

Eucan Report.
Czech Republic 19th August – 5th September 2009

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I normally write a diary for my trips abroad, but this trip was so full on, I gave up after the first few days. I couldn't possibly write about everything that happened in a report like this, so I'll pull out the highlights and the bits that stick in my mind. Like taking little bottles of swirling mists of memories and placing them in the pensieve to have a look at every now and then.

Thursday 20th August

Our first treat was a trip to the Natural History Museum (NHM) to go behind the scenes and into the new 'Darwin Building' (a bizarre egg-shaped construction) housing their vast collection of butterflies and moths. It was cool and stank of mothballs (well, you wouldn't want moths in here eating the collection, would you?).



Jeff and Blanca showed us some of the butterflies we were likely to come across in the Czech Republic and also some impressive ones from Columbia, where Blanca was from. Unfortunately, I wasn't feeling too well, so I didn't get the most out of it, but luckily, Brian is a member of the NHM, so he had access to the members' room. So, I made myself comfortable on one of the small leather sofas, while the rest of the group looked around the Museum for an hour. The room had some interesting specimens including a fish that walked on its front fins, a crocodile skull, a giant egg and something that looked like the tail stub of a stegosaurus.

Brian and I vowed to come back another day when I was feeling better and he bought me a big green lollipop that said 'GO GREEN' to cheer me up.

Saturday 22nd August

This morning, after breakfast, we got ourselves together and walked across to the park where the 'Histopedal Festival' (or Bicycle Festival) was taking shape. We were introduced to the Mayor and shook his hand, we were evidently VIP's. All the townsfolk were dressed up in period costume and had brought an impressive range of bicycles from through the ages. There were lots of speeches and awards and Nigel and Kathy were presented with a cup. A mini cannon was fired and the mobile bar went passed – an extraordinary contraption where about 10 men and 1 woman peddled along at 90° to the way they were going, whilst drinking and being served beer by a barmaid!



The Mobile Bar!

Then the cyclists did their three laps around the park whilst being judged.

Later that evening, we went back to the festival to join the party. Unfortunately there was a steady drizzle, but it did little to dampen anyone's enthusiasm. There was a covered stage and a rubber 'dance floor', a DJ reeling out English and American pop songs and a Czech woman in a cowboy hat singing along to them in Czech. We went to the beer tent (there's always a beer tent) and I got Brian a beer and I had one of those awful 'Kofola' drinks – the Czech version of Coca cola, an acquired taste – a brown liquid with a strong hint of cloves.

Anyway, Brian and I were the first of the group to take to the dance floor, where we wowed them with our Jive moves. The floor was saturated but we danced around regardless, soon a crowd gathered and at the end we got a round of applause. Shortly after that, the floor was cleared to allow a troop of majorettes to do their thing to some dynamic music. It was charmingly entertaining. Most of the girls were quite young, apart from one larger, older girl who looked like an oversized member of Thunderbirds. The music was cheesy, the dancing was cringe-worthy, the fashion sense was way back in the eighties, but the atmosphere was friendly and relaxed and we all had a good night. The highlight (or most memorable moment) was when the dance floor was packed, in the rain, to the embarrassing better-left-in-the-past tones of the birdie song! In England, it would make people sit down or even leave, but here, it got everyone out of their seats and up dancing. Brilliant!

Sunday 23rd August

Today we had a trip out to Mutinice Fish Ponds, with our guide Karel. We had a slow wander around the ponds, there was lots of wildlife there- birds, frogs, toads, a tiny grass snake, and lots of insects. The highlight was the bird-ringing. Karels' friend was out there, having mist-netted and ringed several birds. He kept them in bags to show us. He had an impressive haul, including: Green woodpecker, Penduline tit, black cap, Kingfisher, Savi's warbler and Red-backed Shrike. It was a real treat to see these amazing birds close up. But the real treat for me was the Little Bittern, I'm fairly sure none of us had ever seen one before and it was desperate to get away, so most of our photos were of it trying to fly away. It was mostly neck, and it had lovely markings.



