

Zdanice, Czech Republic 19th August - 5th September 2009

When I'm suffering from general city office-job dissatisfaction and the urge to escape (this happens frequently, you may know the feeling yourself), I idly search the internet, dreaming about somewhere and somehow that I could go and do something more interesting and more outdoors. Last summer I decided I was going to go and do some conservation volunteering – something that would at least get me out of Bristol for a few weeks getting my hands dirty in the countryside, doing something useful, and perhaps that would help get me on a career path out of Bristol altogether! I had accepted that I would probably have to pay for the privilege of volunteering, as is usually the case, which is why I was completely amazed when I stumbled across the Eucan project, offering the chance to spend two weeks on one of a variety of practical conservation projects across Europe – all costs covered! I looked everywhere for the small print, for the catch, but there was none: no experience required, just enthusiasm, all that was required that I was not in full-time education. I applied – I definitely had enthusiasm! – but without much hope as the application deadline was imminent – and predictably got a 'sorry we're all full up' email shortly afterwards.

But then, a few weeks later, just after I'd forgotten all about it, I had a call from Nigel asking if I was free to spend two weeks in the Czech Republic at the end of August? They'd a late cancellation. Overjoyed, I accepted without any hesitation (I wouldn't miss this chance for anything, even if my employers might be unhappy about releasing me for so long!) and began counting down the days...

Meeting the rest of the group in London the day before we embarked on our trans-European train trip was daunting, due to the fact that – as a late addition – I'd missed the preparation weekend and so hadn't previously met any of the group, but I wasn't the only one, as it happened, and in any case it didn't turn out to be half as intimidating as I'd initially feared, as everyone was really friendly.

Travelling all the way from home almost entirely by train to our final destination to Žďánice was not only heart-warming from an environmental-impact point of view, but it also gave us all a great chance to get to know one another. By the time we arrived we already had a developing repertoire of in-jokes resulting from long hours chatting and joking on the train together, and we were all getting along really well. It was a long and tiring journey, but with the admirable organisational skills of Graham, as our group's appointed ticket-holder and 'shepherd' of our little flock, we successfully changed trains, negotiated with stern train conductors, purchased sufficient snack foods, and all-in-all got ourselves from A to B with only a few dramas along the way. The wonderful Nigel and Kathy met us off the train at Brno, together with one of our Czech hosts, Zuzana – all full of welcomes and smiles, and with relief the travel-weary group piled into the minibus to be taken the final stretch to our hotel in Žďánice.

Our floor of the hotel smelt of renewal – all fresh paint and new fittings – and we offloaded our baggage into our comfortable rooms, briefly explored, and soon reconvened downstairs in the restaurant area, where we would be served most of our regular meals each day. Most of us made a beeline for the town's outdoor pool for a refreshing swim and a beer in the late afternoon sunshine, where we got to know David, our other host, before heading back to the hotel for dinner at 6.

The next day, Saturday, was Žďánice's 'Histopedal' festival in the park, which involved a spectacular display of vintage bicycles, penny-farthings and even a pedal-powered bar, all ridden by local people in period costume – one old bearded gent even somehow managing to cycle while simultaneously playing an accordion and smoking a pipe. I was somewhat distracted and upset by my camera inexplicably packing up at this point, but with an unexpected (but I came to realise, characteristic) kindness and generosity, Brian came to the rescue and offered to lend me one of his, as he had brought two with him.

Later that morning we took a brief walk to the 'Butterfly Valley' where we'd be working, to see the results of last year's group's work and to meet some of the butterflies who'd so far benefited. What a beautiful place! Bees and butterflies flitted between the meadow flowers on the slopes where the

scrub had been cleared the previous year, and we were all filled with enthusiasm for continuing the work there the following week. But we had a weekend of fun to get through first!

That evening the weather turned pretty dismal, but the spirits of the town were not apparently dampened as the evening's festivities got underway. There was a bar serving greasy sausages and beer, a band playing music, and impressive choreographed dance routines involving, variously, ribbons, batons and (appropriately) umbrellas being twirled in time to the music by groups of schoolgirls in shiny costumes. Then half the population of Ždánice enthusiastically and somewhat precariously took to the slippery wet dancefloor to dance the rest of the night away to a selection of Czech versions of Western pop songs, with some Abba thrown in, and as a group on a cultural visit we swallowed our pride and enthusiastically and somewhat precariously joined them.

