

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).

After doing some volunteering for Christchurch city council in 2007 I received an email that informed me of a conservation holiday that would be running the following year and going to France and Hungary. I applied and was invited to an introductory weekend in January with the view of me going to Hungary in September to do some practical conservation work.

I arrived in Dorset on the Friday night and attended an introductory night including a presentation and some very nice venison goulash. The Saturday was spent at the Kingcombe centre where I was put through some brushcutter training before all meeting back for dinner in the evening. The Sunday was a day of volunteering on a patch of land for the Butterfly conservation trust, I was clearing blackthorn for most of the day and talking to people that were to be going on the same trip as me.

I traveled to London by train and found the youth hostel that we were booked into by St Pancras station. We spent the evening together and a few of us went for a drink in a local pub. The following day we were up early and boarded the Eurostar to Brussels. The train was very impressive and we were in Belgium within 2 hours. We had about 3 hours break before our next train so had a look around the city and sampled some Belgian chocolate and a Belgian waffle. The next stop was in Köln where I had a coffee and a Bratwurst overlooking the famous cathedral. We then got a train to Munich and then a night train to Budapest. I slept surprisingly well on the train and while it was a little cramped it was comfortable.

Once in Budapest we were met by Nigel, Kathy and Sandor and went for a tour of Budapest, dinner and a 3 hour drive to the Aggtelek national park. We had a very good dinner, including our first shot of the local spirit, and then settled into our hostel.

The following day was a tour of all the sites that we would be working on and the day after that we did our first days work. We had a group of about 30 Hungarian students helping us clear encroaching scrub from a glade in the forest. I was doing brushcutting in the morning and chainsawing in the afternoon. The next day, Friday, was spent working a bit closer to the hostel and without the Hungarian students. We got a lot done and I once again did brushcutting and chainsawing. Saturday morning was spent working on the same spot but I had a rest from machinery this time as wearing all the PPE in 37°C heat was getting a bit too much. In the afternoon I cycled to the Slovakian border with 2 other volunteers and had a look around a deserted polish settlement.

Sunday was a day off but we had to get up even earlier than usual to visit a bird ringing camp. It was a very good experience to see this process so close up. We then went on a tour of some caves that were originally created for iron mining but in building the exploratory tunnels they had found some natural caves that were quite spectacular. In the afternoon we saw a restored monastery at the top of a big hill that was a little strange as it was in the middle of no where.

Rain put a stop to our proposed work day today but it was good because it brought out lots of fire salamanders near to the visitor centre. Had a walk around Josovo for the rest of the morning and then the afternoon was spent walking up to a castle over looking the hostel for some incredible views.

The next day we were back to work and onto a new site, I did brushcutting and some chainsawing of some very difficult Blackthorn. The evening was spent with Sandor monitoring the parks bat population. We got to see 8 different species of bats close up that was extremely interesting.

Had another day off on Wednesday and drove to Eger and saw a very strange marzipan museum and climbed up a very tall and unsafe feeling tower in the centre. We then went for a very nice meal and wine tasting night that a local wine maker had put on for us. The area was famous for its bulls blood which used to be thought of as an inferior wine but is now getting a lot better.

Felt very ill for the following days work due to all the wine the previous night but worked through the hang over. The next day was our last work day and in the evening we stoned some plums ready for jam making and played some pool at the hostel. Our last day in the

national park was spent on a butterfly walk and a horse drawn ride around the town of Josovo.

The last 4 days were spent traveling across Europe by minibus and stopping in some very nice places on the Austrian border and in Germany as well as a lot of service stations.

The whole experience had exceeded all of my expectations and seemed to be tailor made for my interests. The brushcutter license that I received was a major factor in getting me my current job and the volunteering and chainsaw experience in Hungary will be very useful in getting me my next job. I have seen places that I know I never would have gone to otherwise and done things that I may never get the chance to do again like see bird ringing and bat catching so close up. Since returning I have been trying to find people to recommend the project.

Thank you Nigel and Kathy