When the man let it go, unlike the other birds, that flew out of his hand, he put it on the ground and immediately it ran under his car! Then it went into the engine. Apparently, this is what they do, as when I got home and told the local bird-ringing group, they asked if it had gone under a car. It's the done thing if you're a Little Bittern!



Either Nigel's collapsed or he's looking for a Little Bittern!

Goat Sitting

During our stay, we 'borrowed' some goats, five of them. They belonged to the owner of our Hotel. We thought it would be the best of both worlds if we could give the goats a holiday (taking them *away* from the Hotel) and in return they could munch on the meadow, just what it needed. Now, we couldn't leave the little darlings out on their own, they might get lonely, cold, or even stolen, so we had to pitch tents, make a pen (a beautiful, hand-woven, ash/ acacia pen, with a door and everything), give them water (fresh from the well) and generally make a fuss of them.

On the first day we took them to the site, *someone*, thought it would be a good idea to leave the hormone-riddled billy goat (nick-named Stuart) behind, maybe to give the ladies a break (?). Anyway, that night, Stuart was very disturbed. The little bleater bleated his way through the night, ALL NIGHT, **every six seconds** (Brian used his stop watch), the most pitiful, whiney, stress-inducing 'bleue-e-e-e-egh' you can imagine! (Ian actually did an uncanny impersonation).

After much complaining the next morning (not one of us had slept through that racket), Stuart was taken up to join his friends, phew, what a relief. Later that day, back at the hotel, I stopped and listened, looked at Brian, listened again, then Brian said the immortal line "Happiness is lack of goat".

Anyway, by the end of the two weeks, the goats were very happy to be out there in their meadow, but between us, we took it in turns to look after them. This day, I finally had a bit of time to myself, volunteering to goat watch, so I laid out on the grass, with my hat, sunglasses and my book and began to read. Very soon I was surrounded by all the goats, two of them on tethers. They sniffed me, nibbled at my bookmark and sat around, so I naturally assumed they wanted to listen to a story. I read my book aloud and they all

seemed to really enjoy it, it was lovely; sunny, insects buzzing around and a posse of contented goats. Ah.