The following day we took a trip out to the carp ponds at Mutenice, with the hope of spotting some interesting bird life under the expert guidance of Karel from the Czech Ornithological Society in Kyjov. We didn't have to look too hard, as it happened: Zuzka (Zuzana) had arranged for us to meet George Candle, a bird-ringer who delicately showed us some of the birds that he'd bagged close-up – including the most stunning kingfisher and a dagger-beaked bittern – before releasing them back into the reeds.

On Monday our work began! We were up and out and ready to begin – kitted out with sturdy boots, gloves, tools and enthusiasm – at 8am, and after a brief prep-talk and division of labour, we got stuck straight into our tasks. For Lucy, Izumi and I, it was cutting down the young ash trees that were creeping across what used to be meadow with loppers and bow-saws. Those with power-tool training armoured themselves up and set their chainsaws and brush-cutters to work on the larger and more stubborn vegetation, with others dedicating themselves to dragging the cut branches and debris out of the way to the side of the track, where it would be collected for chipping later. We took 'before' and 'after' photos of the area from the same spot so that we could track our progress at the end of our morning's work, and it was suitably impressive! We finished our day's work in the field at lunchtime, which was very welcome, although we often found that the heat stole away our appetite somewhat – and it was often a challenge to eat what was put before us anyway, as in Czech the main meal of the day is eaten at lunchtime. I never did quite get used to this, especially after a hard morning's work outside in the heat too – I struggled to stave off the urge for post-lunch snoozes!

My experience with Czech food and beer was (with only one significant exception) entirely positive. Lunch was usually launched with a good bowl of soup served with cumin-seeded bread, followed by a vast plate of meaty goodness combined with a mountain of potatoes or dumplings that almost inevitably none of us could comfortably finish. The evening meal was a lighter affair, usually something like a bowl of pasta. My favourite Czech dish was (and still is!) 'kachna' – roast duck served with dumplings and cabbage – with 'gulaš' (goulash) coming a close second. Potato gnocchi sprinkled with icing sugar and ground poppy seeds, however, did *not* go down well amongst our group served one evening as a main course.... but we did ask to try traditional foods, I guess it was inevitable that one of them would be just a little too bizarre for us to handle! Breakfast was always great though – a great selection of fruit (and veg!), bread, cereals, cheese, egg, cold meats, yoghurt, juice, tea, coffee and sometimes even cake – just what we needed to fuel ourselves for the work ahead!

By day three of working in the field, having been consistently sawing down trees and dragging them across the ever-widening field to add to the chipping-pile, every muscle in my body, including some I'd forgotten I had, ached and burned with every movement. Terrifying though it was to learn how unfit I was, I comforted myself with the thought that I might come out at the end of two weeks feeling strong and healthy for working hard in the outdoors (and hoped I wouldn't - alternatively - simply fall apart into useless little pieces by the end of day 4!)

One of the no less important, but slightly less strenuous, tasks of each day was to watch the goats.

Zuzka wanted to trial the goats as a possible long-term method of habitat management, to control the thorny shrubs and other invasive plants which constantly threatened to out-compete the meadow grasses and flowers. So the nanny goat, her kid and two other youngsters, were loaded into the trailer from their uninspiring hotel-side enclosure – much to the disgruntlement of Stuart, the billy goat, who was left behind – and relocated to the relative paradise of the meadow in the valley near where we were working. Their enthusiasm for 'constructive destruction' seemed on a par with our own, albeit somewhat more motivated by their stomachs than our own work was, and they set to nibbling away at the blackthorn shrublings within minutes. Being necessarily tethered to wooden stakes so that they wouldn't stray too far meant that they needed supervision to ensure they didn't tangle themselves up, spill their water or succeed in coming loose – night and day – so on day two of our work the goat camp was established. Izumi became head goat-herd, volunteering to camp out each night, and organising a rota so that we could take in turns to camp out. One night we had a great barbeque, with Catherine creating some impressive kebabs to cook over the fire, which we ate with baked potatoes, and followed with foil-wrapped chocolate bananas, all washed down with plenty of Czech beer and wine. Camping there under the impossibly clear starry skies was wonderful, waking at dawn with the croaks of pheasants echoing across the valley from the edge of the majestic beech forest – but heading into the field to get stuck into the tasks of clearing the scrub then was slightly more difficult after a night on the hard ground rather than after a night of comfort in the hotel!

