

## **European Conservation Action Network Trip to Hungary March 2009**

Butterflies are sensitive and ephemeral creatures that respond rapidly to environmental changes, and so are excellent indicators of biodiversity and the general health of our natural spaces. They are currently undergoing a serious decline in population, both in the UK and throughout Europe, which is being paralleled by a loss of biodiversity. While this is due in part to the increasing occurrences of extreme weather conditions as a result of climate change, other major contributing factors are the alteration and destruction of habitats, as well as habitat fragmentation. The European Conservation Action Network is a project which enables groups from the UK to carry out species monitoring and practical conservation management tasks within Europe, in order to restore and protect some of these fragile habitats.

The European Conservation Action Network (EuCAN) was established in 2007 by the Kingcombe Trust, a registered charity (no. 1054758) based at the Kingcombe Centre in west Dorset, dedicated to conservation and environmental education, in association with the Dorset branch of Butterfly Conservation. Partnerships have been set up with other conservation organisations in France, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland, and the EuCan project is open to all UK citizens over the age of 18 and not in full time education. It provides an excellent opportunity for people from any background to become involved in conservation, as it is fully funded through the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme. This means that all the accommodation, food and transport are free!

In order to keep the carbon footprint of the trips to a minimum there is no flying involved, so the method of transport our group took to Hungary was by train. This gave us a great opportunity to get to know each other, playing cards and games on the train by day, stopping for dinner and beers in Munich, then squeezing into six-bed quasi cupboards on the sleeper train to Budapest. Being aware of the significance that the individual group members would have upon the experience of the trip as a whole, I was pleased that I would be working alongside, and experiencing Hungary with, a group of such sound and like-minded people.

The majority of our time was spent in north eastern Hungary in the Aggtelek National Park, which straddles the border with Slovakia. The Aggtelek National Park consists mainly of forests of hornbeam, oak and beech as well as grassland, situated on top of a 230 million year old limestone karst landscape, punctuated by hundreds of caves, including the impressive 25 kilometre Baradla cave system. As a result of the financial strain on Hungarian farmers in recent years, the number of cattle kept and grazed in the national park has been dramatically reduced, and this has increased the rate of encroachment of the surrounding forest scrub onto grassland areas. So our first task was to clear blackthorn and to reduce the quantity of juniper bushes from the Acsko meadows, a site within walking distance of our hostel Szalamander Haz, and with wonderful views across the hills to the ruins of Szad Var castle; which we later climbed up to in our free time.

The second site we worked on was the plum orchard near Tornakapolna, where we cleared dogwood and blackthorn from amongst the trees, stacking the larger branches to keep for firewood and burning the brush on large bonfires. On this site we worked alongside five Hungarian students from Debrecen University, who were initially not very willing to integrate with us; however this was

remedied by an overnight downfall of snow that prevented us from working on the site the following day, but provided the perfect opportunity for improving international relations with a good snowball fight! By clearing the overgrown scrub in the plum orchard we were assisting the local community to continue their tradition of making palinka, a strong alcoholic drink made from the plums; as well as improving the habitat for invertebrates and birds.

After spending the majority of our time in the Aggtelek National Park we travelled by minibus to western Hungary to work in the Fertő-Hanság National Park on the border with Austria. This ecologically distinct national park contains a 75km<sup>2</sup> shallow lake; currently being compromised by encroaching reed beds and disrupted water level fluctuations due to drainage, mainly by Austrian industry, which has led to anaerobic conditions in some areas. After an introductory talk about the ecology of the national park from its director, Andras Ambrus, we cleared scrub and stacked felled trees from nearby the lake, in order to open a ride for butterflies; in particular the Large Blue (*Maculinea*) butterflies that Andras is closely involved with. We then used the large logs to help him build a dam across a channel at another site in order to raise the water level and improve the habitat for fish and the 200 bird species that populate the area.

Because the EuCAN project aims to involve people from different backgrounds, the group members all had varying degrees of knowledge, experience and training. Certain group members had been trained to use brush cutters at the preparation weekend prior to the trip, and these, along with loppers, billhooks and bow saws were used to clear the invasive scrub. We achieved a great deal at both sites, working together with the purpose of opening up rides to create a mosaic of grassland and scrub and to link habitats for butterflies and other invertebrates. Although we were not in Hungary at the right time of year to see butterflies, it was rewarding to learn about their habitats and to know that we were helping to improve their prospects.

The project offers an extremely rewarding experience; particularly perhaps for those who have no background in or prior knowledge of butterfly conservation; as there is so much to be gained from being in the company of such interesting, knowledgeable and passionate people, from both the UK and the host country. Nigel Spring, who organises and leads the trips with positive efficiency and contagious enthusiasm, is a true inspiration. Having already taken three previous groups to Hungary when we went in March 2009, he was able to introduce us to friends and contacts who facilitated our learning and added a wealth of enjoyment to our trip. These included, amongst others: Sandor Boldogh, the director of Aggtelek National Park in Hungary, who decided at the age of nine that when he grew up he wanted to be the director of Aggtelek National Park, and who was our generous host and informative guide during the majority of our time in Hungary; Sandor's wife Fanni, who gave us a useful and light-hearted lesson in Hungarian language and helpfully informed us of cultural faux pas, such as clinking glasses when you say cheers (*egészségedre*), or women walking into a bar before men; Adam Szabo, a modest and intriguing wolf expert who spends much of his time tracking the very few wolves that have gradually been re-populating Hungary from across the Slovakian border since they became extinct in 1970; Istvan Komosczi, a guide for the nearby Rakoczi caves and our companion for much of our stay, of whom we all grew very fond, partly because he not only understood, but was also very good at joining in with our English sense of humour; Simon Hursthouse, a very laid-back English man who accompanied us on the train from Budapest to Miskolc when we arrived in Hungary, and who lives in Szogliget - the nearest village to our hostel, where you can buy a decent sized house for around three thousand pounds; Katalin Mihalik, the

Mayor of Szogliget who talked to us about local political, economic and social issues; and Andras Ambrus, the director of Fertő-Hanság National Park, who is not only very knowledgeable about ecology and conservation but is also, we discovered, very talented at making and playing his own musical instruments.

The trip as a whole was extremely enjoyable and I am happy with the insight I have gained into Hungary through the people we met, the landscapes we encountered, the food and drink we tasted and the wonderful places we visited. Not having done any practical conservation work prior to the trip, the experience I gained in Hungary encouraged me to actively pursue this interest further, and I have since become involved in volunteering locally. I would thoroughly recommend the EuCan trips to anyone who may be developing an interest in this field and am grateful for the opportunity to have taken part.

Poppy Wood