

EUCAN Report Czech Republic 2009 by James Webb

This report is structured like a diary but its focus is on what I observed and learnt throughout the trip.

Thursday 20 August

Natural History Museum & travelling

Friday 21 August

Arrive Ždánice

Sat 22 August

In the morning we visited the Histopedal – a festival celebrating historic bikes with people coming from afar away as Austria.

Mid morning we visited the work site, known locally as Butterfly valley. The valley was comprised of species rich grassland on the south side of the valley and a large commercial beech forest on the north side of the valley. The centre of the valley contained many abandoned allotments. We would be working on the grassland removing scrub and trees.

The first visit was very promising with many butterflies present including Violet (Weavers) fritillary, Heath fritillary, Clouded yellow, Short tailed blue, Adonis blue, Chalkhill blue, Silver-studded blue, Map, Great banded grayling and Dryad, all of which were new to me. There were also lots of other browns and whites that are commonly seen in the UK.

In the afternoon we visited two local nature reserves that demonstrated extremes of management. The first site, Baracka, was similar to a tidy park with well mown grass and individual trees and bushes. We were informed that the site is on a ten-year management plan that is difficult to change. However, small pockets of un-mown grass yielded a diverse sward, several species of butterfly and a green lizard. This would indicate that the site had great potential and a relaxation in the management would be beneficial. Members of the group suggested mowing just once a year, similar to a hay cut; only mowing alternate years; or even mowing in strips to increase sward diversity.

The second site, Sevy, was also grassland but received no management at all. An absence of grazing or cutting had resulted in advanced scrub invasion with Robinia and hawthorn especially prevalent. In the open areas rank grass had built up and dominated. However, once again there were pockets of diverse sward with some interesting species, probably on the poorer soils, indicating at the sites previous diversity.

Improvements in management could enhance these sites however both were small in size and surrounded by intensive agriculture. These factors combined are likely to have an ongoing detrimental effect on their wildlife value. Interestingly, these issues are much the same as the ones faced by conservationists in the UK.

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Sun 23 August

Karel Šimeček of the Czech Ornithological Society in Kyjov took the group bird watching to the Mutenice fish ponds, a series of large ponds for commercial carp production. On the way we saw a number of Bee-eaters. At the ponds we meet George Candle, a bird ringer, who had caught numerous birds including: Little bittern, Kingfisher, warblers and various tits to show us. We were informed that in his bird ringing career, George has ringed 115,000 birds! On the way back we saw a juvenile grass snake in the reed-beds.

After lunch we went to some different carp ponds to watch waders. The woodland adjacent to the pond was classic wet woodland with oak, willow and alder dominant. Rain the previous day had brought out many amphibians – marsh frog, pool frog and two species of fire bellied toad. I observed a water filled wheel rut, perhaps 2 meters long and 10cm deep, which contained at least 10 individual fire bellied toads. Bird watching revealed Osprey, Marsh harrier, Common Buzzard, Honey Buzzard and Goshawk – sometimes in close proximity, as well as numerous assorted “ducks/waders”. The number and variety of species present at the carp ponds point towards the richness of this environment. Before returning to Ždánice we embarked on an unsuccessful trip to look for Susliks at Kyjov air field. I’m convinced at this point that the locals must think we are all mad...

Latin names

Working with the Czechs highlighted the importance of using the Latin names when identifying species because it is recognised universally. Common names are not!

Mon 24 August

During the first morning of work I used a brush cutter in the meadow in the valley floor to cut rank grasses and invasive species such as Golden Rod. This task was one of three primary tasks set by David Novotny, our Czech host and entomologist. The tasks were:

- Cutting the meadow – particularly areas of Golden Rod
- Cutting Robinia from the slopes on the south side of the valley
- Cutting ash regeneration and scrub from the head of the valley

The overall objective was to improve the habitat for butterflies and in doing so many other species would also benefit. The species rich grassland on the south side of the valley was especially important for butterflies because of its rich botanical interest. However, a lack of grazing or hay cutting had resulted in scrub invasion and secondary woodland. The scrub and secondary woodland largely consisted of Robinia and diminished the diversity of the grassland resulting in suboptimal butterfly habitat. Clearing the scrub and secondary woodland from the south side of the valley improved the habitat for butterflies. Clearing the adjacent meadow in the bottom of the valley and the scrub at the head of the valley improved and extended the favourable habitat further.

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The work to clear the scrub and open the site up would benefit many butterfly species that rely on open habitats or early succession habitats. The open habitat and new structural diversity would also benefit many other species of invertebrate, reptiles and some birds and mammals.

Tue 25 August

Initially I used the brush cutter in the meadow and after the break I moved to the south side of the valley where I helped cut Robinia and drag it down to the track.

