

European Conservation Action Network

Linda Meadows – Hungary May 2009

It was with great excitement and trepidation that I heard I had been chosen for the trip to Hungary. I had to pay only £100 deposit, which is returnable, making the whole trip FREE!

I had read about it on the Kingcombe Trust website, 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.

Altogether there was to be 17 of us, all strangers, from around all parts of England and Wales. Nigel Spring and Kathy Henderson were the project organisers and our destination in Hungary was the Aggtelek National Park, an area of outstanding natural beauty.

Our project was to count, mark and recapture *Melitaea telona* and *Melitaea phoebe*, two species of Fritillary butterfly.

The following is a diary of our incredible journey.

Saturday 9th May 2009

I was collected in a minibus from a meeting place in Wincanton, Somerset; others were picked up from Basingstoke station, Clackett Lane Services and Ashford station in Kent. We spent our first camping night together on a site at Selsted in Kent and had an enjoyable meal in Jackdaws Inn nearby.

Sunday 10th May 2009

Encouraged by well-meaning friends I had bought an airbed, and in case I rolled off a single one in the night, bought a double one! I then found it quite a struggle to get it into the two-berth tent - it had to be curled up at the edges, which caused a few laughs, and when I did sleep on it, it was like being at sea! It had been 30 years since I last camped and that was in the back of a van! By our third camp I abandoned the blowing up and just slept on it as it was.

We arrived in Calais at 10.05am, and we stopped near Aachen for lunch and arrived at Dreifelder Weiher near Deirdorf, south of Köln in Germany, to camp for the night. This was a lovely site with a lake and plenty of birdsong. We had a delicious supper sitting outside and then enjoyed a few drinks around the campfire. We had set up the moth trap, which was checked before turning in for the night.

This part of the journey was quiet emotional for me as I had seen many place names which my mother from East Germany had mentioned in the past, and Mum, I really wish I had stuck at the German you tried to teach me!

Monday 11th May 2009

19 species of moth were found in the trap. We had noticed a huge moth flying around just before it had turned dark, but it became damp in the night, and the moth trap had to be taken in. We had hoped to have a walk around the lake this morning, but it was decided to continue our journey in view of the poor weather, and I was glad to get on the road again, eager to see new territory and reach our destination.

It could have been very boring just driving along, but we all took great interest in our surroundings, noting any birds on the way and the wild flowers and shrubs growing alongside the autobahn. Particularly memorable were the Acacia trees which were growing everywhere along with wild salvia. Hungary is well known for its Acacia Honey. This journey was also a good chance to get to know each other and it turned out that some of us were working in conservation in a serious way, in National Parks in the UK or in nature reserves, and there were some highly qualified members of the trip.

We stopped at a wonderful German service station where Marche do the most amazing fresh healthy foods, but just before entering the service station outside on the grass verge we spotted two beautiful Longhorn beetles mating.

We later arrived at a campsite near Passau on the Austrian border for our third night of camping. This campsite did look very Austrian and made me want to yodel! I found myself thinking of cuckoo clocks! The building was nicely painted and had flowers in troughs, the houses were affluent, and a wee bit too nice for me. We really enjoyed the lovely tasty goulash supper.

This is a very lovely area, and I wished we had more time to look around the very beautiful city of Passau.

Tuesday 12th May 2009

After enjoying a leisurely breakfast we drove on into West Hungary. We stayed for a night at the hostel at Feroujlak in the Ferto-Hansag National Park. In the morning some of the group spent a short while bird-spotting in the grounds, and it was amazing to hear the call of a Golden Oriole, which shrieked loudly; I just managed to see a flash of bright yellow flying off into the distance. We also heard nightingales.

Later in the evening we met Andreas Ambrus, the head keeper of the Park, and he took us to some nearby woods for moth trapping. We later had supper with Andreas at a local restaurant.

Wednesday 13th May 2009

This morning after a leisurely start we were able to watch some marsh harriers on the wetlands surrounding the lake: it was marvellous to see two or three pairs. We also saw many waders and other waterfowl; there were some amazing local grey cattle with fantastic horns and some goats grazing close by.

At midday we reluctantly left, stopping for coffee and Hungarian cake near Gyor,

before arriving in Miskolc where we shopped at Tesco's for provisions for supper at Szalamandra Haz, outside the village of Szogliget.

We arrived at 8.00pm, pitched our tents and had supper round the fire outside. We put the moth trap out and Janos Toth arrived. He was our butterfly friend who would be helping us over the next two weeks to mark and recapture *Melitaea telona* and *Melitaea phoebe*.



