

Eucan Conservation Trip - Ždánice, Czech Republic
19th August – 5th September 2009
By Catherine Zala Larman

We set out on a journey with one thing in mind, maybe more. So often it is that it is entirely other...

The Wall Came Tumbling Down

Writing this on the eve of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the timing of this short EuCAN report is curiously apt. Some 36 years ago I stood in West Berlin looking across from a viewing platform to a mess of barbed wire, mine fields, lookout stations and a wall. There, reflecting in the damp grey morning light, the cold heart that resides in human nature. Families split apart, cut up by politics.

Working in Munich at this time, I travelled with my partner to visit his father in West Berlin. This involved driving through Eastern Germany on the autobahn, such as it was, left over from the mass road build of the Third Reich, with apparently little repair since. A fire on the autobahn determined that we were redirected by the police. Ushered through villages, people came out to wave and say hello. Winding down the windows and touching, holding hands. I could not quite believe it at the time. It was a harsher world then, it seemed, but human warmth was alive and well.

So when in 1989 the wall came down I rejoiced. Since this time I have been fortunate enough to travel back to Berlin and stand where I could not have done previously. Glad. I have also been privileged to travel and work in former Eastern Block countries busying myself with conservation and agricultural policy. Meeting conservationists who had worked under the communist regime has been an honour. Not put off by limited resources and restricted contact with the scientific world outside of the communist influence, people pushed forward to understand and set about conserving biological diversity. Successfully establishing organisations that today work closely with many others around the world. All with a passion and mostly, little funding.

Naturally then, when the opportunity arose to be involved with conservation work via the EuCAN project, I leapt at the chance. Picked by the organiser to go to the Czech Republic, a country I knew little about, I relished the thought. What would the land be like, the culture and peoples' relationship to their land? How would we truly contribute?

Journey Overland to Ždánice and the Histopedal Festival

On the day of departure, 20th August, a meeting at the Natural History Museum was arranged in the back rooms, where millions of species lie archived (or still waiting to be archived). The air tinged with the smell of moth balls, we walked past hundreds upon hundreds of trays, boxes, drawers and cabinets of natural history, to arrive in a brightly lit room. Here we were shown trays of butterflies, species that we were likely to see in the Czech Republic. Some rare, some extinct, others not suited to our climate, and some that just never made it across

Eucan Conservation Trip - Žďánice, Czech Republic
19th August – 5th September 2009
By Catherine Zala Larman

before the UK became an island. A useful morning to 'get our eye in', as Lepidoptera identification was one of the skills training featured in the EuCAN itinerary.

Our little group of 13 travelled by train(s) from London (Brussels, Koln, Prague) to Brno - Then by minibus to Žďánice, in the region of Moravia – some 50 km from Slovakia and 40 km from Austria. The journey itself was an opportunity for us to begin to get to know each other, to practise our Czech and to soak up the passing scenery. Sleep was broken, company and humour excellent, and we made it in some 24 hours, to be greeted by Nigel Spring, Kathy Henderson (UK EuCAN), together with Zuzana Veverkova and David Novotny our Czech hosts in charge of the conservation management programme in Žďánice.

After settling ourselves into our accommodation, which was unfussy, our extraordinary two weeks started with the twinned Czech and Austrian 'Histopedal Festival'. Gathered in the park grounds of the museum and house, were bicycles of all ages and styles with people in costumes to match. After many speeches and presentations of prizes, the cyclists were off cycling around the grounds and around the town – for pretty much the whole day. We, however, disappeared off to look at some local conservation sites and sights (Baracka and Sevy). In the evening we returned to the park for the evening festivities, to eat sausages, drink beer and dance in the rain, on the rain damped dance floor to an assortment of music some of which the Czechs roared to in chorus – whereas we just danced, not knowing the words and all that - and a good time was had by all.

Conservation – Timber! Sweat and Scrub - Valley Revealed

The previous year a EuCAN group had cleared an area which we would continue to extend. The objective was to restore to its former glory a valley meadow which had become scrubbed-up and afforested due to the usual enemy, abandonment (and its close relative agricultural politics). In the heart of Europe, this area, rich in wildlife of all kinds, revealed so many treasures (see the species lists attached - courtesy of all of the group members sharp eyes, and identification skills).

