

## **EUCAN LEONARDO PROJECT TRIP TO AGGTELEK NATIONAL PARK HUNGARY - MAY 2009**

After being made redundant in October 2008 I was looking for a new direction in life (and struggling to find a new job to pay the bills), I had always had an interest in the environment and nature but never had any technical expertise or knowledge so I started volunteering with BTCV two days a week and looking around for other projects to take part in.

It was therefore with surprise that I found out I had been selected to be part of a trip to Hungary to survey butterflies. I attended a preparation weekend at the lovely Kingscombe Centre in Dorset, where I got the opportunity to meet Nigel and Kathy, who were responsible for organising the trip, without them this wonderful experience would never have been possible.



As the project is against air travel on environmental grounds we travelled by minibus, towing a sheep trailer with our gear, across Europe, we must have looked a bit strange as various police forces decided to investigate us further! We did see many Brown Hare (*Lepus capensis*) and deer fleetingly through the mini bus windows as we sped along the motorways, a glimpse of what was to come. The camping along the way was a little arduous for some members of the group who had never or very rarely camped, but we formed a strong group of like minded individuals from a range of backgrounds and decades. The knowledge of some of the people was truly amazing with experts on birds, insects, plants and amphibians, all very willing to share their expertise. Throughout the journey we enjoyed various opportunities for wildlife spotting, even in the car park at the motorway services!



Our accommodation for the survey work was a nice hostel in the forests bordering Slovakia, once the old border control post, where we were well fed by Eszter a local cook.

We spent the next few weeks travelling around the region on foot, bicycle, horse, cart and minibus carrying out our survey work on the butterflies and getting to know the local area and community. The trip was well organised and there were regular cultural interest trips interspersed with the survey "work", along with chance to explore the local food and drink possibilities. The locals were proud to bring us their home brewed parlinka (plum hooch), each believing his was better than any of the others!

There are already plenty of reports on the survey work itself (accessible via the website) and whilst it was very interesting, enjoyable and certainly an education it is with mammals rather than insects that my main interest lies.

The forests around the hostel provided ample habitat for many of the furry kind, some lovely encounters were had when just taking a morning or evening stroll. As I said I'm not scientifically trained so these are merely "cute" observations so apologies for any lack of science! I saw Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), Fox (*Vulpes*



vulpes) and Red Squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*) on various walks. Wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) evidence (diggings and dung) was also easily found.

One day whilst surveying butterfly's in a high grassland clearing in the woods we literally stumbled over a young Roe deer family. Mum bolted at first site of us leaving her three young offspring resting under a bush. One of them, very much the smaller, runt of the litter, ran towards us and into our arms, completely without fear. We regretfully made a necessary retreat, worried that mother would not be too impressed. On checking later the family must have been happily reunited as there was no sign of them. A day to remember!



One evening Sandor Boldogh , the Director of conservation in the National Park and our main contact, showed us the Lesser Horseshoe Bat (*Rhinolophus hipposiderus*) roost in the attic of the hostel and then took us bat watching beside the stream below Szalamandra Ház. In the mist net he hung over the water he caught 10 bats of 5 different species, all most unhappy at their fate and it seems keen to tie themselves further into the net whilst vigorously biting the person trying to free them, however cute they looked! Sandor's net certainly did not look particularly whole after the night and the discussion continued over whether he was using the right bit of kit!

One evening Adam Szabo the local wolfman, gave us a talk and showed us his film about his work with wolves (*Carnis Lupus*), bears and lynxes (*Lynx lynx*) in the area. He and his compatriots on both sides of the Hungarian/Slovakian border are struggling to obtain the funding they need to



continue their work, so much so that Adam is considering moving to Canada where he can continue his research with more support. The wolves range across the border paying no heed to the little markers dotted through the forest, unlike us on our bike ride to Slovakia.



Another day we walked with Adam through the forest and hills above Jósvalfó, searching for evidence of wolves and experiencing the varieties of forest and the lovely grassy dolinas. Wolf scat (droppings), mostly full of fluff or fur, and bones from an old kill were found. On this walk we also found a badger set (*Meles meles*). Badgers were also seen in the road on the way to the Corncrake site and are an inhabitant of the woody plateaus.



It should be remembered that this is still a working forest,

timber is extracted and revenue is earned from deer and boar shooting, with numerous hides throughout the forest.

On the more domesticated side there were many species of sheep, goat, cattle and horse along the route and in Hungary.

#### Mammals – Other species encountered by the group

Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus*)  
Wild Cat/hybrid (*Felis sylvestris* X)  
Dormouse (*Muscardinus avellanarius*)  
Water Vole (*Arvicola terrestris*)  
Wood Mouse (*Apodemus sylvaticus*)  
Mole (*Talpa europaea*)  
Serotine Bat (*Eptesicus serotinus*)  
Greater Mouse-eared Bat (*Myotis myotis*)  
Greater Horseshoe Bat (*Rhinolophus ferro-equinum*)  
Schreibers bat (*Miniopterus schreiberi*)  
Noctule Bat (*Nyctalus noctula*)  
Leisler's Bat (*Nyctalus leisleri*)  
Daubenton's Bat (*Myotis daubentoni*)

#### Other mammal species reportedly in the area

Marten (Weasel family *Martes martes*), not uncommon in higher woodlands  
Stone marten (*Martes foina*), common in proximity to settlements and temporarily lives in the caves the region is so famous for  
Gopher (*Citellus citellus*), a primary food for ground hunting birds of prey such as the Imperial eagle and the Saker.  
Garden Dormouse (*Elliomys quercinus*), rare.

The trip really was like a completely different life, many of us wished we could just stay on in this escapism from life; unfortunately, all too quickly the realities of life back home were upon us, after a 48 hour train journey back across Europe!

I would thoroughly recommend one of the many trips EuCan organise, it really is a very worthwhile expedition, and completely funded by the through the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme. For more information on future projects go to [www.kingcombecentre.org.uk](http://www.kingcombecentre.org.uk) or contact Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559; email: [nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk) ).

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 has partners in France, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland.

**Wendy Astill**

