

Conservation visit to Aggtelek National Park, Hungary, with the European Conservation Action Network, 31st August – 17th September 2008

The Kingcombe Trust in 2007 set up the European Conservation Action Network. The Kingcombe Trust is a registered charity (number 1054758) based at the Kingcombe Centre in west Dorset and is an associate of the Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation. The Leonardo Da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme funded this Aggtelek National Park visit. There are also visits being funded in France, the Czech Republic and Poland. For further information about the trips and organisations involved please contact www.kingcombecentre.org.uk or Nigel Spring, Tel: 0044.1963.23559 or email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk

On the starting day of the trip I caught the train to London and met the other volunteers at the St Pancras Youth Hostel in the evening where we had dinner. Our leaders Nigel and Kathy were going to meet us in Hungary as they were coming from a recent trip in the Czech Republic.

The following day was our big day of travelling, co-ordinated by Helen Shaw who coped marvellously! We caught the Eurostar to Brussels, which got us there in good time; we had a few hours to explore the city. We had a look in a couple of chocolate shops obviously as we were in Belgium! We also stopped in the Grand Place, a beautiful square with ornate buildings. We also chanced upon a parade of World War veterans, which was very interesting to see. Next we caught the train to Cologne, no time to explore but the station was near the cathedral, which was very imposing, very dark and of beautiful design. Then a train from Cologne to Munich where we arrived in the dark, from there we soon caught our sleeper train to Budapest. At first we were a bit shocked as we realised that the little room we were trying to stand in was to sleep six of us, and our luggage, but we got on with it and it's amazing where you can find space when you need to. I actually slept very well.

On the 2nd September we arrived at Budapest. We were met by Kathy, Nigel and Sandor Boldogh, an employee of the National Park and all round expert on the area we would shortly be calling home for a couple of weeks. We had time to have a quick guided tour of Budapest's main sights including Buda Castle, views of the parliament over the Danube, and the president of Hungary's residence, which surprised me with its minimal security compared to the UK. We drove north through Miskolc and arrived in the park in the evening. We had dinner at the Tengersizem Restaurant in Jósvalő before arriving at our hostel.

On our second day in the park we visited the two sites we would be doing conservation work at. One, called Acskó was only a couple of minutes walk from the hostel where work had been done the previous year. Whilst there we also saw some men doing horse logging. The horses were completely responsive to their masters and it was interesting to see them all working as a team. We saw large fungi on a dying tree and some fallen ones. Whilst there I noted a small hole in a mud bank with a funnelled spider's web inside. Obviously a kind of funnel web spider lived there though not the deadly one. I also saw a small white flower, which I was told by Kathy was related to the carrot family. As I don't know much about botany that came as a surprise to me. We saw a lot of saplings, but these are being grazed by deer, so not all that we saw will become full-grown trees. There were some trees where you could see the height at which roe deer can no longer reach the leaves, they are stripped at the bottom but still full at the top. We saw a pregnant praying mantis and a boar hoof print in the mud. At this site we were to clear some of the scrub, trees and bushes so that open expanses of field and meadow could be created instead of meadow areas separated by wooded areas. This would mean that butterflies would be able to travel from one open area to another more easily and wouldn't be limited to isolated spots. Butterflies need to bask in the sunlight and so need bright open spots, not the shade of the woodland.

At the other site, Csarabos, we had a look around as well and were told that we would be clearing trees and scrub again as they are draining moisture from the land. On the way back we saw Hungarian grey cattle being herded. Cattle like these could be used to maintain pasture areas and help stop them being taken over by woodland, but this isn't widely done.

In the evening Sandor gave us an introductory talk about the Park, and its history and conservation record. The area became a National Park in 1985. Sandor explained to us that conservation in Hungary is different to conservation in the UK. Their three main goals are:

- Research and monitoring
- Recording and protection
- Interpretation and education

The area is in close proximity to the Carpathian mountain range, meaning mountainous types of flora and fauna can be found in the Park including wolves, bears and lynx, and the Carpathian basin. In the Ice Age the basin was a good refuge for species that had split from their main population, adding to the biodiversity present today. The caves in the park became a World Heritage site in 1995. The Park extends into Slovakia as it is all the same geological unit therefore co-operation is needed between the nations to conserve the site. However on the Slovakian side there are only 8 staff: 5 guards and 3 specialists. On the Hungarian side there are 7 guards and 15 specialists. The Park receives a small amount of money from the government. So both sides are very under-staffed but the Slovakian side more so. Nest boxes for birds, owls for example, have been put up to encourage breeding. The Park is approximately three-quarters forest and the remaining quarter is small areas of grasslands and orchards. The human population is increasing in and around the park and a visitor's centre is used to educate the local children.