Czech forests

After lunch we went for a walk with Mrs Zajickova who took us through the woods past the old castle at the top of the hill, with a view over the town. The walk went through the large commercial beech forest on the north side of the valley. In this part of the Czech Republic wood fuel is very important and consequently the forests are intensively managed with almost no deadwood present. However, the trees are well spaced so that a reasonable amount of light reaches the forest floor and ground flora was quite rich in places (unlike many dark and unmanaged English woods). The Clearfell blocks also supported good flora and many species of butterfly including Pearl bordered fritillary and Silver spotted skipper – both new to me.

Zuzka, our Czech host, informed us that 33% of the Czech Republic is forested (compared to only 11% in the UK). The vast majority of forest is for commercial use and only 1% is old growth forest. The lack of old growth and deadwood within forests is likely to impact upon the species that depend on it for feeding – beetles and their predators, and those animals that use it for shelter – bats, owls and birds.

The fragments of old growth forest are the last refuge of several species of bark beetle. Foresters have tried to cut down the old growth forests arguing that they are a source of pests that affect neighbouring commercial forestry crops. However, conservationists suggest that the commercial crops are weak and susceptible to pests because they are grown as a monoculture and often planted at an inappropriate altitude.

More positively, the large forest blocks offer many opportunities to wildlife such as wider dispersal and clearfell creates opportunities for early succession species. In conservation terms these forests could be enhanced by retaining more deadwood and creating habitat corridors to other forest blocks.

Wed 26 August

I continued working on the south side of the valley. The grassland was divided by secondary woodland largely comprising Robinia, we aimed to cut through the wood to join the grassland.

Thu 27 August

I brush cut the areas around where we intended to cut through the wood in the first part of the day and cut and dragged trees in the latter.

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In the afternoon we went for a guided botanical walk with Philip, a Czech botanist, in the valley parallel to ours. There were good numbers of butterfly including Bath white and Reverdin's Blue – both new to me.

Geology

Philip informed us that the area was covered in up to 2 meters of loess, a wind blown glacial sand. The soil appeared free draining and on the steeper and exposed areas it was very hot and dry. This favoured many interesting plant species normally associated with climes further south.

In the evening I was on goat sitting duty. 5 goats had been brought to the site to graze it for the duration of our stay. I noticed that the goats had an entire field of grass to eat but instead preferred to browse on trees and bushes, often bark stripping. An important lesson for conservation grazing!

Fri 28 August

At work I concentrated my efforts on opening up the emerging corridor through the woods.

Differences with UK

The south Moravian landscape is made up of large valleys with rolling hills. The landscape feels big and in general is far less developed than the UK. Commercial forestry is more important in the Czech Republic and covers a far higher percentage of the land than in the UK. A major difference is the complete absence of livestock in south Moravia, whereas in the UK livestock are part of the landscape and have indeed shaped it. In both countries big arable production covers much of the land.

The weather is different. Although both the UK and Czech Republic are in the temperate zone, Czech Republic has a continental climate with defined seasons and significant spells of cold weather and long hot summers. For example, winter 2008/09 in south Moravia had 40 days of snow cover and temperatures of -20C. The wildlife is more diverse in the Czech Republic probably because of a number of factors including; climate, location, distribution is easier (no sea to cross) and it's less developed.

Sat 29 August

In the morning we had an interesting presentation by Jan Hajek (Onyx) regarding conservation legislation in the Czech Republic with particular reference to the Natura 2000 sites, the European network of conservation sites.

Afterwards we went to the nature reserve of Na Adamcich, a very rich grassland site set on a ridge of low hills, particularly interesting as it is thought to have never been forested. The plant diversity was high but like many sites would have benefited from being grazed. Unfortunately it rained so there were no butterflies but we did see several sand lizards.

Later we had a tour of the knights' templar wine making establishment. It was set underground with huge barrels of wine, very musty. Goat sitting duty in the evening.

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Colony collapse

Paul Kirkland of Butterfly Conservation Scotland explained how important habitat management work is for struggling butterfly populations. As traditional management reduces or ceases habitats such as grassland or coppice can quickly become overgrown. Grass can become rank, flowers are shaded out and only dominant species persist. This can negatively impact upon butterfly habitat and reduce numbers until colony collapse is a real possibility. Parasites and poor weather exacerbate this further. Habitat degradation is compounded when it is isolated and fragmented. Targeted habitat management work to improve habitat and create links or corridors with the wider countryside is therefore very important.

