

TRIP TO HUNGARY

Tues March 3rd – Friday March 20th

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).

The trip was a both a cultural and practical experience of the work of the National Parks in Hungary and the problems they face as well as the opportunity to gain insight into the wildlife, heritage, architecture and geographical features of the country. The group ranged in age from early twenties to early sixties with everyone having a wide range of skills and experiences to bring to the group. Travelling, living and working together as part of a team was an important part of the trip and I felt we all gained from the companionship and breadth of knowledge available. The following is my personal record of the trip.

Guest Speakers During The Stay:

Sandor Boldogh – Our host in Hungary and conservation officer gave an introduction to the Aggtelek National Park and the geology and history of the area illustrated with slides

Katalin Mihalik, the mayor of Szögliget, gave a talk on the village, her work as mayor and the future plans for the community

Adam Szabó – a talk and film on the large carnivores, mainly wolves, in the park area

Atila Huber – a talk and slides on the invertebrates found in the National Park

Dr. András Ambrus – introduction to Fertő- Hanság National Park and the conservation of the Large Blue (*Maculinea*) butterflies

Krisztina Mészáros from the Fertő- Hanság National Park education centre spoke on the work of the centre and showed a film of the wildlife.

Introduction to the Aggtelek National Park

There are 10 national Parks in Hungary and during our stay we visited 3, Aggtelek, where we were based for the majority of our stay, Fertő- Hanság where we stayed for two nights and the Bükk which was a day visit.

The Aggtelek Park has 20,000 hectares within Hungary and another 35,000 hectares in Slovakia. In 1986 it was designated a National park, in 1995 it became a world heritage site and in 2001 a Ramsar site – an important area for breeding and migratory birds. The area was protected by the Carpathian Mountains during the ice age and the wildlife has many mountain characteristics considering the height above sea level, 600 metres. The area is made up of limestone karst over 230 million years old with typical karst and heathland vegetation. Three quarters of the park is forest, mainly hornbeam, oak and beech with 14% grassland. There are over 400 caves in the limestone area with 262 in the Aggtelek National Park area and the rest in the Slovakian National Park. The rich flora and fauna of the park include red deer, wolves, wild boar, Imperial eagles, Ural owls, pygmy owls, rock buntings, butterflies, grasshoppers, orchids and more than 20 species of bat.



Fire salamanders

The fire salamander with its striking black and yellow colouration is the symbol of the park and we were lucky enough to see many of them after a day of rain. They live for an average of 6-7 years but can survive for 15 years. The length is usually 20-25cm. They have a poisonous gland near the head that secretes a white, milkish liquid.

The area suffers from problems of high unemployment, social issues surrounding the gypsy population, a loss of traditional skills such as handicrafts and a lack of local food production – milk comes from Tesco in Miskolc and there is no local cheese production. The Hucal horses, a native Hungarian breed with a black line down the back can be seen in the park as well as a herd of Hungarian Grey cattle.



Hucal horses



Hungarian Grey cattle

Practical Conservation Work

1. Askó Fields

Our first full day in Hungary began with a walk from the Szalamanra hostel to the Acskó fields (named after a deserted village) with Sandor and Imre. A wet morning but warm so we kept an eye open for fire salamanders but did not see any but saw evidence of deer, wild boar, lichens and numerous birds mainly great tits and blue tits.

After breakfast on Saturday we collected our tools and walked to the fields again whilst Imre took his jeep with the brush cutters and chain saws to the work area.



Askó Fields



A well-earned break

The two-day task was to clear many of the damaged and unsightly juniper bushes from the centre and perimeter of the fields and the blackthorn that was growing around the perimeter of the woodland and so was encroaching on the grassland area. This clearance would enable the many species of butterfly to have a clear area (race) to enable them to fly from one grassland area to another, a fact that I had not previously appreciated. If a tree is six metres high then the race needs to be six metres wide. The chainsaws cut down the larger trees whilst a group of us tackled the smaller junipers and the blackthorn using bow saws and loppers then brush cutters finished

off the work. It was important to cut the wood flat as the area is grazed by red deer and sharp stumps could result if damage to their feet. The resulting branches and cut scrub was pushed into the woodland to rot naturally but also to provide habitation sites for the numerous birds and small animals.

