

European Conservation Action Network visit to Aggtelek National Park, Hungary – October 2008

On Monday 1st September, 13 of us volunteers set out from London St Pancras for Aggtelek National Park, Northern Hungary, with EuCAN (the European Conservation Action Network). Whilst we were there we had a chance not only to gain experience in and carry out practical conservation work, but also to appreciate the wildlife and culture of a new place.

Practical conservation work

During our time in Hungary we undertook practical conservation work in two areas of the National Park; firstly in the fields of Acskó, Szogliget, and then in Csarabos, a damp valley just outside Aggtelek. In both areas, as with many across Hungary, agriculture is in decline and a lot of grassland habitat is being lost or degraded as a result. Lack of crop planting and grazing of livestock is enabling succession to take place as farmland is colonised by scrub and trees. Although return to woodland is a natural progression it may mean the loss of many species in the area (particularly butterflies, insects and plants) as habitats are lost or fragmented. Action is therefore being taken to maintain clear grassland areas, and where possible corridors between them, to help preserve species diversity.

Acskó

As a group we worked to clear the grassland area of scrub, mainly hornbeam and blackthorn, using hacksaws and loppers, brush cutters and chain saws. We began with the fields of Acskó, joined by a group of 30 students from Gödöllő University, then moved on to clear along the track up to Acskó, clearing the field and selectively opening up the spring running alongside the track. Clearing along path up to fields should help maintain habitat corridors for population sustainability and breeding.

Track leading to Acskó:



Before work commenced:



After:

Our aim at **Csarabos** was once again scrub clearance. Woody scrub was cleared from the grassland and surrounding borders and burned. We also manually removed 'golden rod' an invasive species that would normally be removed by grazing cattle/livestock in an attempt to prevent it reseeding next year.

The area at Csarabos was designated as important as species of Scarce Large Blue and Large Blue (*Maculinea*) butterflies were found at the site earlier in the summer. These species are highly endangered and are particularly remarkable for their extraordinary parasitic life style with ant species. Early larvae consume flower buds of specific host plants, but later live in ant nests where they either devour the brood, or are fed mouth-to-mouth by the ants. They have been the focus for much conservation research and studies of evolution. Whilst clearing we were careful to avoid cutting any Great Burnett (*Sanguisorba officinalis*) as larvae of the scarce blue butterfly may still have been present, in the host plant stage.



Scarce Blue Butterfly (*Maculinea teleius*)

Fields at Csarabos:



Wildlife

As well as visiting sites for practical conservation work we also had the chance to see a lot more of the park and the wildlife within it. On our cultural days we had a number of visits and talks:

- Visit to the Bird Ringing camp at Szalonna – Professor Lajos Juhasz and Atilla Huber showed us the mist nets used to catch the birds and we watched various species being ringed, weighed and recorded as part of the survey.



Mist nets



Ringling and weighing the birds

- Bat netting – Sandor kindly took us to one of the least disturbed caves in the park in the woods above Derenk to watch the bats there. The bats were captured by a net similar to those at the bird ringing camp, placed outside the opening to the cave. We were lucky enough to see 10 individuals of 9 different species of bat, including the Greater Horseshoe bat and the Schreiber's bat, both of which are very rare and endangered. Many species of bat in the area are rare and threatened due to human disturbance of caves and loss of habitat.
- Talk from Adam Szabo on his work on wolves and lynxes in the national park area, and on the three bears that have recently been spotted! He also took us up to Derenk to listen for any wolves in the vicinity, however all we heard no answer to Adam's calling, only the rutting of red deer and the calls of Tawny owls and mice.
- Fire salamanders! A personal highlight for me, on a walk through the woods to Jósvalfö, following the first rainfall for some time, we saw large numbers of fire salamanders beneath the trees. Easily identifiable by their distinct yellow and black markings they are often inconspicuous, hiding under stones or wood, in their habitats in hilly parts of southern and central Europe.



Fire Salamanders (*Salamandra salamandra*)

- General botany lessons along the way from Kathy, one of the trip organisers, and a day out in the hills of Jósvalfö learning some butterfly identification and looking for plants and birds.



Butterfly capture and ID

Culture

Whilst in Hungary we had a chance to experience a taste of the culture around us, from visiting the local bar in Szögliget and working with the national park staff and university students, to admiring the architecture and landscape of the area. Armed with a basic grip of Hungarian language from an introductory lesson we were ready to explore! ...In addition to all the wildlife visits we also had the opportunity to visit many of the villages and sites within and around the park, including local folk and art museums at Gömöraszölös, Martonyi Kolostor, an abandoned monastery that has been partly restored, the foothills of the Bükk mountains and the town of Eger. We were also lucky enough to visit the home of a local vineyard owner near Eger for a spot of wine tasting and the Rakoczi Cave in the Esztramos Hills, one of the caves for which the Aggtelek National Park is famous.



A view of Eger from the top of the Minaret tower



Martonyi Kolostor monastery



Salamander House Youth Hostel – home for 2 weeks!

Overall it was a brilliant trip, from which I gained some valuable work experience for my CV, experienced a new place and culture, and had a lot of fun! Thank you again for the opportunity.