďánice, our destination in the south east of the Czech Republic, took four days by minibus. Nigel single-handedly drove us all the way, aided by his favourite cds and French travel sweets. On the way, we stayed in three different campsites: In Belgium we ate pizza while small boys booted footballs all around us; In Germany we sat by the river Main and watched lightning move towards us across the night sky, and in Austria we camped by a couple who had cycled all of the way from Berlin and had incredibly muscular legs to prove it.



Old and new clothes at a folk festival

Our accommodation in Žďánice was five bunk-rooms on the upper floor of a building beside the local swimming pool. My roommates were Toby and János, students from Milton Keynes and Hungary respectively. They were really friendly guys, but I managed to scare them both a little on the first night by dreaming about jumping out of the cab of a truck, while actually jumping off of the top bunk in my sleep, still zipped up in my sleeping bag!

On our first Saturday night, we visited a folk festival in nearby Milotice. Settling down on the grass in front of the stage, surrounded by wooden houses and rolling fields of sunflowers, I had hoped to see genuine local costumes and unusual musical instruments. There were some of these, but afterwards a group of Maoris from New Zealand took to the stage as part of a small tour they were doing around Central Europe. Not something I'd expected to see in the middle of the Czech countryside. We talked to them afterwards about how excited they were to be there and how their traditional grass skirts really didn't stop the cold.

Our work for seven of the eighteen days involved cutting down a particular type of tree called *false acacia*. This species makes it very difficult for anything other than its own seedlings to grow, and it also has sets of thorns along its stems that can poke straight through a leather glove. I operated a brushcutter, which is a long pole with a spinning blade on one end for cutting, and a motor on the other. It doesn't sound like conservation at all, but a tool like this used carefully and only where necessary can help make a huge difference, especially when false acacia re-grows so effectively and as much as possible needs to be removed.

Since communism gave way to capitalism in the Czech Republic in 1989, traditional land management practices have declined as people move to the city to take up jobs to earn the money that they couldn't under the old government. This also means that volunteering isn't as well



David shows us a swallowtail butterfly

established as in the UK, for example, but the dozen or so Czechs who joined us were really passionate about protecting nature and keen to share their culture.

Our successful joint-effort to begin restoring such overgrown grassland habitats should allow the wildflowers to recover, and attract

any declining butterfly species back to the area.

David Novotný was one of our Czech guides. A tall, friendly research student with baggy trousers and a straw hat, David was often seen dashing about the fields catching butterflies with a net. With a series of expert finger movements, he would hold them out for us to see the patterns on their delicate wings without causing them any harm, before launching them into the air to carry on their business.

Temperatures reached about 30 deg. C (86 deg. F) most days, which made working in the valley just outside the town hot and sweaty work. After early starts, we finished each day at about



Napoleon with my colleagues
Histopedál Festival

one pm and then shambled into a small restaurant owned by husband and wife Honza and Marketta, who laughed more than they talked. They brought in great big pots of home-cooked food for us, which included tasty soup, dumplings, sautéed potatoes and meat for non-vegetarians. Minutes later and most of us were dozing almost in the road outside from the heat, work and feast of each day. Mad dogs need their rest, too.

On our second Saturday, Ždánice held its annual *Histopedál* festival, when local people ride around the park on a range of old bicycles while wearing smart old clothes. One particular cyclist was dressed as a soldier in Napoleon's army. He rode what seemed to be nothing more than two wooden wheels held together by a wooden pole and a seat, which he powered by swinging his legs and pushing himself along with his feet. A sticker on the frame stated proudly that he'd ridden the uncomfortable contraption 400km (about 250 miles) across Japan. As much as we wanted to join in, no one was enthusiastic about riding his machine!

In the evening, a dance floor was set up beneath the trees and a DJ blasted *Europop* from his speakers all



Music in Mr. Mayor's wine cellar



Štěpan the choreographer

night. It takes me a while to get going on the dance floor, but fortunately our Czech friend Štěpan's original moves set the tone and joining in became easy.

On our last night, the Mayor of Ždánice kindly invited us for wine tasting in his own

wine cellar beneath the park. An open fire warmed the brick-lined room nicely, and I took my boots off to be taught a traditional dance by a Czech girl, who I'm sure managed to break a wine glass with a sudden, piercing screech in between moves.

At 11pm, we said goodbye and shook hands with everyone, and left for the town's only night club, *Bar Bolero*. I sat down in the dimly-lit but lively room to find the Mayor opposite me, still dressed in shirt, tie and cardigan. Through Zuzka Veverkova, a Czech colleague who translated for us, I found out that Mr. Mayor was taking antibiotics but going against his doctor's orders to join us for a drink, so grateful was he for our help, and that he was going to study conservation in order to carry on the work we had started. He also said that with another fortnight, I would be able to speak good Czech. I couldn't have asked for a better sign of achievement and a warmer sign of gratitude as a farewell. I said "*Děkuji*" (dye-koo-ee) – thank-you – with a big smile and eased further into my chair to watch my UK team mates storm the dance floor as "*We Are the Champions*" by Queen started on the jukebox.

All of these people really made my trip. May there always be a little odd in all of us. Don't be afraid to share it.

For more information about studying practical conservation with the UK charity BTCV, please visit: <http://www.btcv.org.uk/> and go to to: "Training Courses".