

One Magical Day In Hungary

I was one of sixteen people who had been in Hungary's Aggtelek Nemetzi National Park for two weeks in May, aiding European conservation work to survey, identify and mark two fritillary butterflies, so similar that it had been assumed they were both a sub-species of *Melitaea phoebe*, the Knapweed Fritillary.

After several days survey work (interspersed with cultural trips, ice creams and welcome breaks at the local village bar!) we spent a day working through the forest and hills above a small, charming village set around a swift-running brook called Josvafo (one of several villages within the National Park). These waters flowed into a wide, clear village pond transversed by a stout wooden bridge on the other side of which stood a smart farmhouse and ample stabling for the local riding centre.

So in 31 degrees of beautiful warmth we set off from the village with the widening brook on our left-hand side, accompanied by Adam Szabo, an expert on wolves and an employee of the park, which is home to three known lynxes, two bears and two small wolf families. We were on a wolf walk!

We knew we would not see any, because of course, they would hear and smell us a mile away, but we were searching for evidence.

Five minutes out of the village the countryside opened out into a flat grassy plain, the water now a widening river, tree lined with rising forest in the near distance. Suddenly, as I was about to step over a horse poo on the track, I noticed a magnificent butterfly happily digesting a hearty meal on top of this flavoursome pile. Three inches wide, a glistening deep blue to black with snow white markings, sat a Poplar Admiral. This was the first sighting of this scarce beauty and created so much excitement that for the next half an hour it must have had its photograph taken about a hundred times!

After another hour of trekking through deep gorges of stunning rock, the river now reduced to a wide trickle, we were shown the large bones of a red deer from an old wolf kill. Then up we tracked through the surrounding forest. This was steep and rocky going, and suddenly a flurry of waving hands quieted us, and as we crept forwards a Ural owl flew straight in front of us, a few feet away. These are huge birds standing well over two feet tall and look disarmingly cute and cuddly, and there right in front of us sitting on a trunk in a clearing and looking for all the world like a museum exhibit, sat its offspring. And this gorgeous 'baby' was enormous. We knew, impossibly beautiful as they are, that these are very aggressive birds which, if roused, would absolutely, cheerfully tear your face off, so we quietly admired it and resumed our walk until, thankfully, hot and sweaty, we reached our lunch spot. This was a linhay (linney), a stoutly built wooden open-sided structure with a wooden ladder up to a hay filled platform under a sweet tiled roof. Images of Hansel and Gretel flitted through the brain, after all, this was in deep forest in the middle of nowhere – the explanation being that the National Park supplement with hay the diet of red and roe deer, which feed the wolves, which kill the wild pigs (there are thousands of them in Hungary where they are legally hunted and eaten).

Walking on for another hour with the constant sound of nightingales, orioles and cuckoos all around us, we finally came across 'fresh' evidence of wolves. I say 'fresh' because it was about two-week old wolf poo, but finds like this take time because 40,000 hectares is a lot of area to cover. Adam, our expert, told us that it was full of roe deer hair, and really was wolf poo, although it looked just like a thick mat made out of old border terrier. But it was all terribly exciting, and then suddenly we were in a gently sun-lit clearing about 30 yards square. This was a wolf "floor", where the males would come on a moon-lit night and sing to the females who could be as far as 3 miles away.

As this clearing was beginning to ascend into the beautiful open grasslands pitted with huge natural depressions called "dolinas", we were seeing more and more Painted Lady butterflies and realised we must be traversing a northward "corridor" of these beautiful creatures' flight-path.

I cannot describe the joy effectively, of the myriad moments culminating in stepping onto those sun-lit hill tops surrounded by mile upon mile of the same sumptuous varied forests and hills, with not a building, car or plane in sight, surrounded by hundreds of wild flowers, and no sound other than heavenly birdsong and the droning of assorted bees and insects.

Sound magical? It was.

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).