

March 2009: Tom Read go's Hungary for three weeks.

Inspired to do my best to mitigate our harmful effects on the planet I made the decision to leave my office job as an architectural assistant and learn more about our natural world. I had been told by a friend about the EuCAN trips, he had been on a trip to France in 2007 and had only good things to say about the experience. So, in January 2009 I filled in the application form (nice and easy!) and waited. I heard that I had been successful in my application and in February I attended a two day preparation weekend at the Kingcombe Centre, an action packed team building weekend with fantastic food in a beautiful location, what could be better than that!

On the Third of March I met Dave Dallimore (A group leader) and the 13 other participants at the Central London Youth Hostel. After introductions, a tasty Indian meal and a good night's sleep we set off on the Eurostar from St Pancras station.



Big Dave enjoying the spacious conditions on the overnight train!

Four trains and a minibus later we arrived at Aggtelek National Park where we were given a very warm welcome by Nigel who had driven in the minibus with trailer on tow all the way from Dorset with Michelle (poor girl ;-). After we got settled into the hostel (Salamandra Ház) we went to Tengersizem Restaurant in Jósvalfö for supper with Sandor Boldogh, our host and the conservation officer within the park. Our first taste of Hungarian food was reassuring, tasty and big!!



On the following day we visited the worksite and were given an introduction to the site and its various habitats, management strategies, aspirations and problems. In the afternoon we had went to Jósvalfö and saw the legendary Fire Salamanders, followed by an introduction to the national park by another legendary character, Sandor Boldogh!

Cheeky little Fire Salamander. Not as scary as his name suggests!

Saturday was our first workday, it was great to get our hands dirty at last, and we cleared scrub with Bill Hooks, Saws, Chainsaws and loppers, made fire and generally had a great time working as a team and having a laugh. Every now and then we would stop because someone found or saw something interesting. Some of the folks on the trip had a wealth of knowledge about birds, plants geology archaeology and many other fascinating subjects, so we were learning a great deal from each other all the time. In the evening I we tried our hardest to get our tongues around some Hungarian lingo. I think we made a valiant effort and strangely it got a lot easier the more Pálinka you drank.



Sunday was our first culture day; we visited the Rákóczi cave guided by Istvan who taught us lots about the geological systems that are at work in the region. It was a fascinating insight into subterranean layers of ecosystem, the picture (left) shows what can only be described as 'growth rings' within the cross section of a stalactite. I found it amazing to think that an inexplicably complex set of events above the ground have led to the variation of

calcite deposition over time and that historical record is recorded like memory in these rock formations.



Afterwards we visited Tornaszentandrás Church which offered another fascinating insight, this time into the cultural development in the area. The Church's walls are covered in beautiful paintings and in places they have been carefully removed to reveal even more ancient symbols that to my knowledge were used in pre-Christian Pagan religions.

Monday was workday two; we continued our work in the fields of Acskó clearing burning the scrub to create new rides to connect the butterfly habitats. In the evening we were given an interesting talk on large carnivores by Adam Szábo and we were joined by Hungarian students Viktor, Johnny, Bogi, Nori, and Judit.

On Tuesday we went up to our second worksite. We cleared scrub in the plum orchards close to Tornakápolna. Another satisfying day of graft!



There's nothing better than a nice fresh heap of Wolf shit!

Wednesday we were lucky to have the opportunity to track Wolves in the snow with Adam Szábo who taught us all a great deal about these smart and powerful beasts. Thursday was another day spent at the orchards clearing and burning scrub with János Tóth. In the evening we were given a talk by the very beautiful mayor of Szögliget, Katalin Mihalik.

Friday was covered in snow so work was cancelled in favour of snow ball fights and caving!

Saturday was culture day 3 with Sandor. We drove to Miskolc and took a little train through Lillafüred to Garadna and then walked back through the beech forest, having a picnic lunch at a trout farm on the way. We spent some time exploring Lillafüred before supper in one of the restaurants there. Very nice it was too!!

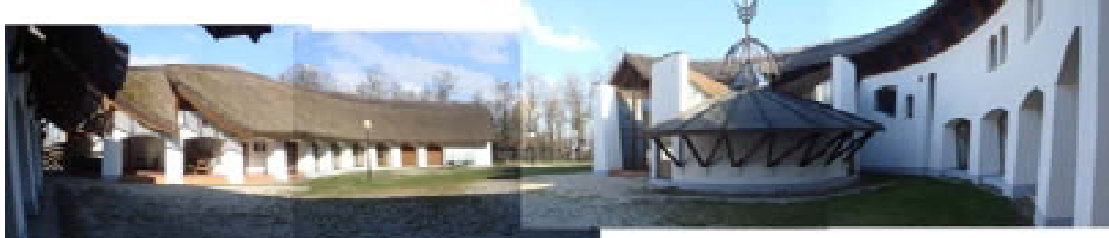


Us lot celebrating after reaching the summit of the gert big hill

On Sunday we went to Komjati near Tornaszentandras to meet the Mayor, Josef, who owns a beef herd and keeps horses. He showed us the old mill he is restoring, the new guest house he has built, his horses and his farm with its beef animals and small flock of goats. Then we took some bikes over the hills and into Slovakia, had a few pints and rode back, the hills are as steep as they look!!

Monday we finished as far as possible the work near Tornakapolna. The afternoon was spent in Jósvalfő having some exciting horse rides and exploring the village in the horse-drawn carriage. Followed by a talk about the invertebrates of Aggtelek given by Atilla Huber and the final supper at Tengersizem Restaurant.

On Tuesday morning we packed the trailer and left the hostel for Fertő-Hanság. Before leaving Szögliget we visited the village school. We were treated to songs in English and Hungarian by the nine year olds (very sweet) and presented them with a set of hand lenses and collecting pots. We said our goodbyes and continued our journey on to Fertő-Hanság National Park. We arrived after an 8 hour drive to the magnificent Great Egret (Kocsagvar) Hostel.



The Great Egret Hostel.

On Wednesday morning we were met after breakfast by Dr András Ambrus who gave a brief introduction to the National Park and the conservation of the Large Blue (*Maculinea*) butterflies that he is closely involved with. Three of the group went with Peter and Sandor, two of the rangers, to use brushcutters to clear vegetation from the small islands in the lake where they hope birds will nest shortly. The rest of us drove to Hideség to one of András' butterfly sites, 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 reedbed to improve the habitat and to make the adjoining lake more suitable for fish. Back to the hostel via the Co-op shop then to the restaurant at Fertőd with András for supper. Very cold moth trapping followed by card games back in the hostel.

On Tuesday we drove up the road to the National Park education centre at Fertőülak where we met Krisztina Mészáros. She gave us a brief introduction to the place and we looked at the very good exhibition. Very short cold walk in the snow to an observation tower to look across the marshes, before returning to the centre for a film about the wildlife of the National Park. Most of the group then returned to the Great Egret hostel for lunch and packing, before setting off at about 2.30pm for Wien. A very dramatic blizzard - cleared by the time we were approaching Wien. Dropped at the Wien West station to catch the train to München and home.

On Friday the 20th of March we arrived in London St Pancras at 6pm, only a few hours ahead of Nigel who got back to with the bus and trailer Dorset by 1.30am. Reluctantly, we said our good byes and wished our new friends good luck for the future.

I can only speak for my self but I felt that by the end of the trip we had made some really great friends and I hope that soon we will all have the chance to come together and relive the experience. I would encourage anybody who has a desire to learn about nature to take part in one of these trips. I would also say that the lessons that I learned from the trip extend far beyond a material understanding of habitat to a deeper and more meaningful participatory relationship between us (as a team) and our habitat.