

Report of George Cottam's visit to Hungary in September 2008 for the European Conservation Action Network

The European Conservation Action Network (EUCAN) 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).

Hungary is an amazing country for wildlife. Because of its geographical position at the heart of Europe, it is situated within the outer limits of the four European natural areas. It is at the southern end of the northern European species range, the eastern end of the western European species range, the western end of the eastern European species range and the northern end of the Mediterranean species range. This leads to an amazing biodiversity count.

In Aggtelek National Park, where the team carried out the conservation work, the south-facing hill slopes at low levels have Mediterranean species, whilst only a few miles away, the north-facing slopes at higher levels have northern European species. This allows animals as diverse as wolves and bears, edible dormouse, fire salamander, oak hawk-moth and raying mantis to live in close proximity. Sandor Boldogh, the Conservation Director of Aggtelek National Park, admitted that the rich diversity of habitat did make the management of the park very difficult at times.

Hungary is a landlocked country with a population of around ten million. Budapest, the capital, is 300 miles from the nearest sea, the Adriatic, and 500 miles from the next nearest, the Baltic and the Black Seas. Despite having no coastline, almost 400 bird species have been recorded in Hungary along with 77 mammals. The figures for other groups are even more startling: Approximately 55 UK butterflies, almost 200 in Hungary. 38 UK Dragonflies, 65 in Hungary. 26 of the 30 European bat species live in Hungary, only 17 in the UK. Reptiles at 15 and Amphibians at 18 comfortably exceed the British totals of 6 each. All of this in a country which is only approximately one third the size of Great Britain.

It may seem like a paradise but the wildlife in parts of Hungary is under severe threat. The EUCAN trip went to Aggtelek National Park, which is in the north of Hungary, adjoining the border with Slovakia. This is an area of low level hills on a limestone base, known as Karst. A mixture of forest and open countryside, with only a few small villages and minor roads, it is an incredibly scenic area. Tourism is concentrated on the enormous limestone cave system, which brings many visitors, but there are surprisingly few "eco-tourists". This means that looking after the wildlife is not seen as a major priority.

Although bears, wolves and lynx are still recorded, the numbers are pitifully low. Only two lynx remain in the park – both female - , one small pack of wolves and three bears are all that are known to exist. Hunting, rife throughout Eastern Europe despite

protection for the rarer species, has reduced the numbers to a level where they are unlikely to be sustained. Wild boar and Red Deer are still fairly common, although these are the permitted prey for the hunters.

The major threat to the biodiversity of the area is the collapse of the rural economy. Since the end of the Communist era and the development of a capitalist economy, there have been many changes in rural agriculture. In upland areas, such as Aggtelek, where a mix of pastoral farming on the slopes and horticulture in the valleys, used to sustain the people under the collective farm and guaranteed price system, this is no longer the case. Those working the poorer land cannot compete with the more fertile areas. More importantly, the higher areas, which used to have thousands of cattle and sheep grazing the slopes in the summer, are now virtually devoid of animals. The farmers here cannot compete with the plains farmers, who can leave their animals outside for much longer, owing to less cold winters and less snow.

Many of the locals yearn for the return of Communism and support for the rural poor. The results of the economic changes have not been kind to the Aggtelek region and are verging on disastrous for some of its wildlife. Much of the hillsides, which were grazed, are now scrubbing over. Bramble, blackthorn, hornbeam, birch and a whole variety of invasive plants are spreading over large areas where limestone grassland and wild flowers, grazed by animals every year, used to be the dominant vegetation. The younger generation, faced with unemployment, have gone to the cities, or even abroad, to find work. This has left an ageing population, with little or no support and no-one to pass on their skills to. The next generation will not have the farming knowledge that previously had been passed on for centuries.

The main focus of the conservation work was clearing the scrub that was taking over the previously grazed fields, for the benefit of butterflies. Many butterflies, especially the “blue” species, have a very complex habitat requirement. Often restricted to egg laying on only one plant, such as Marsh Gentian or Great Burnet, in many cases these butterflies also have symbiotic relationships with ants – the ants protecting/feeding the larvae in return for secretions which they seem addicted to.

The fifteen British volunteers on the trip, plus a couple of locals and a national park warden spent seven hot days clearing some of the scrub, with chainsaws and brushcutters, mostly (including my chainsaw) brought from England. The brush was either burnt or stacked depending on the area. Mowing regularly would have, at first sight, seemed to be the best solution, in the absence of grazing animals, but much of the ground was dotted with the necessary ant hills, which would have been destroyed by heavy machinery and other land was too inaccessible for motorised equipment.

On one day we were joined by around 40, mainly female, students from Gödöllő University. It was interesting to note that at the end of a very productive days work, most of the British took pictures on their digital cameras and mobile phones, whilst none of the Hungarians did. Said one student, “we have no cameras, we are Hungarian, we are poor.”

Although over the two weeks, quite a few acres of scrub were cleared, without regular intervention by man or beast, the scrub will return and huge areas are under threat. It is to be hoped that the Hungarian government, perhaps with EU help will contribute

to the continuation and expansion of this work, otherwise many of the huge variety of Hungarian butterflies will be under threat. Even in September, our group identified 40 butterfly species, whilst a similar group in June found 92 species in this one small area of Hungary.

The emblem of Aggtelek National Park is the Fire Salamander and we were staying at the Salamander Hostel in the park. One of the highlights of the visit came on the only wet morning in Aggtelek, when work was postponed owing to the weather, we were fortunate to find dozens of these striking black and bright yellow newt-like amphibians. They grow to 8 inches long and can live for 50 years. They love to hide in the wet leaves in a deciduous forest, looking for insects for lunch.

A second highlight was a trip into the hills at night, where we put a mist net in front of a cave entrance. In one hour we trapped 9 different species of bat. Apparently the record is 17 different species in one night – equal to the total British list.

My thanks go to Nigel Spring and Kathy Henderson, the joint leaders, who led with great knowledge and enthusiasm.