

## **A European Conservation Action Network Trip to the Aggtelek National Park, Hungary. March 2009.**

A Report of the Visit by Graham Brown

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*Further information can be obtained from [www.kingcombecentre.org.uk](http://www.kingcombecentre.org.uk) or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559; email: [nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk) ).*

### Introduction

The aims of this trip to the Aggtelek National Park in Hungary are to provide the opportunity for a group of individuals to travel, using low carbon emitting forms of transport, to another European Country. Where they will participate in a practical conservation work and species monitoring program provided by the host organisation, in this case the Aggtelek National Park (ANP). In the process it is envisaged that there will be an exchange of ideas , expertise and resources between the participating parties relating to the tasks carried out and new skills will be learnt by members of the visiting group. It is also anticipated that a visit of this nature will provide an opportunity for an exchange of cultural, social and political ideas leading to an appreciation and greater understanding of how other Europeans work and live.

### Travel

In keeping with the ethos of the European Conservation Action Network (EuCAN) our journey to and from Hungary involved travelling by a series of intercity trains across Europe (Eurostar and the German ICE train), with sleeper trains for parts of the journey, and a local train from Budapest to Miskolc. Here we were met by a coach for the final part of our journey to the village of Szőgliget and our accommodation at Salamandra-ház . During our stay we were ferried around in a minibus, we travelled by minibus to visit the Bükk National Park and for part of our return journey across Hungary to visit the Fertő Hanság National Park, before being deposited in Vienna for our return journey to the UK by train.



Waiting to board the ICE train at Frankfurt.

### The Aggtelek National Park

The ANP lies in the north east corner of Hungary and forms part of the Gömör – Torna Karst landscape which extends across the National Border into Slovakia. The area is defined by its geology, principally Triassic limestone which was deposited 220-240 million years ago, and which today gives rise to the distinctive landscape which makes this area so special.

The weathering and erosion of the base rock, especially solution by rainwater, has resulted in a karst landscape, characterised by flat plateaux, with bowl shaped dolines, sink holes, springs and streams divided by gorges and valleys, plus an impressive number of caves including the famous Baradla Caves.

The continental location and elevation, between 160 – 640metres above sea level, of the area, with its associated regional and localised climate, linked to the alkaline rocks and soils, has resulted in a particularly rich flora and fauna.



Hornbeam – Sessile Oak forest on limestone.

Recognition of the significance of the area within Hungary was established in 1978 with the formation of the Aggtelek Protected Landscape Area. In 1979 the area became a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, making this the first National Park in Hungary to be recognised for its abiotic values, superficial land formations and

internationally important network of caves. The Aggtelek National Park was established in 1985 and today occupies some 20,159 hectares. This area is today contiguous with the Slovak-Karst National Park to the north, and the two parks constitute a single geographical and ecological area extending to over 60,000 hectares.

The ANP is divided into two well defined areas by the Bódva River and its broad valley, with the Aggtelek Karst to the north west and the Szalonna Massif to the south east. With over 77% of the national park forested the majority of intensive agriculture occurs in the Bódva valley and its tributaries. Here sunflower, grain and maize are grown, with pastures for livestock on the more inaccessible and wet ground. Numerous small orchards are clustered around settlements and some times located in more isolated areas. The steeper valley sides and upland plateaux areas are dominated by Hornbeam – Sessile Oak forest (*Quercus petraeae*-*Carpinetum*) with areas of Turkey Oak (*Quercus cerris*) and Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), these areas are interspersed with wood pasture, semi-dry grasslands and areas of scrub, creating a mosaic of habitats. The management of the national park is concentrated on the maintenance of the diversity of these habitats and the associated flora and fauna by the designation of four zones. Zone A cannot be visited at all; zone B, the managed zone, can only be visited on marked trails and for research; zone C is set aside for tourism; and zone D acts a buffer zone with the farmed areas. Within the managed zones B and C, the timber appeared to being harvested on a 40 to 80 year cycle, areas or coupes of 2 or 3 hectares being clear felled and then fenced to exclude deer to allow re-growth and natural regeneration of the trees to occur.

This diversity of habitats, the rich flora supported by the alkaline soils and the low levels of human intervention have resulted in an important invertebrate fauna, particularly of the Orthoptera (grasshoppers and crickets) and Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths). Over 1000 species of moth and butterfly having been identified, including important populations of Osiris Blue (*Cupido Osiris*), Large Blue (*Maculinia arion*), Scarce Swallowtail (*Iphiclidis podalirius*), Alcona Blue (*M. alcon*) and Lesser Marbled Fritillary (*Brenthis ino*). Many of these species are dependant on the grasslands which occupy 14% of the area. Roaming the woodlands are large numbers of red deer and wild boar, with roe deer associated with the more open areas, and ground squirrels in the meadows. These in turn provide food for a small population of lynx and an itinerant pack of wolves. The caves are an important tourist attraction but also have their own fauna, with over 500 species associated with the caves, of which 40 species are endemic. Fire Salamandas (*Salamandra salamandra*), the emblem of the National Park, are present in good numbers and can be seen during the spring, summer and autumn on days of high humidity. Of particular importance are the bats, with over 20 species present in the area, many of which hibernate in significant numbers in the caves in the winter and roost in them in the summer. There is a rich and diverse avifauna with over 127 breeding species present, including Hazel Hen (*Bonasa bonasia*), Ural and Pygmy Owls (*Strix uralensis*, *Glaucidium passerinum*), Redbreasted Flycatcher, Rock Bunting (*Emberiza cia*), Rock Thrush (*Monticola saxatilis*) and Imperial Eagle (*Aquila heliaca*).



Fire Salamanda. The emblem of the Aggtelek National Park.