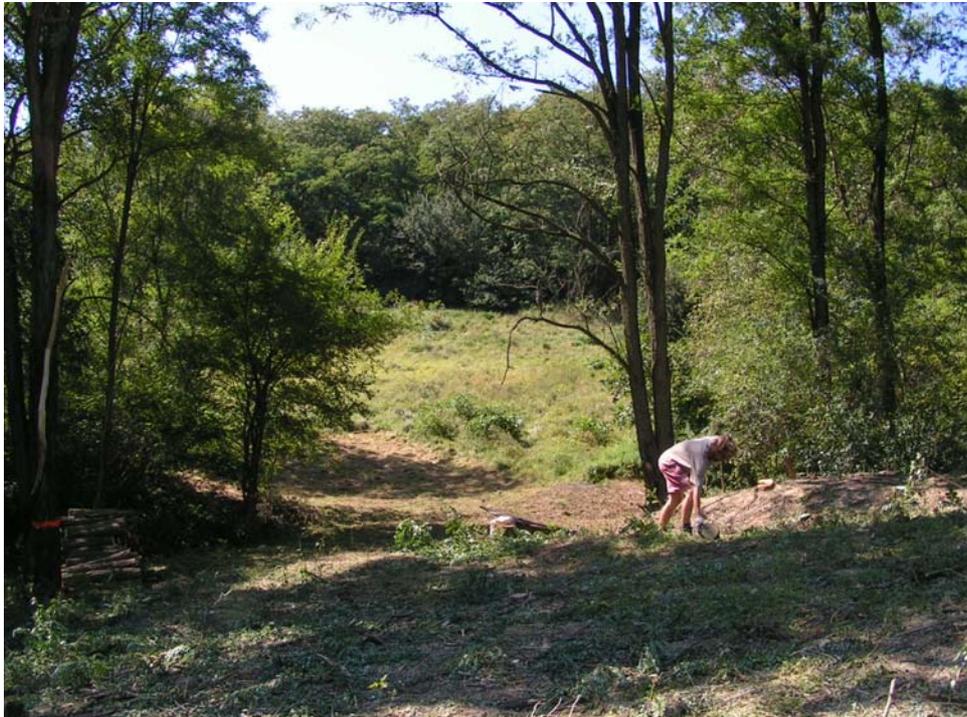


The work

That's enough fun, what about the work? Well, actually the work was quite good fun too. It was hard work, it was hot and we achieved a substantial amount over the two weeks. I was basically chainsawing the whole time. Yes, there was clearing up, stacking log piles, burning brash, cutting ash, brushcutting and raking, but mostly I was the 'Chainsaw Queen' as Brian called me (or chainsaw monkey, as a friend of mine called me!). Ash and Canadian golden rod were smothering the meadow and up the slope, False Acacia was encroaching down into the valley. I had my work cut out clearing the spiny non-native false acacia or Robinia. It started off fairly small but the trees got ever larger as we worked back into the 'woods'. One aim, as well as taking the whole lot back, was to make a wide corridor through to the next meadow. My team of helpers started off as just Kathryn, but steadily grew and Mark joined us with the chainsaw later on when he got some boots. It was great to see the area changing every day, getting clearer and the piles of logs getting bigger. I don't know exactly how many cubic metres we cleared in the end but it was an impressive amount. Something that really showed me that we were making progress was when a butterfly finally took the plunge and went all the way through our corridor and off into the next meadow. James and I watched it, it certainly made us feel that our hard work was worthwhile.



Near the start of clearing through to the next meadow (For reference, note the tree coming in from the right with the three branches hanging over going the same way to the left)



The same tree is more evident here just behind Peter. You can see now we have cleared right through to the next meadow – Fantastic!

Quotes and Champagne Moments

“Little boys loiter, old men lurk”

Dumplings

Brians’ top toffee

Little Bittern running under car

WALLA WALLA BING BANG!

‘Ilkley Moor by tat’

The birdie song!

Stuart bleating

Stone jamming under wheel of van

“Happiness is lack of goat”

David sleeping on tarpaulin outside tent after many dumplings and much beer.

Jethro Tull

“♥Mmm, Daniel ♥”

Marks’ pants – Gay pride

Nigels’ pants – Oh God!

Pivo

Sousliks

“Don’t think of an elephant”

My deer and red squirrel

“From Ashes to ashes”

Beer mat flipping championships James 31, Abby 24

Izumi tries meat after nine years

Mouse head on track

“I love your vein”

Vinegar instead of chain oil!

Ians’ goat impressions

‘Salami arms’

Nigel and Mark getting saws stuck at same time, Nigels’ bent bar!

Tripe soup!

Gnocchi with icing sugar and ground poppy seeds!
Zuzanas' laugh "Dobrou hutz"

Goat story time

Yannos, David and Lucy chasing butterflies

Drunk, embarrassing dad at Histopedal

Mullet mayhem

Brian and Abbys' first dance at Histopedal

Greasy sausages

Stealing plums

The romances...

Brian flipping Zuzana at Mayors party

Generous Mr. Mayor

Mrs. Rabbit

Whistling insect or....burglar alarm?

Izumi – Billhook Ninja/ Goat girl

Brian – axe man

Abby – Chainsaw Queen

"Why won't you fall down, you bitch!"

Town archivist with his dodgy VHS tape and '*Lots of pretty girls*'

Pauls' passport swipe and return at Prague from Daniel

"I think I'm in love with Roiter, he's got lovely sparkly eyes"

Dauids' Goulash and Marks' dahl