Our first day of work was with some students from the Gödöllő University in Hungary at the Acskó site. We followed the footpath that led up to the grassland where we'd be working. I helped remove juniper bushes that were over a couple of metres in height and blackthorn bushes using a saw and a pair of loppers. Later we moved up to higher ground to clear trees that were felled by the chainsaws and brushcutters. We dragged the fallen branches into the woodland that was being kept to keep the space clear. Leaving dead wood on the ground would stop anything underneath from growing. By the end of the day we had created a corridor of grassland for the butterflies to travel through.

In the evening we did proper introductions to each other and Sandor, including how we had heard about the project and why we decided to join up. We also met Simon, a Brit who moved to Hungary and has set up his own business in Szögliget and he talked to us about life here.

The next day we worked in the same area but in a field alongside the footpath closer to the road. I helped clear trees close to the path that were covering a brook that ran along side. At the start of the day you couldn't see the path from the field but by the end they were next to each other. All the fallen logs and branches we hauled onto the fire. Imre, the ranger who was overseeing us asked some of us to help in the field on the other side of the road. He said there was a well there that had been overgrown. The brushcutters cleared the scrub around the brook and then a couple of other helpers and myself cleared it with pitchforks, and then we could see the actual brook. It was the same one in the field above flowing downhill. We saw a lot of wildlife at the site, bush crickets, caterpillars, praying mantis, a lizard and a tree frog, different types of spiders and ants nests.

In the evening Sandor's wife Fanni came to the hostel to give us a Hungarian lesson. She is a primary school teacher and so was a very natural teacher and did a very good job of teaching us practically. She went to a lot of trouble for us and it was lovely to meet her.

We did another half day at the Acskó location, lopping and sawing at unwanted trees and saplings and burning them as well as putting the smaller ones into the woodland on the other side of the footpath. We found a goat moth caterpillar, it was about 4 inches long and its colouring was black and a deep peach colour, and it moved very quickly. Nigel told us that these caterpillars love inside trees for around 5 years before becoming butterflies, so we must have disrupted it. We left it amongst some other trees we weren't touching so hopefully it will have found a new home. Our fire very nearly spread a bit too far so we had to keep an eye on it. We found a small, disused quarry in the woodland where we were putting the smaller debris and a fresh spring coming out of the ground. On returning to the hostel I discovered a spider resting on the inside rim of my hat which was a bit of a surprise! It had about a one-inch pale green body with thick translucent grey/green legs. As yet I believe it is unidentified.

With the rest of the day I wandered down to Szögliget village with Sarah, another volunteer. It was about a twenty-five minute walk and passes another disused quarry on one side of the road, but far bigger than the one found in the woodland. The rock is a red colour and looked about sixty-foot high. The village is quiet, there doesn't appear to be much traffic or activity on the surface. I noticed pet dogs or possibly strays wandering on the roads, it seems they have free range and walk around happily. I also went for a walk turning left from the hostel instead of right down to the village. The road was very quiet, and turned into a track if you turned off it on the left. If you carried on along the road up the hill you can find the castle and the Slovakian border. That evening we had a BBQ round a campfire to celebrate Kathy's birthday. The next day was our first cultural day. We visited the bird ringing camp at Szalonna and saw birds including a kingfisher, blackbirds and bluetits being tagged, weighed and recorded, then let go. They are caught in large, very fine nets about twelve foot high. These nets are checked every hour and the ringers gently release them and put

them into small bags, then take them to be recorded. There were specialists and volunteers working there, some had their families with them so it felt very communal. Later we went on a very informative guided tour of Rakoczi cave given by Istfan, who was also helping look after us at the hostel with his mother Eszter and sister Dia. It was very cold inside compared to the heat outside. We entered the cave through a man-made entrance and went down some man-made tunnels before entering the cave system itself. These tunnels were made in the 1920s when it was being mined for iron ore. At this time Hungary was trying to become the major exporter of iron ore, and in this area alone there were 53 caves before the miners came, and they destroyed all but 7 in their attempts to find iron ore. We were told that unfortunately there was more iron in the rail tracks inside the tunnels that were laid down for the wagons than there was that was transported out of the cave. Where the man-made tunnels stopped and the cave began there were steep steps, almost like ladders. There were two pools in the cave, the water was a green colour and very clear, they looked a lot shallower than they were. We were told that the stalactites take ten years to grow a cubic millimetre, and we also saw calcite crystals. There was electric lighting installed throughout the cave, if not we would have had no idea what a cavernous place we were in. It was a bit disorientating on the way back, and I think the lack of oxygen made everybody feel tired.

