

Visit to Aggtelek National Park, Hungary

September 2008

Two weeks in Europe? Free? When I heard about this opportunity I was quick to complete the short application form and waited anxiously to find out if I was fortunate to have been selected. Happily I was one of those chosen and set off in September with 12 complete strangers to embark on a conservation project in Hungary. We travelled there by train, 3 in total, and after a night on a sleeper train we certainly had all got to know each other a lot better. Each cabin slept 6 and with 5 men, me and our entire luggage for two weeks including a chainsaw it was most definitely a squeeze.

On arrival at Budapest train station we were met by Nigel and Kathy, the project organisers along with Sandor from the Aggtelek National Park and after a whistlestop tour of the city we drove to Szogliget, our home for the next few weeks. Our accommodation was a former border post which was now a youth hostel. For our entire stay we were spoiled by a lovely family who cooked our breakfast made us a picnic lunch and a three course dinner each day. Wild boar appeared frequently on the menu and most dishes came with a generous portion of paprika. Very tasty.

I expect you are starting to wonder when we would actually do some conservation work! We worked on three different sites whilst we were out there. At each site the main brief was to cut down trees and bushes which had colonised in areas which should have been open meadows. The purpose was to improve the habitat for native butterflies. Sadly, the local people are not keeping livestock and as a result the land is not being grazed to keep the vegetation from turning into bush. The National Park had hired in a herd of cows but I don't think they could ever eat enough to keep on top of the problem. Those with licenses set to work with chainsaws and brushcutters but those of us without the necessary qualifications were just as effective with a bow saw and loppers! Well, nearly as effective! We had fantastic weather whilst we were out there and some days it was almost too hot to work!

If you are thinking all this sounds like hard work then don't worry. The trip had a dual purpose and the other side of it was to actually experience Hungarian culture. We had the opportunity to try and see so many different things. We visited several local museums and villages. Sandor's wife was kind enough to give us a Hungarian language lesson. There was a wine tasting evening and a horse and carriage ride. We went to a bird ringing camp, tried our hand at butterfly and bat identification and jam making. To keep us fit, a steep climb to the local castle and even two night walks to try and hear a wolf! Sadly, we did not hear or see any wolves on this trip but I am assured there are wolves and even three bears in the area.

Between the three of them Shandor, Nigel and Kathy had a vast amount of knowledge on wildlife, birds, butterflies, plants and the local area. There was always the opportunity to learn something new.

Unfortunately our time came to an end all too soon and we had to pack up and leave our beautiful hostel on the Slovakia border. As the minibus we have been using during the trip needed to be returned to Dorset our journey back was by to be by road. Staying on the way back in a youth hostel on the Hungarian/Austrian border and two nights camping in Germany. Eventually arriving in Calais to catch the ferry back to Dover. I have to admit I was filled with slight trepidation about this part of the trip, being locked in a minibus with 15 people for 4 days, but even this experience turned out to be far more enjoyable than expected.

The whole trip was a fantastic opportunity to learn so much more about the country than I would have done if I had just visited as a tourist. The method of travel there and back was a unique experience I will never forget. I am pleased that we were able to give a little back through the work we did. I would certainly recommend anybody who wants to immerse themselves into a country and have a go at some conservation work to apply.

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.

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