The management of the Park falls to the ANP Directorate, a state run organisation, with the stated aims of protecting the designated areas and the provision for research and education. However the management of the forests for timber production, by private companies who own 59% of the area, has resulted in a conflict of interests and frustration for the ANP in maintaining the rich diversity of habitats which make this area so important.

The grasslands and meadows, which are so important for many of the areas invertebrates, are particularly under pressure. Lack of managed grazing is resulting in tree and bush encroachment, and a number of non-native invasive plant species are posing a further threat to these areas, these include False Acacia (*Robina pseudoacacia*), Tree of Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) and Golden Rod (*Solidago virgaurea*). Burning by graziers, or to deliberately reduce the conservation value of an area, in the spring of dead grass, is also detrimental to the invertebrate populations. Hunting for deer and wild boar is helping to maintain artificially high populations of these animals and this is having a detrimental effect on the forest under storey. Hunters may also be involved in the persecution of protected predator species such as wolf and lynx. There are also very low levels of dead wood, within parts of the forest due to unofficial wood cutting and removal.

Within the local communities there is a high level of unemployment and an aging population. There is very little traditional farming, and many marginal areas have been abandoned to scrub encroachment and forest. Tourism is important, with 150-200,000 visitors a year, but this centred on the caves which have been developed as a tourist attraction and very few visitors remain in the area for more than a few days. There are many attractive villages in the area and a number of guest houses, a hotel, camping areas and hostels. There is therefore a need to extend and increase the facilities and attractions for visitors if the decline in the local population is to be halted.



Szögliget village.



Szalamandra-haz, our hostel.

### Our Work

Our work for the ANP was centred on the clearance of invasive scrub from important grasslands and a local orchard. The first area we tackled was a small upland meadow a short walk west of our hostel at Szalamandra-haz. This open area, known as Acsko, was being colonised by scrub from the surrounding forest and juniper bushes, shading out the grass and herb layers, which are so important for a range of invertebrates.

After an introduction to the area and the task, by Sandor Boldogh the Conservation Officer for the ANP, we set about clearing the scrub. Working with us, on this task, were a group of Hungarian students and Imrie, an ANP Ranger. Using brushcutters, loppers, bowsaws and billhooks we cut off the bushes and shrubs at ground level and piled up the brash under the trees around the edge of the site to leave an open meadow area, dotted with juniper bushes.



The meadow at Acsko after our efforts at clearing the scrub.

We next tackled an overgrown orchard, about a twenty minute drive from our hostel, at Tornakápolna. Here the trees, mainly a type of plum grown to make a strong spirit, known as pólinka, were being engulfed in plum suckers and cornus scrub. We again worked on this task with the Hungarian students and János Tóth from the ANP, clearing the scrub from around the trees, so that it could be burnt. In maintaining this orchard we were helping to sustain the tradition of pólinka making for the local community and enhancing the habitat for invertebrates and a number of important bird species, including wryneck (*Jynx torquilla*), woodlark (*Lullula arborea*) and redstart (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*).



Working in the orchard at Tornakápolna.

#### Culture

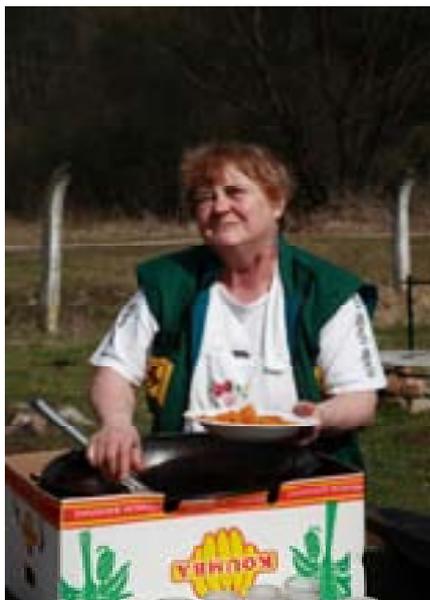
Our trip also included a number of cultural and social activities. These included trips to see the caves at Rákóczi and Vörös-tó near Jósvalfó; a visit to the small church of St Andreas, the patron saint of miners, at Tornaszentandrás, with its medieval murals; the monastery at Martonyi which had been sacked by the Turks in the sixteenth century; and a visit to the fascinating museum of rural life and art assembled by the

artist Lazlő Kovacs at Gömörszölös. We also visited a former Soviet era Collective Farm at Komjati, which is now owned and managed, along more modern lines, by Joseph, a former industrial entrepreneur!



Visiting the caves at Rákóczi.

During the evenings we had a number of talks about the area and its culture. Katalin Mihalik, the mayor of Szögliget, came to talk about the village; Fanni Boldogh tried to teach us some Hungarian and Adam Szábo told us about his research on wolves in the area and took us on a walk looking for evidence of wolves in the local forests! Our visit, to Hungary, was greatly enhanced by the local food and beverages we managed to taste. At Salamandra-haz we were catered for by Eszter, and her daughter Dia, who between them served up some truly memorable meals. And we also dined out in number of Hungarian restaurants. Our meals and free time in the evenings were lubricated by trying the local liquor; good lager style beers; excellent Hungarian wines, including Bulls Blood and Tokaji, the local plum, derived, spirit pólinka and the bitter infusion called Unicum.



Eszter, our wonderful cook, serving an alfresco meal!

Conclusion

This visit, for me, has been a truly memorable experience. Memorable for the train journey from the UK to Hungary; the places visited and sights seen, and perhaps most importantly the people I have met. My fellow travellers from the UK, all the Hungarians who made our visit so enjoyable and particularly Nigel Spring and Sandor Boldogh for organising such a great, action packed, itinerary and keeping it all on the rails! I hope one day, in the not to distant future, to return to Hungary and the Aggtelek National Park.

Many Thanks Graham