Iain, Lucy and I made it our mission to build a corral for the goats to shelter in at night, by weaving together poles made from the young bendy ash trees that were being cut down by other members of the team further up the valley. It was very satisfying work, constructing something not only useful but also beautiful out of the debris of the meadow clearance. The goats took a great interest in the building works, showing their appreciation mainly by examining the edibility of the ash leaves still attached to the branches, and generally not respecting a safe distance from the sharp/ heavy tools in use.

On the afternoon of the fourth day of work, some of the group braved the heat and went for a botanical walk guided by Filip, a friend of David's. I personally enjoyed this walk very much. I now know very much more than before about grassland flowers, and Filip is now my boyfriend. :o)

That weekend we were again treated to some rather damp weather on the Saturday, which I didn't mind too much, because not only had it timed itself not to bother us during our working week, but also because we went on another very interesting walk to the Adamcich grassland area and then spent the afternoon underground in the Knights Templar wine cellars in Cejkovice, where the guide seemed adamant that we tried about half a glass of about half a dozen different wines in very quick succession!

On the Sunday, with slightly improved weather again, we visited the 'Moravian Sahara' with Karel, an area of desert-like land, and then walked through an area of low-lying wetlands with copses of willow trees that strangely reminded me of the Somerset Levels near where I grew up in the UK. In the evening we rejoined those who had chosen to spend the afternoon cycling around Kyjov, and went to enjoy a fantastic meal at the Atlantic Bar in the town before heading back to Ždánice.

The second week of work began and we got stuck back into clearing the valley of unwanted vegetation to make way for the recovery of the meadow flowers. While the rest of the group continued the hard work, Janos, an entomologist from Hungary, took groups of us out to catch and identify butterflies in the grasslands which helped to get up close to the main beneficiaries of our work! We had made an impressive amount of progress along the valley, and now the end really was in sight; it looked quite likely that we would finish what we had set out to do within the allotted time-frame, which was encouraging, and we battled on with our tasks: sweating it out beside the

ever-burning bonfires that we fed with cut goldenrod, dragging the last of the ash trees to their place in the mounting piles beside the track, the chainsaw gang methodically felling the larger trees that would clear a corridor between the trees to link the upper and lower meadows... it was tough work but rewarding.

It was sad to be coming to the end but it felt like we'd achieved a lot, working as a real team as well. And we felt it had been appreciated – even if the butterflies and other wildlife couldn't show it, the people in and around Ždánice did so on their behalves! We had had a significant amount of media attention from the start, with another news crew coming in the second week to film our activities and interviewing our hosts and some members of the group. The mayor showed his appreciation by inviting us to his wine cellar on the evening before our final day of work and putting on a great array of food and wines for us, and we were even provided with musical entertainment courtesy of a small folk ensemble. Mark and Catherine returned the favour by performing a traditional English folk song, sung in impressive harmony, before the music stepped up a notch and some of the group got up and danced (some more reluctantly than others!) At the end of the evening each of our group was individually presented with a certificate declaring us as a 'Knight of the Butterfly Valley', together with a generous goodie bag with a Ždánice gift of some kind – a t-shirt, a mug, a pen or similar, together with a bottle of wine.

The final day dawned at last, and we uncannily finished the work dead on time just before lunch. We stood at the head of the valley and looked across to admire our work with quiet but significant satisfaction, before heading back down for the last time with our tools, knowing that at least now our Robinia-related injuries would now have a chance to heal rather than be inevitably added to, and our achey muscles could take well-deserved rest.

Such a lot of change can happen in such a short period of time! With a small team of willing volunteers we made a great impression on that small beautiful corner of the world, and in turn it made a significant personal impression on us – the place, the hard work, the wonderful people that we met, both from home and from the Czech Republic. I know that personally it changed the entire course of my life – taking the cultural exchange aspect to an extreme level perhaps! – but for anyone with an interest in the outdoors, in meeting new people and willing to put in a bit of personal and physical effort as a member of a diverse team, a two-week trip like this will for sure be one of the most rewarding and inspiring things you will ever do. If, like me, you have to return afterwards to your city-based office job as a matter of simple depressing practicality, be prepared for very soon experiencing the liberating thought: 'I don't have to do this anymore! There are better things in the world that I could be doing, and I'm going to go out and make them happen!' Sometimes you just need such an opportunity like the EuCAN project offered to you to help you believe that it's possible. (I am due to finish working in my office in Bristol at the end of March and leaving the country to go and work for conservation in Paraguay for the next year or so. A certain Czech botanist will be coming to visit me there in October. If it all goes well I may not come back to the UK at all, but perhaps end up back in the Czech Republic instead...)

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.

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