Imre did manage to make us move one pile as it was restricting access to a very important cherry tree used for the local drink – pálinka - but good team work and the thought of supper spurred us into action rather than returning another time. Interesting finds included a preying mantis egg case, a wild boar nesting area, a robin's pincushion and a woven nest but we were unsure of the owner. On one of my return visits I discovered a long tailed tit nesting in a juniper tree so our noisy activities had not led to any disturbance.

Wolf Tracking

One of days consisted of an eight-mile walk with Adam Szabó, known locally as the wolf man. Adam had visited us at the hostel and had given an interesting talk with a film about the large carnivores, mainly wolves, in the area. The walk began from Jósvalfó and took us through the beech woods into an area of the park where the general public are not allowed to go. Adam showed us the remains of a red deer killed by the wolves about a month earlier. The wolves had made their kill near the stream and use the sound of the water as cover as they ambush from the valley sides and the river valley. I was delighted to find wolf scat, which was only two days old, and Adam took a sample of it for DNA testing and also a GPS reading of the location as part of his studies. As we walked we observed the different types of scats including wild boar, red deer and badger as well as wolf. Although we were not lucky enough to see any wolves the actual tracking was very interesting and informative. Our walk took us close to the Slovakian border and we were afforded wonderful views of the area and a return walk through the fields with the herd of Hucal horses.



Red deer remains



GPS by wolf scat



Adam taking a sample

2. Plum Orchards

Our next practical task was clearing the scrub in the plum orchards near Tornakápolna. These had been grazed in the past but were now becoming encroached with dogwood, wild rose and some blackthorn. Many of the trees were rotten, very spindly and too close together so our task was to try and clear around the good specimens, brush cut the undergrowth and make the land suitable for grazing once again. Numerous bonfires were built over the two days working here to get rid of the cuttings and the fierce heat did cause some singeing of hair and eyebrows!



Hard at work in the parlinka orchards

Five students, Bogi, Nori, Judit, Viktor and Johnny, from Debrecen University in Eastern Hungary joined us in this task. Although they participated in the work they seemed to lack the enthusiasm and teamwork ethos that we had. It was a difficult conservation concept to grasp at times when the emphasis seemed to be on keeping as many plum trees as possible, not surprising as this is a source of the local brew – parlinka – and Janos seemed reluctant to thin out some of the trees which to us restricted the butterflies and made the area look like a woodland rather than an orchard. He did leave some of the larger rotting trees that made excellent habitats for insects. Here we found many large Roman Snail shells, a protected species, most of which were empty but one was inhabited.

This was a good area for spotting the flocks of Hawfinches, which were settling in the nearby bushes to afford some excellent close up views of them.

One of our workdays had to be rearranged as we awoke to snow and the decision was taken that it was too slippery and dangerous to work on the slopes. It only remained for us to have a snowball fight in the orchard instead - the Hungarian male students were much better at this than us and we had to resort to underhand methods when they were sitting targets in the back of the jeep. It did lead to a fun final evening together and a cementing of European connections, so a positive result.

3. Fertő- Hanság National Park



Clearing the undergrowth

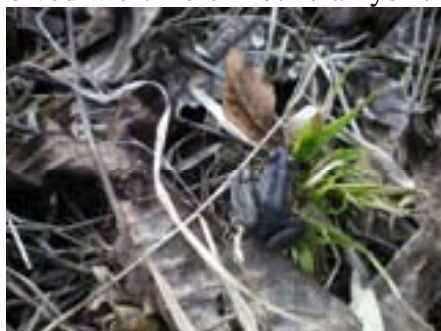


Dam building

Our third project took place near lake Fertő, which forms the border with Austria on the western side of Hungary. The Hungarian side of the park covers 23.5 hectares and was opened in 1994; the lake covers 75km² and consists of shallow standing water 1-2 metres deep with light salt content and fluctuations in water level. The reed beds along the banks are encroaching the lake and in some parts reach a width of 5km. Some restricted cutting of the reed beds takes place, which are affected by the fluctuations of the water level, and a lack of oxygen kills of the roots therefore affecting the colonies of purple and white heron in the area.

