

Conservation in the Czech Republic

In 2007 the Kingcombe Trust and the Dorset branch of Butterfly conservation set up a programme of visits for UK conservation volunteers to work in France and Hungary between 2007 & 2009. The programme was set up by Nigel Spring (a former director of the Kingcome centre) in partnership with the Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux (LPO) in France and the Aggtelek National Park in Hungary after being awarded a Leonardo Da Vinci lifelong learning grant by the European Union. The original conservation projects in la Brenne in France and the Aggtelek National Park in Northern Hungary proved to be so successful that they received further funding to extend the project to include the Czech Republic and Poland between 2008 & 2010.

In August 2008 I was fortunate enough to take part along with 12 others in the first trip to the Moravian town of Zdanice in the South East of the Czech Republic. The aim of the programme was to work in collaboration with local people in carrying out a practical conservation project to remove vast amounts of scrub that were encroaching on the unimproved grasslands on the outskirts of Zdanice. The unimproved grasslands are of particular importance to butterflies and moths as they are in the warmest climatic region (South Moravia) in the Czech Republic and have a mosaic of calcareous and acid soils created by the tertiary sediments of sandstone and mudstone that make up the valley's underlying bedrock. These factors contribute in making the site one of the best and most diverse butterfly sites in the Czech Republic whilst also being home to the extremely rare Mountain Alcon Blue butterfly. The Czech Republic is a fantastic place to work with butterflies as it has 150 different native species and during our work within these grasslands we recorded 41 species, a very respectable figure for August, especially when you consider the fact that the UK only has 54 native resident species! Of these 41 species, my personal highlights included sightings of Swallowtail, Short-tailed Blue, Queen of Spain Fritillary and Great Banded Grayling butterflies, pictures of which can be seen below.



Swallowtail (*Papilio machaon*)



Short tailed blues mating (*Everes argiades*)



Queen of Spain Fritillary (*Issoria lathonia*)



Great Banded Grayling in flight
(*Brinthesia circe*)

During the two and a half weeks spent in the Czech Republic we achieved an impressive amount, clearing vast areas of scrub that mainly consisted of the extremely thorny *Robinia pseudacacia* (an invasive nitrogen fixing tree species) and Blackthorn. We were joined in our work by a number of Czech conservation volunteers and three extremely knowledgeable and passionate entomologists from Ceske Budjovice University in the Czech Republic and Debrecen University in Eastern Hungary respectively who ensured that our trip was as educationally satisfying as it was physically.

The European Conservation Action Network (EuCAN) programmes aim to give their participants experience of the ecology, culture and history of other parts of Europe as well as improved practical conservation skills and from our experiences in Zdanice they certainly did not disappoint. Aside from the important conservation work carried out during our stay, the programme included a number of guided botanical and wildlife walks, an audience with the towns mayor that included a trip to his personal wine cellar, trips to the local museum and castle that left us well versed in Czech history and visits to two local festivals that gave us a rare insight into their cultural past.

The opportunity to experience wildlife conservation and ecology from another countries perspective was invaluable and my conservation work within the UK will without doubt benefit from the insights I gained whilst doing so. The initiatives set up during these programmes will hopefully in the near future provide useful links and discussions about conservation practices and attitudes within Europe and one of the most amazing aspects of the trips is that they are completely free for all participants. From my experiences in the Czech Republic I would thoroughly recommend any of the EuCAN programmes to anyone working or volunteering within the conservation field in the UK. If you would like to know more about any of the programmes run by EuCAN during the next few years the best way forward is to contact the programmes leader and originator Nigel Spring by email at nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk and find out for yourself.

Steve Sudworth
National Trust
Assistant Warden
Quantock & Blackdown Hills
Somerset Countryside