Szalamandra Haz, where we stayed

Thursday 14th May 2009

As the night had been very cold, I woke early and decided to explore the woodland of the hostel surroundings. A fox was meandering in the meadows, and cuckoos, nightingales, and golden oriels could be heard all around. In fact cuckoos could be heard almost every day during the next two weeks, so lovely to hear, and it was sad to reflect that they appear to be dwindling in numbers in the UK. The moth trap had produced the most amazing giant peacock. It was a WOW moment, a first for me, and one of many to come.

After breakfast we met Roland Farkas, a member of the Aggtelek National Park scientific staff, who took us for a walk up to Szadvar Castle, explaining to us about the wildlife and history of the ruins, which date back to 1258 built after the Tartar invasion.

It was at the top amongst the ruins that we saw our first glimpse of the Hungarian glider butterfly, as well as a beautiful green and blue lizard. There were wonderful views from up here: we could see the meadows where previous groups had worked

restoring the meadows by keeping the encroaching brushwood cut back.



Professor Zoltan Varga, showing us the different species of plants

After lunch we went with Professor Zoltan Varga of Debrecen University to the Josvafo vineyards and under his and Janos' guidance, we learned to identify and handle *Melitaea telona* and *Melitaea phoebe*, both beautifully marked Fritillary butterflies, and many other butterflies and their food plants, such as *Cirsium Pannonicum* and *Pontomediterria (dianthus)*. We found that a few species of butterfly, like the blue, also love this dianthus.

We had supper at Tengersizem Restaurant in Josvafo where we met a couple from England, John and Joy, who were staying in Szogliget with Simon Hursthouse.



View from the castle looking down on Szalamandra Haz showing meadows to the north where previous groups had worked

Friday 15th May 2009 - Survey day 1

After a wet start to the day, we decided to visit the Rakoczi cave, only a few miles away, where Istvan gave a brilliant guided tour, explaining how the different features in the cave were formed and how the iron ore industry discovered it by accident in the 1920's.

We saw magnificent stalagmites several metres long. The beauty of the red tinted flowstones was enhanced by the abundance of popcorn coralloid, and only (!) 250 million years old. This became protected as part of the UNESCO World Heritage site since 1995.

We had a very steep walk to the top of Esztramos Hill, looking at plants and birds - this was where I realised how unfit I was!

In the village of Tornakapolna we were met by Zoltan, Attila Huber, another scientific officer of the park, Janos and Judit. This was the first day of the project to mark and recapture *Melitaea telona* and *Melitaea phoebe*, to help Janos with his PhD studies looking at the differences in population structure and behaviour of these two species, formerly thought to be subspecies of *M. phoebe*.

We arrived back at Szalamandra Haz in time for one of Esther's many wonderful Hungarian suppers.

Saturday 15th May 2009 – Survey day 2

The group split into two today, and Sam and I, accompanied by Attila and Janos walked up to Perkupa Vineyards. Our mission was to catch, mark and possibly recapture as many *Melitaea telona* and *M. phoebe* as possible. It was a magnificent day, very sunny and very hot! The undergrowth was dry and it had not rained in this area for the past two months, yet the plants were very tolerant of the conditions and flowering well. I was not feeling particularly energised, but Sam saved the day, swooping with the net - I nicknamed him the flying Welshman! A reasonable number were caught, and we reunited with the other group for a picnic, thrilled to hear that Tim had caught a beautiful Festoon butterfly, the one and only!



The area we surveyed (Yanos, Kathy, Richard) Tim, dashing away with the net!

We returned to the Hostel for 4pm, and before supper Attila gave a talk about the insects of the Pannonian grasslands.

The moth trap was put out.

Sunday 17th May 2009

The moth trap was inspected and contained another fantastic collection of moths. We had a free morning, and some of the group had risen early (5:30am!) gone for a dawn walk.

Most of us went on a transect walk to Acsko to look at the work which previous Eucan groups had done. They had cleared lots of scrub and it was very interesting to see the re-growth. One butterfly, which really impressed me, was the Chequered

Blue. I had never seen this specimen before, and its markings were very distinctive. There was lots of the lovely white dainty catchfly plant, very sticky to the touch.

