

Visit To Hungary March 2009 As Part Of The European Conservation Action Network (EuCan).

By Nicola Simpson.

The journey there.....

The adventure began in London, but not without a few hiccups! After arriving late at the Youth Hostel in London due



to British Train Delays, I met the group and we set off for a meal. The morning also came with its hiccups, on arriving at London St Pancras to catch our Eurostar to Bruxelles we realised we were an hour late and had missed our train. After negotiations we caught the next train to Bruxelles and managed to catch our connection to Frankfurt. From Frankfurt we then travelled to München where we had several hours to look around the city and I got to try my first Schnitzel, tasty! At midnight we then caught the night train

to Budapest, this took around nine hours and involved us sleeping like sardines in some very small beds stacked in a very small cabin, a real experience! After a short train journey from Budapest then a bus journey we finally arrived at our destination, Salamandra Ház in Szögliget, a guest house set in Aggtelek National Park. There we were met by the group leader, Nigel Spring, who had travelled, with another member of the group, by minibus, to the park.



The Group

The group consisted of thirteen people, of all different ages and backgrounds, Dave Dallimore, who had previously done the Hungary trip and acted as our guide during travel, and last, but not least, our leader Nigel. We were looked after at Salamandra house by Esther, her daughter Deya, who's wonderful cooking amazed us daily! Esther's son Istvan, who works at Aggtelek National Park, acted as a guide and translator to us for much of the trip. The itinerary for our time in this part of Hungary was organised by Sandor Boldogh, who is a conservation officer at the Aggtelek National park and joined us for many days of conservation work, cultural visits and socialising. Sandor's wife Fanni



also gave us a short Hungarian lesson one evening. After we had been in Hungary for a few days we were joined at Salamander House by five Hungarian students all studying environmental degrees at a local University. The students, Viktor, Johnny, Bogi, Nori, and Judit, joined us on many of our work and cultural days and socialised with us in the evenings. During our trip we were also helped by Simon Hursthouse, who is from the UK but has been living in Hungary for several years and acted as a guide and translator for us on many occasions. After twelve days at the Aggtelek National Park we took a short drive across Hungary to Fertő-Hanság National Park, staying at the Great Egret Hostel. There we were met by Dr András Ambrus, a conservation officer at the park who gave us a talk and organised some work for us.

The Work

On our first day in Aggtelek we spent time visiting the worksite and were given an introduction to the variety of habitats and to discuss management techniques, plans, aspirations and problems. We also spent time at the Aggtelek National Park head quarters learning about the park and its work and spotting Fire Salamanders!

During our visit to the Aggtelek National Park we carried out conservation work in two areas of the park. The first site we worked at was Acskó where we spent two days clearing scrub from the abandoned fields which is an important habitat for butterflies. The field was over grown with Blackthorn and Juniper bushes which were cleared

by hand and using brush cutters. Our aim was to open up this field and connect it with other neighbouring fields extending the habitat for butterflies and other animals and creating corridors so animals can move freely between habitats.

Our second work site at Aggtelek was in the plum orchards close to Tornakápolna. The orchard had become very overgrown and we spent three days clearing this area and burning what we removed. We also spent a day with Adam Szábo, a local large carnivore expert, learning about and tracking signs of wolves in the Aggtelek National Park. Although we didn't spot any wolves or footprints we found evidence of wolf activity with carcasses and wolf faeces which Adam collected for analysis.

We spent one day working at Fertő-Hanság National Park and the group split into two. 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 the group worked with Dr András Ambrus at Hideség, on an important site for Large Blue Butterflies. Here we cleared and stacked the debris of felled trees for subsequent burning, this was done to provide corridors between the butterfly habitats. In the afternoon the whole group came back together and we all 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. We also spent the evening moth trapping with András, however had little success due to the cold weather!