After lunch we went to a monastery near Martonyi Kolostor, we walked about a mile up a wooded track to see the ruins. The site was on a hill surrounded by similar forested hills, so there wasn't much of a view, which increased the reclusive feeling. According to Kathy's guidebook the monastery was built in the 1200s but destroyed around 200 years later by the Turks and was left since then although recently there has been some renovation; some new beams had been put in. Only the main part of the building, the church, is still standing, there are ruins that must have been wings where the monks slept and ate etc. There were two large tree stumps inside the church. They looked like beech trees and they were around 250 years old. This means that they grew inside the ruins and the mid-1700s but were cut down when the renovations started. It was very quiet in the area and easy to see what an idyllic spot it was for a monastery.

The following day, a Monday, we were scheduled to work at Csarabos but it was rained off. We took the opportunity to look for salamander lizards on a woodland walk near Jósvalfö. The rain must have brought them out because we saw about 5 including a baby about 2 inches long. The adults were around 4 times that size. They are so brightly coloured; even the baby had the same markings as the adults so clearly they do not only appear at adulthood. We also saw a couple of frogs. We visited the Jósvalfö folk museum, which had reconstructed rooms of a traditional village house and were filled with original items. There was also a room dedicated to cave exploration, displays of rock and early equipment. In the barn there was some original preserved farming equipment. We went up to the village church (Nigel was given the very big ornate key). The bell tower and building for funerals were separate to the actual church. We also had a quick walk around the village. We had lunch at the smallest parish in Hungary, Tornakápolna, and picked some flowers on the way back to identify with Kathy's help back at the hostel. In the evening Adam Szabo, who lives next door to the hostel, gave us a presentation on the large carnivores that live in the park. We watched a documentary, which went into detail about the hunters who come to the park and the lack of effort and funding to protect these species. In 2001-02 the Life Foundation was created, which funds environmental projects relating to protected species. This Foundation still continues today but less money is provided and only 5 people are involved with it. There are very few wolves, bear and lynx in the park so their future doesn't look hopeful. Adam brought with him a wolf skin that had been 'donated' to him by a hunter (it is likely that the hunter gave it to him to avoid or minimise getting into trouble, as wolves are a strictly protected species). Adam believes there is one wolf pack in the National Park, (including the Slovakian Karst). The pack consists of 4-5 wolves: a mother and father and 2-3 cubs. The penalty for shooting a wolf is 1-3 years in jail or a ban from hunting. However there is a lot of corruption, which means shootings sometimes go unpunished. There are 3 bears reported as being in the park and 2 lynx but both are male so there is no chance of population increase. Bears and lynx are also at big risk from hunters, bear cubs especially as they are similar in height and movement to wild boar, which are the main target for hunters. Some hunters attempt to be friendly with Adam and his associates, some not. According to the documentary a lot of hunters consider shooting a large carnivore a very macho thing to do. Perhaps there is no realistic chance to save the animals. There isn't enough money being provided, and there aren't enough resources, people or legal enforcement.

After our cultural day yesterday we went back to work today. We went to the Csarabos site and lopped down and burnt unwanted trees, again to prevent the grassland becoming yet more forest. The grass was high and included the Greater Burnet flower, a tall stalk with a deep red flower at the top. These we had to protect because they hold Scarce Large Blue butterfly larvae. We worked a full day and cleared a lot of space that will be suitable for butterflies.

In the evening as the light was fading Imre and Sandor drove us to a cave following the road up to the castle and the Slovakian border from the hostel. We had to walk a short distance into the woods before reaching the cave and there Sandor had put up a net over the cave entrance and was monitoring bats. After the bats got caught in the net Sandor would take them down and show them to us. In a short time we saw 9 different species out of the 24 different species in the park. We had brought bat detectors too and we could hear them on the right frequency. A couple of us thought we heard a wolf howl, but it was so faint we really couldn't be sure. On the drive back I was in the back of the pick-up truck with 5 others and that was a bumpy ride back! Our second cultural day we visited a village called Gömörzölös and looked at an exhibition belonging to an old local man called Lazlo Kovacs. He owned a lot farm buildings and in each was a different exhibition including farming equipment and paintings he had done himself. He also had a guesthouse.