Monday 18th May 2009 - Survey day 3

We went to Tornakapolna and had 4 survey groups for *M. telona* and *M. phoebe*; one group were doing a habitat survey and timed counts for butterflies. The species of plants was amazing and one in particular, the dark purple Dragonshead, (*Dracocephalum austriaca*) has its only population in Hungary in the rocky grasslands of the Aggtelek Karst, where there were whole drifts of it. Along with the gorgeous pale lilac, *Campanula siberica*, another plant that was plentiful was the shocking pink *geranium sanguinum*. A shrub I particularly noticed, which the black hairstreak is very fond of, was the common cornus. I was really excited to discover a small colony of this butterfly amongst this shrub.



Dracocephalum austriaca (the beautiful dragonshead)

Lots of scarce swallowtails were noted, flying high on the edge of the woodland. We returned for supper at 7pm, and put out the moth trap.



Black hairstreak

Tuesday 19th May 2009

Three of our group went bird ringing today at 4pm, although I wasn't one of them. Today was also Rachel's birthday, a staggering 26 today! (I hope you don't me telling everyone, Rachel - you don't look it! Rachel almost ended up bringing Wuff-Wuff home!

Weatherwise it was drizzly today, so the survey work planned for the Josvafo site was abandoned - my legs breathed a sweet sigh of great relief! After much reflection it was decided that the best thing we could do for our wellbeing was to adjourn to the bar! Later, however, a great cosmic clearing happened (no, I hadn't been to the loo – I said cosmic, not gastric!)

Roland took us to the fields above Szin to record plants and butterflies. On the way there we were amazed to find, near a damp spot at the side of the track, a huge gathering of mostly Silver studded blues butterflies. It was as if it was raining silver stud, and incredibly pretty. When some flew up, it was like confetti all around us. Wonderful experience! Nigel had helped me learn how to recognise this lovely butterfly: it has blue metallic dot-like markings on the undersides of its hindwings. Later on in the week I found it nectaring and mating on the very pretty pale pink sainfoin (*Onobrychis viciifolia*) flowers.

After supper Sandor Boldogh, the Director of Conservation in the National Park and our main contact, showed us the Lesser Horseshoe Bat roost, in the attic of the hostel. Then we walked up the track near the hostel where a mist net had been placed over the river, in which we caught 10 bats of 5 different types: nocturnal, daubentons, greater horseshoe, lesser horseshoe and greater mouse eared.

A few of us piled into the truck and went on a wonderful off-road experience to listen to corncrakes singing.

Wednesday 20th May 2009 – Survey day 4

Most of the group went to the Josvafo vineyards to carry on with the capture, marking and remarking of *M. telona* and *M. phoebe*. Five people including myself went with Bela Vaszi, a ranger of the National Park, to make stork nests.

Now, how's this for recycling? We were taken to a local dump, which had a lot of builders' rubble, also discarded branches of willow, cherry, and various prunings from places and these were to be our materials to make the nests.



Kathy, Rachel, Richard, Stevie and me with 4 homemade storks nests ready for the trailer

Why were we making storks nests when they can make them themselves? The reason is that some storks make their nests where they are in danger of being electrocuted, such as on live wires high up on telegraph poles, so these nests are replaced by home-made ones - in this case Kathy, Stevie, Rachel, Richard, and Linda Specials! Blood, sweat and almost tears! It was hard non-stop work, needing strong backs and strong hands, with welcome guidance from Bela, who sometimes must have wondered where we came from - he was very patient! We were all very glad for his help when it came to that final lift into the trailer, when we had produced four wonderful nests! These special nests were to be placed by the rangers when needed, with the help of a hydraulic ramp on a tractor's shovel.

Later we all met at the tourist Information office in Aggtelek for lunch and some retail therapy in the shops. In the afternoon we visited Gomorszolos where we met David Varnagy, who runs a project that promotes sustainable buildings, farming and crafts in the region, and which is centred in the village. We visited the church and a museum where an elderly couple, Mr and Mrs Laszlo Kovacs, now in their nineties,

live. Mr Kovac is a very good artist and had an exhibition of his paintings, mainly of local scenes and the village people. We saw a weaving loom which Mrs Kovacs still used, and many items she had made. She is the last lady in the village to still weave. It was noticeable how the Hungarian people like to have cemeteries on the side of a hill, apparently so they can still look down on their village!

We enjoyed a free evening, and time to write some postcards home.

Thursday 21st May 2009 – Survey day 5

We revisited four sites at Tornakapolna. Two people went with Roland to look at the plants of the neighbouring hills of Zabanyik-hegy and Boka-teto. We finished the survey work at 2.30pm and all had ice creams in Josvafo. As much as possible we used the local village shops. We had the opportunity to visit the local school and use the internet facilities.