The Culture

During our time at the Aggtelek National Park we spent three days learning about and experiencing the local area and cultures. We spent time visiting several spectacular cave systems including the Rákóczi cave, and the Vörös-tő Cave. We also visited Tornaszentandrás Church, an old Monastery at Martonyi and a museum at GömörSZölös. We spent a day visiting trout farms in Lillafüred and walking back to Miskolc to do some shopping and having evening meal in a local restaurant. We also met two local mayors who spoke to us about their plans for the local area, were taught Hungarian songs by the Hungarian students, visited and gave presents to a local school who in return sang to us



Esterházy Palace

in English and gave each of us a picture, tried Hungarian foods and sampled some local drinks (Parlinka!). On our one day off the majority of the group borrowed some bikes and a small group of us decided to cycle over the border to Slovakia, this was a tough ride up hill, we visited a small village stopped for a very cheap round in a local bar and then cycled back. After leaving Aggtelek we drove to the Fertő-Hanság National Park via Budapest and managed to see a few of the sites of the city whilst driving through. During our short stay in this area we managed a brief look around the local village and Esterházy Palace before leaving to drive to Vienna to catch our train.

The journey back.....

Le Grand Place – Bruxelles around Vienna and some food we caught the night train to Cologne which included another interesting night's sleep on the train! We had a short time to look around Cologne and check out the spectacular cathedral by the station before hopping on our next train to Bruxelles. On arrival in Bruxelles we decided to try and visit one of the main squares in the city, Le Grand Place. After much deliberation of how to get there and conversations with Station Staff in English, French and Spanish we managed to find our way there and arrived in a

bustling, sunny, and beautiful square with just enough time for some food and a drink. A few hours later we arrived back at the main station to catch our final train, the Eurostar, back to London. Our final train journey together included some celebratory wine and card games before we arrived back into London at 6pm, seventeen days after we left. After saying our goodbyes the group went their separate ways to continue their journey back home. Due to some typical British train delays I arrived home in Birmingham around 10pm!



Le Grand Place

The experience.....

This was truly a unique experience and one that I would definitely recommend. I met so many interesting people, the group I travelled with from all different backgrounds, experiences and ages, the Hungarian locals who welcomed us into their town, taught us about their culture and made us feel at home, and all the other random people we met travelling to and from Hungary. I learned a lot about conservation work, management and issues around Hungarian National Parks and about the different species and habitats residing in them. Working in the field of conservation I found it interesting to compare the different management techniques and ways in which conservation is approached in a different country. One interesting difference is the many problems faced by conservationists in certain areas of Hungary. In particular the collapse of the rural economy means that wildlife in poorer areas is severely under threat from a lack of grazing and wildlife in these areas has a low economic value due to the lack of eco-tourism.

The culture of the area was also very interesting and it was great to meet two of the mayors of local villages and discuss their hopes and aspirations for the future.

Another highlight for me was the travel to and from Hungary, I had never travelled through Europe by train before and enjoyed seeing little snippets of all the different countries we travelled through, the night train was also a real experience!

The thankyou's.....

Thank you to Nigel Spring who organised the trip, applied for the funding to run The European Conservation Action Network (EuCAN) and managed to put up with us for nearly two weeks! EuCAN was established in 2007 by The Kingcombe Trust, a charity based at The Kingcombe Centre in west Dorset and dedicated to conservation and environmental education (Reg. Charity no. 1054758), in association with the Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation. Thanks also to the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme who have funded the EuCAN project which also has partners in France, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland. Further information can be obtained from www.kingcombecentre.org.uk or from Nigel Spring nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk.

Thanks also to the staff at Aggtelek National Park, in particular Sandor Boldogh who organised our activity programme and the staff who looked after us at Salamandra House. Thanks to staff at Fertő-Hanság National Park in particular Dr András Ambrus.

Finally thanks to Dave Dallimore for organising our travel to and from Hungary, but more importantly thanks to the whole group who made the trip such an interesting, educational, enjoyable and memorable experience.



Me!