Working in temperatures around 25-30°C, a chain-sawing team together with various volunteers wielding axes and machetes (slightly worrying), linked last year's area with the remainder of the valley – a perfect corridor for all sorts of wildlife. All logs piled, quantities estimated, no doubt to be used to heat homes in the cold continental winters to come. Simultaneously others of us took on the scrub and overgrown vegetation with brushcutters, bow-saws, loppers, rakes, sweat and elbow grease. With 15 UK and a good few Czech volunteers (20 plus on one occasion), the result after a mere 9 days was remarkable – job done. The whole valley cleared. Unsurprisingly, the butterflies lost this year's flowers, hopefully to return next year. Throughout the two weeks though, we were treated to sightings of birds, lizards, vast range of butterflies, praying mantis, harvest mouse nests, and all manner of insects, many of the biting variety.

Eucan Conservation Trip - Ždánice, Czech Republic

19th August – 5th September 2009

By Catherine Zala Larman

Goats

A quick mention must be given to the herd of goats. As part of a long-term management plan for the area, goats could be an option. Toying with the idea, our Czech hosts were keen to trial four local, available, goats. The task, to graze last year's field (several acres). So with a fire pit already in situ, tents and an on-the-spot-hand-crafted-hurdle-goat-enclosure installed, a 'goat rota' ensured that both volunteers and goats alike had many happy nights under the stars for the best part of two weeks. Needless to say the goats enjoyed sampling tasty herbs, and we enjoyed the opportunity to relax, with conversation, music, food and various refreshments. However it has to be said that the goats were smelly, noisy and feisty. Rather like the volunteers after a hard days work.

Culture

In my experience of all conservation projects to date, there is always the scheduled 'meet the Mayor and raise a glass or two'. This trip was no different. Our dear and welcoming Mayor Miroslav Procházka, had more than one string to his bow as we were to find out on week two in his wine cellar. As host, in this secret cellar entered by a small door in the grounds of the Manor park, not only did he lay on a feast of food and marvellous samples of his wine, but he also played traditional music on his violin with fellow musicians, whilst we ate and drank. Having pushed aside any barriers to communication, we learnt a Czech dance, jigged about and drank plenty of good wine. But I skip ahead. That was week two. Week one was friendly and formal. Under the aerial photograph of the town in his office, we stood for photographs and the obligatory toast! A great welcome from the people of the town, via the Major, a big thank you for all the work we were about to undertake.

Czech language lessons were provided on three evenings with Naša Polaskova in the Culture House. Under her skilled tutelage, we learnt enough to help us meet greet and bid farewell, plus order drinks and food in volumes, rather than gesticulating, grinning and arm waving.

Other cultural events included the history of the Czech Republic, by Naša, standing in the sunshine outside the museum. A walk through the woods with Mrs Zajickova to the site of the old castle at the top of the hill, with more history and something about the name 'No Dream' being the literal meaning of the town, apparently. I won't explain. A visit to Cejkovice, where there stands a castle steeped in history, once belonging to the Knights Templar. We sampled the wine in the labyrinthine wine cellars and some of us stuck coins in the ceilings for good luck, so thick was the damp fungus on the walls. Finally in this jamboree of cultural events has to be mentioned the trip to see Jethro Tull performing live in the grounds of a beautiful schloss, dressed with the fading sun and rising moon, the schloss that is.

Agriculture and Wider Conservation.

On other days out we were treated to Karel Šimeček of the Czech Ornithological Society in Kyjov, who introduced us to the Mutenice fish ponds and a 'feast of bird watching'. For many

Eucan Conservation Trip - Ždánice, Czech Republic

19th August – 5th September 2009

By Catherine Zala Larman

of us the star attraction was a Mr George Candle a bird ringer, who had set a mist net and bagged a dozen birds to show us, a bittern, a king fisher... We also had the benefit of expertise from Janos from Debrecen in Hungary. A dedicated specialist, who took us out on butterfly identification forays – and with delicate fingers, pointed out all the telltale markings.

However, it has to be said that the Czech countryside has been scarred by agricultural events. Similarly to the UK, the last (and this) century's speed of agricultural development, technology and chemicals have taken their toll, leaving only marginal areas as repositories of what may once have been widespread. In this context, Jan Hajek introduced us to how the Natura 2000 sites in the Czech Republic are being recorded and their status of protection.