Professor Varga invited us to join him moth trapping up the valley from Josvafo on an extended 20-minute walk to the National Park research station - the group returned to the hostel after midnight.



Large Blue

Friday 22nd May 2009 – Survey day 6

We worked at the Josvafo and after a picnic lunch at Szalamandra Haz we had a free afternoon with an optional trip to Abod to look at a damp marshy site where scarce Large Blue butterflies had been thought to breed, and to an old sand quarry at Galvacs, where we saw an amazing colony of bee-eaters. It was truly wonderful to watch them swooping just like huge colourful swallows, and another first for me. The holes in the sandy sides of the quarry where they had been nesting were also used by sparrows and starlings.

We returned to the hostel where the Mayor of Szogliget, Katalin Mihalik, introduced herself and gave an interesting talk about her role as mayor, and answered any questions we had.

Later after supper Adam Szabo, a local wolfman and tracker, gave us a talk and showed his film about his work with wolves, bears and lynxes.



*Giant Peacock
moth*

Saturday 23rd May 2009

A free day, and most of us borrowed bicycles from Szalamandra Haz, to explore the village, or went over the border into Slovakia, only to find that that all the bars seemed to be closed! I went with Stevie and Richard into Szogliget, and called into the local shop where they gave us the key to look in the Museum. Inside was very interesting, giving us an insight as to how they lived years ago. There were some beautiful clothes, which had been lovingly embroidered .We saw a group of three glider butterflies near the church.

The elderly village folk wear a lot of black clothing and head squares and are well covered up. They had vegetable areas in their gardens, growing very much the same as we do in England: beans, cabbages, and maize. They love to grow a lot of iris and peony flowers. Some had beehives. Nearly all had their own well, and a few chickens. Some buildings were very old, dating from 1894 and some up to 1919; some had little balconies and what was very noticeable, no tarmac drives! I found myself thinking that this was very much what my grandparents' place must have looked like. Some had a fair sized plot of land. I later asked Simon Hursthouse what the price of property was locally, and he told me it was anything from £3000 upwards.

Although this is a very peaceful, unspoilt and beautiful area, I found myself missing the coast and the sea.

Later in the evening we enjoyed a barbeque on which Esther Istvan and Dia had worked hard and organised especially for us, with wonderful wild boar stew. Some of the group played the guitar that Simon had brought for us. Sandor, Joseph, and Attila had joined us and brought with them some amazing home-brewed Polinka. We had a singsong with the campfires burning, the smell of the wood smoke, the laughing and chatting, never to be forgotten. It was a very memorable evening, and although it did turn chilly, some stayed up late, with Janos inviting people to wrestle the night away! I felt overwhelmed with all the kindness from everyone: it was truly amazing - the Hungarian people certainly know how to love and give freely.



Stevie, Tim, Rachel and Nigel investigating the moth trap

Sunday 24th May 2009

No survey work this morning because of rain, and we walked up to a ruined Monastery at Martonyi, where a renovation project had been started but then ran out of funding, which was real shame as it must have been a fantastic building. Luckily the roof had been restored and it was made up of hundreds of small wooden tiles. As we walked around and explored the perimeter, Wendy who had been looking through binoculars for woodpeckers, had spotted three baby tawny owlets, which were sitting up in a tree watching us. It was so funny to see them, especially as they had managed to keep silent, and almost went unnoticed!

We went onward to Voros to the caves, emerging at Jasvafo in the afternoon. This was another WOW! I am so pleased I went into the caves, as normally I can feel on the claustrophobic side, but this was one place never to be missed, and I was not to be disappointed. We spent two hours in the caves, which extend into Slovakia.

We later wandered around the lake at Voros, where some of us heard and saw fire-bellied toads.

Monday 25th May 2009 – Survey day 7

We surveyed all our sites this morning, dividing into two groups and visited Tornakapolna and Josvafo. Today I was capturing, marking, and recapturing with Tim. We did very well on this site and I felt more confident in recognising telona from phoebe. Tim reminded me it had only taken two weeks for me to be able to distinguish between the two! Oh well, you mustn't rush these things! His youthful energy came to the fore and he was poetry in motion swooping with the net!

Some of us went riding at Solosardo and on later returning to the hostel we had a Hungarian language lesson with Janos using the computer very effectively.