Three of the group went with Peter and Sandor, two of the rangers, to use brush cutters to clear vegetation from the small islands in the lake where they hope birds will nest shortly. The rest of us drove to where we cleared and stacked the debris of felled trees for subsequent burning (to provide corridors between the butterfly habitats), then helped to dam a drainage channel to raise the water level in the reed bed to improve the habitat and to make the adjoining lake more suitable for fish.

Our task was to clear an area of scrub and overgrown woodland near Hideség, one of András' butterfly sites to link two areas of reed together to provide a route for butterflies and logs for dam building. It is an important area for the Large Blue (*Maculinea*) butterfly which András is closely involved with. Here I found a hybrid marsh frog and some scarlet elf cup fungi.



Hybrid Marsh frog



Scarlet elf cup

The trees here were mainly willow and all the smaller specimens and some of the larger ones were removed. The plan was to burn these but as it was windy the risk of setting fire to the dry reeds was too great. Large logs were kept for firewood and a selection of smaller logs about a metre long were piled up ready for the dam. These were transported by van although a group of us also carried some on our shoulders, at the request of Andras, to the next site – a strange procession through the reeds.

Andras and his colleagues mainly carried out the dam building with help from Alan who wielded the sledgehammer. The dam was made by driving some wooden willow stakes into the narrow channel and putting the larger logs between, filling in the gaps with sand bags. The aim being not to stop the water flow completely but to raise the water level of the small pond behind where we were working so that a species of fish could be reintroduced and dragonflies would be encouraged to use the area as well as creating microhabitats.

Cultural Visits

1. Szád Vár Castle



View from castle ruins



Szalamandra Ház below the castle

The castle is a short walk away and stands on a hill overlooking the hostel. It is a pleasant but uphill walk through beech woodlands until you reach the ruins. Dating from around 1268 it was destroyed in 1686 and now only a few walls remain but it worth a visit for the spectacular views across to the fields where we had been working and into Slovakia.

2. Rákóczi Cave



Entrance to the mine



Lake where debris was tipped

The entrance was near the remains of old iron ore workings and we proceeded through a tunnel into the mine seeing evidence of the former mining activity. The formations were spectacular and given names such as popcorn, pea, and cauliflower and many examples of straws, stalactites and columns in the 3 main chambers. The cave is situated partly below the water table and a lake at the bottom had been used to dump former mine waste so destroying many of the formations.

3. Vörös-tő Cave



Formations in the cave

This is the longest cave in Hungary, 25km in length with different entrances so we entered near Jósvaló and exited at the centre at Aggtelek National Park. It has been open to the public for hundreds of years and in 1926 was declared a protected area and a national heritage. A spectacular cave where we saw Greater Horseshoe bats as well as impressive chambers and beautiful stalactite and stalagmite formations. In the final chamber we first stood in darkness until Sandor illuminated different sections and filled the hall with the voice of a Hungarian tenor – perfect acoustics.

4. Tornaszentandrás Church



Church on a hilltop



Twin arches & paintings

Only four churches with twin arches behind the altar exist in Europe, the twin-sanctuary church dedicated to St Andrew was built in the 12th century and medieval wall paintings can be seen inside. The 18th-century altar originally stood in the chapel of Szádvár Castle.

5. Gömbrozölös Museum



Heating the room



Lazlo Kovaes

A fascinating and extensive collection of tools, handicrafts, machinery and artefacts illustrate the different aspects of Hungarian life. The collection has been made by Lazlo Kovaes who showed us around his museum stored in a variety of houses and barns.

6. Bükk National Park



The train



Fruit soup

A trip in the mini bus to Miskolc and then a ride on an old steam train, complete with wooden seats and a log stove to provide warmth in the carriage in winter, took us slowly through interesting countryside to the park. Here we walked through the woods to a trout farm at Lillafüred where we were shown around, a look at the old iron foundry and a quick visit to the local shops before enjoying a meal of trout preceded by a fruit soup.

7. Farm Visit



The Farm House



Inside the cattle shed

Owned by Josef, the mayor of Komjati, the farmhouse and nearby holiday cottage is not your typical Hungarian abode. In the main house we were shown the old mill workings and the waterwheel, no longer in use but in the process of renovation. The cattle were a mixture of Limousines and Irish Reds bred for the Greek and Hungarian markets and it was interesting to hear (and see) how the use of protein/growth hormone food accelerated the weight gain in 2 weeks.