Now hanging on, and perhaps the very best example of all that we saw with its total abundance of flora and attendant fauna, was the Na Adamcich Nature Reserve. A rich grassland site thought never to have been forested. In sharp contrast, the view out from that high hilltop was of miles and miles of undulating farmed monoculture landscape stretching to the horizon. You could understand how only remnants might still survive. Monoculture long established. No livestock. That is now done in other parts of the country. Mixed farming seems dead. Cattle, the very few we saw, were in a courtyard and kept in-house – high intensity meat and milk farming. Not a pretty sight. Once upon a time, and not so long ago, the land would have been biologically diverse beyond our UK imaginations. The conservation work that we were involved with bore testament to that.

So our work with the Czech partners, whilst a good mix of fun and hard work, was set sharply in focus. Preserving and restoring habitats for species, yes, but perhaps more importantly in relation to raising the awareness of the general public and changing the minds of those in policy who may not consider conservation in the countryside a necessary part of landscape management. To this end the Major and our Czech hosts had arranged, and word got round, to have the press and television report on our visit. We became adept at being questioned, looking the part and not understanding our Czech over-dubbed voices. Namely: a local camera crew came to film us and the Mayor on site; a national camera crew and television journalist filmed our work and interviewed several of the group; and a journalist from the local newspaper interviewed us, and photographed our work, and the goats. The point, to raise the profile of the value of conserving the natural biological heritage and health of the Czech Republic and how we UK citizens are happy to knock ourselves out helping them do it!

Social Soirees

To my mind, music is a universal thing which breaks down barriers. One particular evening we were treated to after dinner guitar and vocals by Vojta, Veronica and Jana. Their own compositions and other traditional folk songs were inspiring and comical.

Eucan Conservation Trip - Ždánice, Czech Republic

19th August – 5th September 2009

By Catherine Zala Larman

So the social aspect, as you may have gathered so far, was threaded throughout. Some of us swam in the cool water of the local outdoor pool at the end of each day. I majored on the swimming and took the opportunity one day to go cycling near Kyjov, along the sandy tracks past the vineyards and out across the fields in the warm sunshine. We all spent time sitting quietly in the heat of the day, or cool of the clear nights, laughing, telling stories and sharing our lives and I believe some even fell in love.

The Talk – Conclusion of the Report.

One evening a Czech guest was invited to talk about how it was for him living in Czech/Slovakia in the time of Communist rule – he had also been to non-communist countries during that time due to the nature of his work. As a middle aged gent of clearly high professional standing, he was pretty positive about those times. He set too, comparing then with now and now with then. It seemed a strangely similar story, it could have been someone talking about Europe, or the UK in general...the past was better, education was better...that sort of complaint... but there were other elements he seemed to be missing.

A younger Czech man was fidgeting uncomfortably, emotionally, directly across the table from me. We looked at each other and looking into his eyes in a flash of memory I was standing by the Berlin Wall. I remembered the darkness of spirit around at that time. I remembered the welcoming faces in the village. I remembered the joy when the wall was torn down. The young man burst out on a request to voice his thoughts. Out came the elements being missed, of hope and youth and future, freedom of movement, creativity of thought, of sharing, of humanity regained, or at least the potential, to learn from the dark past once more and move on more wisely with knowledge and hope. With no disrespect to the first speaker, I agreed with the second, the past is passed and the present is our future unfolding.

To conclude, the EuCAN project is a fantastic example of bringing people and cultures together. Offering experiences we may not necessarily have set out to have, opportunities to meet on all levels, to be able to discuss, be creative and hopefully, as part of this, contribute to conserving part of the vast richness of this planet's biological diversity.

My sincere thanks go to all those we worked with in Ždánice and I wish you all the very best for the future. Needless to say, we all got home safely by train - happy and exhausted.

Eucan Conservation Trip - Ždánice, Czech Republic
19th August – 5th September 2009
By Catherine Zala Larman



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, Belgium, Poland and Romania. Further information can be obtained from www.kingcombecentre.org.uk or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559/mobile: 0044.7981.776767.Email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk).