Sun 30 August

Karel took us birdwatching in the morning in the Moravian desert, an area of sand near the River Morava, south of Bz nec. Commercial planting on the sand had begun some 140 years earlier and now the forest was very large. Pines dominated. In clearings and along rides there were good numbers of Queen of Spain fritillary and several Sooty coppers (both new to me), and lots of juvenile sand lizards. The forest adjoined an extensive area of marsh and wet grassland. Karel informed us that the large size and mix of habitats meant that the site was very rich in wildlife, particularly mosquitoes.

Hunting

I observed many deer chairs in trees along rides in butterfly valley and the areas we visited. I asked Karel if hunting was popular and he said it was very popular in Moravia. My first thought was that this was good because it would keep deer numbers down but Karel noted that many hunters shoot anything including birds of prey and migrating swallows etc, which is clearly not good.

Mon 31 August

At work I used the brush cutter in the meadow to cut more Golden rod and grass. Much of the cut material is burnt and the cleared area appears larger by the day.

In the afternoon we have some free time and I take a walk to the clearfell area within the beech forest on the north side of the valley. We had passed this area the previous week on our walk with Mrs Zajickova and there were many butterflies here so I hoped to get some good shots. Unfortunately I got there a bit late and the few remaining butterflies were too fast to get a good shot. I decided to walk to the top of the hill and then continue to the top of the valley through the woods and then back down the centre of the valley past the work site. The woods on the lower slopes of the valley were mature beech and on the plateau turned to oak/hornbeam. The trees appeared exceptionally tall (in comparison to the UK). I couldn't decide if this was a result of better growing conditions or the way the forest is managed - perhaps both. At a clearing I listened to two Roe deer bucks calling to each other.

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Tue 01 September

We finished cutting the meadow today as there would not be sufficient time to burn anymore. The other groups continued cutting ash seedlings and felling Robinia in the wood. Before lunch Janos took a few of us to look for butterflies on the terraces above the valley. It was really interesting and a good opportunity to try out our species identification skills. Some species are readily recognisable; others such as the blues can be trickier. Examining the underwing and referring to the books was the preferred option however when individuals become worn it makes it more difficult. Janos explained that some species could only be positively identified under the microscope.

Czech food

The main meal is at lunch time, usually soup and bread followed by a main meal. Dinner is a lighter meal and breakfast is much the same as the UK. To fit in with the Czech way we ate like this. The food was very heavy in carbohydrates – bread, dumplings, pasta etc and surprisingly few vegetables.

Wed 02 September

I moved up to the head of the valley and helped drag cut material, hay and small ash trees, and burn it. We were very glad to receive help from 18 people from the Kooperativ Insurance Group.

Thu 03 September

Graham, Richard and I concentrated all our efforts on finishing the brush cutting in the head of the valley to remove small trees and scrub. Once this was done we dragged the cut material to the fires and burnt it. At this point we all spent some time admiring our work. The tasks were completed:

- Cutting the meadow – particularly areas of Golden Rod
A large section of the meadow had been cut and the hay burnt. In particular the stands of Golden rod had been targeted and much reduced. The meadow would potentially offer improved habitat for butterflies next year, particularly nectar sources.
- Cutting Robinia from the slopes on the south side of the valley
Much Robinia had been felled, the stumps treated and the cut material moved to the track ready for chipping at a later date. The larger logs were left in piles on the hillside. The corridor linking the grassland was quite large now and butterflies were observed passing through freely.
- Cutting ash regeneration and scrub from the head of the valley
A large section of the meadow at the head of the valley had been cut and the hay/trees burnt. Left to its own devices the ash regeneration would have quickly turned this area into secondary woodland but it was now completely clear.

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Fri 04 September

Depart Ždánice

Conclusions

The local involvement was really good – the Czech hosts and their friends, TV crews and journalists, the corporate day, the Mayor and town council. With their involvement the likelihood of locals understanding and learning about the importance of our work increases significantly. Perhaps when the last work party leaves there will be enough local interest to continue this work into the future.

As a volunteer it was really important to meet, work and socialise with the Czechs. The hosts Zuzka and David were great and I think we all learnt lots from them. I really enjoyed our days out with Karel as well, he was very knowledgeable and a lot of fun. The immersion into the Czech culture was also great such as the hostel, food, language lessons etc. The group of volunteers from the UK interesting and I learnt a lot from some of the others knowledge and experiences.

My knowledge of and interest in butterflies (and environment in general) has definitely increased as a result of the trip. Before going I had seen 29 of the UK species in 2009. During the trip I saw 35 species (the group saw 44 I think) and of the 35, 15 species were new to me. I became a member of Butterfly Conservation yesterday and I hope to liaise with the Gloucestershire branch of Butterfly Conservation regarding my land and any improvements I can make.

Thank you very much for organising this trip, it must have been really hard work and no doubt caused some headaches at times!

With best wishes

James Webb
29 September 2009