8. Háromhegyi Pálos Monastery

The monastery was built by the Pálos order of monks in 1341 and was vacated in 1550. In 1997 it came under public ownership and two large beech trees, which were threatening the stability of the building, were felled leaving only the base. In 2001 restoration work began and a new roof was added but work has now ceased due to lack of funds.



The new roof



Remains of a beech tree by altar

9. Szögliget Village School

A visit to the school, run by a charitable foundation, where a class of 9 year olds entertained us with traditional English songs such as Lavenders Blue Dilly Dilly and Ten Green Bottles as well as a singing a traditional Hungarian song based on a poem by a local writer. Each child had also drawn a wildlife picture for us. We presented them with a set of hand lenses and collecting pots.



Accommodation



Szalamandra Ház



The Team outside Szalamandra Ház

The Szalamandra Ház was a warm and comfortable hostel about a mile from the village where we enjoyed the delights of Ester's cooking – traditional Hungarian food, lots of sausages, white bread, potatoes and pasta but with selection of main courses including local venison and wild boar. You never knew quite if you would have one or two main courses, a fruit soup or a dessert but we were always ready to eat after a day's work or outings. . Evenings were spent listening to talks, playing cards and enjoying the delights of the local beer, wine and parlinka!

Our second accommodation for two nights was in the delightful newly built Great Egret hostel in the Fertő- Hanság National Park, a building designed to represent an Egret's wing with thatching on the sweeping roofs and large open spaces for displays and meetings. Here we ate out and enjoyed the delights of the local restaurant.



Egret Cottage Hostel



Andras keeps us entertained

Programme

March 3rd Tuesday

Arrived in London, first night was spent in the Great Portland Street Youth Hostel, a chance to chat over an Indian meal with travelling companions.

March 4th Wednesday

Travel to Hungary was by train, the Eurostar from St Pancras to Brussels, then the high speed Thalys train (185mph) to Frankfurt, the Ice train to Munich and the delights of the overnight sleeper train to Keleti, station, Budapest

March 5th Thursday

In Budapest met by Simon Hursthouse, an English writer & cyclist, who lives in Szögliget and then onto another train to Miskolc, the second largest city. A final trip in the Aggtelek National Park mini bus took us to Szögliget, and our final destination of the Szalamandra Ház arriving at 1.30pm After a walk to the lake in the rain we went to Tengersizem Restaurant in Jósvalfő for supper with Sandor Boldogh, our host and the park conservation officer.

March 6th Friday

Ecological Introduction: Visit to the Acskó fields worksite - introduction to the variety of habitats, discussed management techniques, plans, aspirations and problems. Lunch at the hostel then we left for Jósvalfő. We looked for, and found, Fire Salamanders and Sandor gave talk on the National Park. Supper at Szalamandra Ház

March 7th Saturday

Work day 1: clearing scrub from the abandoned fields at Acskó. Walked up to the Szad Var castle. A Hungarian language lesson with Fanni Boldogh then supper, pálinka and games.

March 8th Sunday

Cultural Day 1: Visit to the Rákóczi cave and Tornaszentandrás Church. Istvan was our guide explaining the background history to the different places. After a picnic lunch in Simon's garden, we visited the old Monastery at Martonyi and returned for supper at Szalamandra Ház

March 9th Monday

Work day 2: spent in the fields of Acskó. I had an early morning walk. Supper at Szalamandra Ház followed by a talk about large carnivores given by Adam Szábo. We were joined by the Hungarian students, Viktor, Johnny, Bogi, Nori, and Judit.

March 10th Tuesday

Work day 3: clearing scrub in the plum orchards close to Tornakápolna with János Tóth. Simon, Josef and Gustav joined us for supper.

March 11th Wednesday

Wolf Tracking Day: walk from Jósvalfő with Adam searching for signs of wolves and other animals in the snow.

March 12th Thursday

Work Day 4: returning to Tornakápolna to continue the clearance of the orchards. Talk by Katalin Mihalik, the Mayor of Szögliget. We put out the moth trap out but it snowed.