Kathy and Karen identifying the moths

Tuesday 26th May 2009

I was dreading this day, as we were to walk approximately seven miles! The route went uphill on tracks through woods, but it was magnificent. I wasn't sure I was physically up to the trek but I didn't want to let the group down by lagging behind.

We had a wonderful time with Adam Szabo, otherwise known as Wolfman, and he led us through some beautiful meadow areas called dolinas. He showed us where there had been a wolf ambush earlier on in the year, where the remains of a stag had been found. Adam explaining how two wolves would find where a stag was drinking, the stream would be flowing fast at that time of year and the noise would have deafened their approach. He also showed us wolf faeces, and explained it is not good to smell it as it can give you a bad infection. In fact we saw a few different faeces.

We stopped by a hay stall for our picnic, but before this, we had been following some Ural Owls through the woods, an adult and her young. This was so exciting, and our

pace soon quickened up, when the adrenaline flowed. Ural Owls are large birds and can very easily attack by dive bombing and flying at your eyes, in order to protect their young. We saw a cloud of Painted Lady butterflies flying in a northward direction.

We ended our walk in Josvafo where Adam's wife, Bernadette, had cooked some potato pancakes for us, in a brand new traditional-style building, which we washed down with Polinka and cold beer. I had been looking forward to the pancakes, as this was a favourite dish my mother had made, being of East German/Russian descent. They were delicious!

Later back at the hostel we looked at some of the photographs of what we had seen during the day.

Wednesday 27th May 2009

A cool damp start to the day. Some went on the transect walk to Acsko and some started clearing up.

Several people went on a ride through the streams, woods and grasslands around Josvafo on the native Hulcol ponies, and I wished I could have gone with them, had I been able to ride. I did spend some time watching them prepare, and then a group of four of us, with Rachel clutching the stable owner's dog, enjoyed a carriage ride around Josvafo. I was pleased when the driver paused for the two ponies as they went uphill. We went all around the village and at the end he surprised us by splashing through the ford, and then returned us to the stables. WOW! Wonderful!



Karen, Rachel, Wuff-Wuff, Jonathan and me at the Hulcol stables on a coach ride

Some of the group had gone to look for the Popular Admiral butterfly, which we had seen a few days earlier. They were lucky enough to find it again, as it's quite a rarity.

A final delicious supper where we were joined by Sandor, Roland and Attila. Sandor, Janos and Judith thanked us for all our hard work and then Sandor surprised us by presenting us all with a beautiful book on the Aggetelek National Park, as a keepsake of our visit. We thanked Esther, Istvan and Dia for all the wonderful food, and for looking after us so well; I felt sad that we were leaving soon.

Later Istvan organised a television from the caretaker's office so that those who wanted to could watch the Champions League football final (Manchester United v Barcelona).

Thursday 28th May 2009

After an early breakfast we had a group photo taken on the Hostel steps and said our farewells and thanks to everyone. Nigel and Janos drove us to Szin Station, and left us in the capable hands of Richard and Ann, and the journey home began. Szin station doesn't look like a station at all until you get through the front entrance. We went from Szin to Miskolc, then Budapest, from there to Vienna, then Munich to Köln on the sleeper train.

The sleeper train was my biggest panic! Six beds in about a 10ft square area, all our baggage and, to start with, no air-conditioning; we could hardly breathe, let alone move! I asked the guard and thank goodness, she put the air-conditioning on. We had a happy journey homeward bound and we saw Köln Cathedral, as it is right outside the railway station.

We opened a bottle of Polinka and toasted our return journey home. Unfortunately we were not to sleep soundly, as we had a group of noisy German people next door to us who chatted all night long until 5am in the morning when one of our group could take no more and asked them to keep the noise down.

Thanks must go to Ann and Richard, our furry godparents who safely guarded us bunnies back home to St Pancras (nearly losing two who got off at the wrong warren hole!).

It is important to add at this point that, as well as the species already mentioned above, the moth trap produced almost 200 moths, and we saw many different species of plants, grasshoppers, bush crickets, damselflies, dragonflies, beetles, reptiles, amphibians, and last and by no means least 172 different birds. WOW!

I thoroughly recommend anyone to join the next trip!

To our hosts everyone at Szalamandra Haz, and to our wonderful friends and mentors, Nigel & Kathy, THANK YOU for the most wonderful and interesting chance of a lifetime, never to be forgotten.

Further information about The European Conservation Action Network (EUCAN) can be obtained from www.kingcombcentre.org.uk.