In the same village we also saw the smallest pub in Hungary which is now a gift shop. Sandor showed us a couple of grassland sites that Birdlife Hungary is trying to acquire. The problem is that Birdlife Hungary is given a fixed amount of money and at the auctions for this land there are investors who are easily able to outbid them. After lunch we drove to a medieval town called Eger. We had time to look around the old streets and we went to a Marzipan Museum, all the exhibits were made out of marzipan and sugar. It was very enjoyable. In the evening we went to a house belonging to a family friend of Sandor's for a wine tasting evening. The hosts make the wine themselves and we tried 6 during the meal they provided for us. They have won a lot of awards for their wine and were very hospitable and welcoming to us. I didn't work on the next day as I was feeling unwell. The others worked at Csarabos for the day. I put myself to use by stoning plums that had been collected for our jam making session tomorrow. There was a huge supply of them but I got through what I could! In the evening we were given a talk by Victor Pal, a research student and friend of Simon's about the effects of industry on Hungary since World War 2. It was an interesting talk and he was very enthusiastic about his research area. Later we went for an evening walk beyond the hostel down a track and found some glow-worms. Apparently it is the females that glow to attract the males. We also heard rutting deer and owls.

The next day was our final workday at Csarabos. I started off deadheading Canadian Golden Rod plants; they obviously are not native and spread very quickly. Deadheading them ensures the flower seeds can't spread. It was important to check that there were no creatures on the flowers as Nigel and I discovered when we found a bush cricket inside the collection bag. The rest of the day was spent dragging branches and logs to the fires. The site looked very different at the end of our work, many bushes and trees were cleared and the site is more of a meadow now. Later on more plum stoning took place and after it had grown dark Adam took some of us up to Derenk (the deserted Polish village on the road up to the Slovakian border) to try to hear the wolves. He left us waiting near there whilst he drove on for a distance and then stopped. It was quiet for a couple of minutes before we heard

Adam do a series of howls in the hope of getting a response from the wolves. We listened for maybe 30 minutes but didn't hear them, we did hear rutting deer though. When Adam came back he said that it had been over a year since he had last heard the wolves. It is probable that the older wolves know that it is Adam howling, but he said that when there are young wolves around he always gets a response from them because they think it is one of the older ones bringing food. So although we didn't hear any real wolves it was a very good experience to hear Adam doing his work. On our last full day we watched the stoned plums being constantly stirred on an outdoor stove, a huge vat of them. Then we went butterfly spotting with Janos Toth, a butterfly expert, up a steep hill near Jósvalfö. We saw many different kinds and other creatures as well, but did not find a Saga pedo, the giant bushcricket that we had been hopeful to see. In the afternoon we had horse and carriage rides round Jósvalfö which was very enjoyable and relaxing. I think it's a great way of travelling! Later on myself, Janos and two other volunteers stayed in Jósvalfö to join the film club watching 'Oh Brother Where Art Thou'. Then we arrived back at the hostel for the last dinner and we were all given a jar of plum jam.

We left the hostel the next day, and drove through Miskolc and Budapest and arriving at the Fertő Hanság National Park, on the Hungarian – Austrian border in the evening. The hostel we were staying in was very unusual, and beautiful.

Unfortunately the weather was very bad, raining and cold.

The next day we went out for an early birdwatching session but the weather was still bad so visibility wasn't good. After leaving we drove through Austria and into Germany, eventually arriving at our campsite in the town of Bodenwohr. It was still raining as we put our tents up but had stopped after dinner. The site was close to a lake and looked very scenic, obviously a popular camping resort.

In the morning we watched a slide show of the local area whilst having breakfast then continued driving through Germany. By the end of the day we had reached our second campsite, at a town called Abenden, near the Belgian border. It was a very beautiful spot near a river and we saw a Kingfisher and a Heron there as well as other birds. The weather was better today; we put our tents up and had dinner in a very nice restaurant.

Then came our last day of travelling, we headed off into Belgium, then into France arriving at Calais. Our ferry was a bit late but the crossing was very smooth. We arrived into Dover and dropped off a couple of our volunteers, Helen Shaw and Sue. Later on we dropped Sandra and Sarah along the M25 and then everyone else including myself departed from Basingstoke station which we reached around 8pm.