March 13th Friday

Cultural Day 2: Snow, hence snowball fun followed by visit to Gömörszőlös to the museum of Lázló Kovacs. Home for a picnic lunch and then off to Vörös-tő Cave near Jósvalfő for a walk through the cave with Sandor. Supper and farewell party with the Hungarian students including singing lessons in Hungarian

March 14th Saturday

Cultural Day 3 with Sandor. We drove to Miskolc and took the little train through Lillafüred to Garadna and walked back through the beech forest, had a picnic lunch at a trout farm on the way. We spent some time exploring Lillafüred before supper in a restaurant.

March 15th Sunday

We went to Komjati near Tornaszentandras to meet the Mayor, Josef, who owns a beef herd and keeps horses. We returned for lunch and had a free afternoon for a bicycle ride. The last supper at Szalamandra Ház with more wine tasting and games.

March 16th Monday

Work day 5: finishing as far as possible the work near Tornakapolna. The afternoon was spent in Jósfaő horse riding and exploring the village in the horse-drawn carriage. Talk about the invertebrates of Aggtelek given by Atilla Huber, a staff member of the Park, Followed by the final supper at Tengersizem Restaurant.

March 17th Tuesday

Packed the trailer, left hostel at 9.15am to visit Szögliget village school. Drove to Aggtelek to visit the Baradla Cave gift shop before continuing to Fertő-Hanság National Park via Budapest and a motorway restaurant near Tatabanya. Settled into the Great Egret (Kocsagvar) Hostel then drove to a restaurant in Fertöd opposite the Esterházy Palace.

March 18th Wednesday

After breakfast Dr András Ambrus gave an introduction to the National Park. Working on the butterfly site and dam building. An evening meal at the Fertöd restaurant with András was followed by a not very successful moth trapping session. Cards and musical entertainment with András back in the hostel.

March 19th Thursday

Drove to the National Park education centre at Fertőülak, met Krisztina Mészáros and looked at exhibitions. Short cold walk in snow to observation tower to look across the marshes for birds. Returned to the centre for a film on wildlife of National Park. I returned to the lookout again and the rest of the group went back to the hostel for lunch and packing. Set off at 2.30pm for Wien, through a blizzard and caught the train to München, then the overnight sleeper to Cologne.

March 20th Friday

Arrived in Cologne with time to look at the cathedral, then onto the train for Brussels. Here we had with plenty of time to take the short train trip to the square, a sit in the sun before the Eurostar back to London arriving at St Pancras by 6pm.

Personal Species List

BIRDS

Vernacular name	Scientific Name
Great Egret	<i>Casmerodius albus</i>
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>
Red breasted Goose	<i>Branta ruficollis</i>
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Black Headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>
Common Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya farina</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>
Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Syrian Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>
Eurasian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>
Wood Lark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
Marsh Tit	<i>Parus palustris</i>
Blue tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Short-toed Tree Creeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>
Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Common Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>
Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>

Beetles (Coleoptera)

Dor Beetle	<i>Geotrupes stercorarius</i>
2spot Ladybird	<i>Adalia bipunctata</i>
7spot Ladybird	<i>Coccinella 7-punctata</i>

Moths

Dotted Border	<i>Agripis marginata</i>
Nine-spotted Moth larva	<i>Syntomis phegea</i>
Geometrid (not on UK list)	<i>Theria rupricaprararia</i>
Plume moth	
March Moth	<i>Alsophila aescularia</i>
Satellite	<i>Eupsilia transversa</i>
Rannoch Sprawler	<i>Brachionycha nubeculosa</i> (noctuid found only in Scotland in the UK)
Shoulder-stripe	<i>Anticlea badiata</i>

Other insects

Praying Mantis eggcase	<i>Mantis religiosa</i>
A White-tailed Bumble bee	<i>Bombus sp</i>
Tipulid larva	(Janós' maggot)
A Ground Bug	<i>Lygaeidae</i>
Wood Ants	

Other invertebrates

Roman Snail	
Tick	<i>Ixodes ricinus</i>

Amphibians

Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>
Hybrid Marsh Frog	
Fire Salamander	<i>Salamandra salamandra</i>

Mammals

Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>
Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>
Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>
Bat species	45 kHz frequency call
Greater Horseshoe bat	<i>Rhinolophus ferrumequinum</i>

Report By Joan Smith
23rd April 2009