Eucan Conservation Trip - Ždánice, Czech Republic

19th August – 5th September 2009

By Catherine Zala Larman

Butterfly List for Eucan visit to Ždánice in Czech Republic August 21st – Sept 5th 2009

Skippers – Hesperidae

Large Skipper	Ochlodes sylvanus
Silver-spotted Skipper	Hesperia comma

Whites - Pieridae

Wood White	Leptidea sinapis
Large White	Pieris brassicae
Small White	Pieris rapae
Green-veined White	Pieris napi
Bath White	Pontia edusa
Pale/Berger's Clouded Yellow	Colias hyale / alfacariensis
Eastern Clouded Yellow	Colias erate
Clouded Yellow	Colias crocea
Brimstone	Gonepteryx rhamni

Blues, Hairstreaks and Coppers – Lycaenidae

Purple Hairstreak	Neozephyrus quercus
Silver-studded Blue	Plebejus argus
Reverdin's Blue	Plebejus argyrognomon
Common Blue	Polyommatus icarus
Short-tailed Blue	Everes argiades
Eastern Short-tailed Blue	Everes decoloratus
Adonis Blue	Polyommatus bellargus
Chalkhill Blue	Polyommatus coridon
Small Blue	Cupido minimus
Meleager's Blue	Polyommatus daphnis
Holly Blue	Celastrina argiolus
Mountain Alcon Blue	Maculinea alcon rebeli eggs
Brown Argus	Aricia agestis
Small Copper	Lycaena phleas
Sooty Copper	Lycaena tityrus
Scarce Copper	Lycaena virgaureae

Fritillaries, Admirals, Emperors, Browns etc - Nymphalidae

Painted lady	Vanessa cardui
Red Admiral	Vanessa atalanta
Peacock	Inachis io
Map	Araschnia levana
Comma	Polygonia c-album
Small Tortoiseshell	Aglais urticae

Eucan Conservation Trip - Ždánice, Czech Republic

19th August – 5th September 2009

By Catherine Zala Larman

Weaver's (Violet) Fritillary
Pearl-bordered Fritillary
Heath Fritillary
Nickerl's Fritillary
High-Brown Fritillary
Silver-washed Fritillary
Queen of Spain Fritillary

Boloria dia
Boloria euphrosyne
Mellitaea athalia
M. aurelia larvae
Argynnis adippe
Argynnis paphia
Issoria lathonia

Speckled Wood
Great Banded Grayling
Small Heath
Chestnut Heath
Meadow Brown
Dryad

Pararge aegeria
Brinthesia circe
Coenonympha pamphilus
Coenonympha glycerion
Maniola jurtina
Minois dryas

Swallowtails - Papilionidae

Swallowtail

Papilio machaon

47 species – pretty good for late August!

SPECIES LIST FOR EUCAN VISIT TO ŽDÁNICE, CZECH REPUBLIC

August 19th – September 5th 2009

Amphibians

Common Toad
Common Frog
Agile Frog
Moor Frog
'Green Frog'
Green Tree Frog
Fire-bellied Toad
Green Toad

Bufo bufo
Rana temporaria
Rana dalmatina
Rana arvalis
Rana ridibunda group
Hyla arborea
Bombina bombina
Bufo viridis

Reptiles

Grass Snake
Adder
Slow Worm
Sand Lizard
Red-backed Sand Lizard
Common Lizard

Natrix natrix
Vipera berus
Anguis fragilis
Lacerta agilis
Lacerta agilis argus
Lacerta vivipara

Eucan Conservation Trip - Ždánice, Czech Republic

19th August – 5th September 2009

By Catherine Zala Larman

Mammals

Roe Deer

Capreolus capreolus

Wild boar

Sus scrofa diggings and tracks

Red Fox

Vulpes vulpes

Hedgehog

Erinaceus europaeus

Shrew sp

Sorex sp

Mole

Talpa europaea

Rabbit

Oryctolagus lagopus

Hazel Dormouse

Muscardinus avellanarius

Harvest Mouse

Micromys minutus

Bank Vole

Clethrionomys glareolus

Wood Mouse

Apodemus sylvaticus

Red Squirrel

Sciurus vulgaris

Suslik

Spermophilus citellus

Beaver

Castor fiber (gnawed trees)

Muskrat

Ondatra zibethicus

Pine marten

Martes martes

Pipistrelle Bat

Pipistrellus pipistrellus