

# European Conservation Action Network visit to Ždánice in the Czech Republic August 21<sup>st</sup>–Sept 5<sup>th</sup> 2009

**Paul Kirkland**

## **Introduction**

I was fortunate to be able to join the practical conservation visit organised by the European Conservation Action Network (EuCAN) to the eastern Czech Republic in August 2009. I have been to several other eastern European countries in recent years, mostly on butterfly-watching trips, so this visit gave me the opportunity to visit a new country, get involved in some practical conservation work, and make new contacts.

Working for a nature conservation NGO, it is always useful to see how similar problems are tackled in different countries and by different organisations. The added bonus was to see some new habitats, and perhaps to see some new species.

## **Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> August**

Having arrived at the very smart Central London YHA the previous evening, this morning we visited the Natural History Museum.

Geoff Martin, Deputy Head of Lepidoptera met us and took us via the new Darwin Centre to the collections area to look at some of the species we could expect to see on our visit. We saw a good selection, including Mountain Alcon Blue.

We then had some time to look round the Museum, including the new 'interactive' exhibits with videos and buttons for young people. It was apparent that the young people seemed to be showing much more interest in the traditional exhibits of mammals, birds etc in glass cases.



**Alcon Blue, Natural History Museum**

We then headed off to St Pancras for the 2.30pm Eurostar to Brussels via Lille. We departed and arrived on time, with an hour to wait for the train to Cologne. A thunderstorm soon started with torrential rain. We embarked onto the Thales train and set off, and the storm seemed to follow us east. At Aachen the train broke down and unfortunately couldn't be fixed, so we waited for a replacement train. There were many people on the train also hoping to get to Prague, so the staff reassured us that the Prague train would wait, as there had been little time anyway to make the connection.

At Cologne it was quickly onto the Prague train with no time to stock up on supplies, let alone sightsee. The storm was still raging and we had good views of the lit-up cathedral as we slowly seemed to circle it as we headed east.

## **Friday 21<sup>st</sup> August**

The train travelled via Berlin, so it was an indirect route, and there were numerous stops during the night. By 8am it was sunny and warm. The scenery was varied but we also passed very large fields of maize and sunflowers. We also saw masses of goldenrod,

Himalayan balsam and false acacia (all non-native invasives) along the railway line. Part of the route was along the Elbe valley.



**We saw lots of this**



**River Elbe en route to Prague**

We arrived at the outskirts of Prague where we changed to get the train for Brno. Near the station was an area of vacant land next to the river. Here I saw Queen of Spain Fritillary, Map, three Whites (Large, Small and Green-veined), Meadow Brown and Small Heath, and a large billboard with a Green Party election poster.



**Map, Prague**



**Butterflies & green party politics**

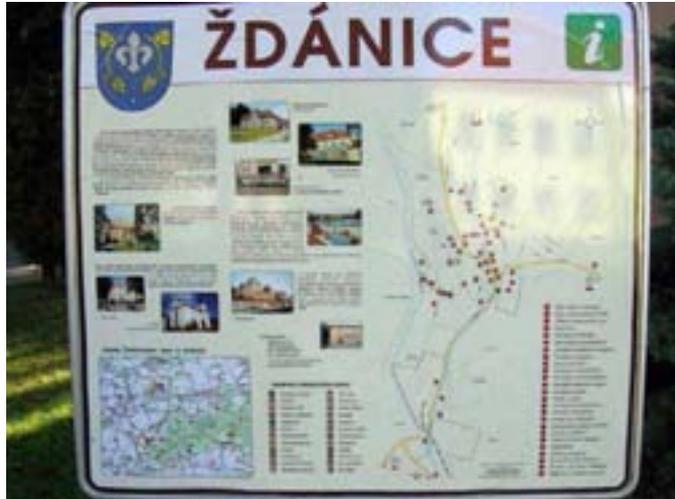
Towards Brno the scenery became more interesting – hillier, with smaller scale agriculture and more woodland. But very few livestock were seen.

We were met at the station in Brno at 2pm by Nigel and Kathy with the minibus, together with Zuzana Veverková, our Czech host, who works for the Daphne Institute for Applied Ecology. We drove to Ždánice arriving at our hotel at 4.30pm in time to unpack and have a cup of tea before going for a swim in the marvellous open air town pool. We had supper at 6pm the Radlovec Hotel, and met David Novotny, a post-grad butterfly researcher and our other host, and later explored the town.

### **Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> August**

We had breakfast at 8am and then walked up to the Histopedal Bicycle Festival in the park. The festival was started about 6 years ago by a local medal-winning cyclist, Mrs Zajickova (Mrs Squirrel). The town is twinned with one in Austria, and there were many cyclists from Austria as well. The cyclists were dressed in Edwardian clothes, and most did a few laps around the park after the presentations. Nigel and Kathy received

Histopedal cups and the Mayor, Mr Miroslav Procházka, made a speech explaining enthusiastically why we had come to Zdanice.



**Zdanice town map**



**Kathy with present, bike festival**



**Its serious!**



**Multi tasking**



**Ready for the off**



**Bikes bigger than riders 1**



**Bikes bigger than riders 2**



**Austerlitz cavalry re-enactment**



**Its all about style**

Afterwards we walked up through the village to the 'Butterfly Paradise' valley where we would be working. We saw the first of many praying mantises, and plenty of butterflies,

including Dryad, Weaver's Fritillary, Adonis and Chalkhill Blues and Chestnut Heath in the area that had been cleared of scrub last year.



**Ready for winter**



**Praying mantis**



**Cultivated and abandoned allotments**



**Meadow cleared by EU-CAN in 2008**



**Our work site - before!**



**Old map of field plots for the work site**

After a pub lunch, David and Zuzana took us to two small local council-run nature reserves, Baracka and Sevy, close to Bučovice, a few miles away.

According to David the first was mown too frequently to be good for Weaver's Fritillary, but was botanically rich, and we thought its condition OK.

The second site was up a track past arable fields where we saw hares and marsh harriers. It is cut less frequently so is probably better for insects, especially Alcon Blue. Although we didn't see the butterfly, its foodplant, cross gentian was plentiful. This is an important area for it, and it can be very common. But scrub, including false acacia, was starting to encroach.

The Histopedal party in the park started damply but despite the rain, the young dancers performed well.

### **Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> August**

We had breakfast at 7am and left at 7.45am with Zuzana and David to meet Karel Šimeček of the Czech Ornithological Society in Kyjov, and carried on to the Mutenice fish ponds for birdwatching. It was an area of ponds of various sizes, with a mix of reedbed, woodland and meadows, the latter being species-rich with *Cirsium*, *Inula* and *Salvia*. Zuzana showed us how to identify various frogs and toads.

As a treat arranged by Zuzana, we met George Candle, a bird ringer who had a dozen bagged birds to show us, including kingfisher, little bittern, penduline tit, red-backed shrike and green woodpecker. We also saw honey buzzards, marsh harriers, and great crested grebes carrying chicks.



**Yellow-bellied toad (*Bombina variegata*)**



**Young grass snake**



**Green Woodpecker**



**Little Bittern**



**George**



**Kathleen and Kingfisher**

We had lunch in a restaurant in Dubňany after the changing a flat tyre on the minibus. Afterwards we went back to some different ponds and saw common tern, wood sandpiper, Temminck's stint, snipe, bee-eaters, and little ringed plover. We also saw two Black Storks.

There was time to have a look for Susliks at Kyjov air field. There are about 40 colonies left in the Czech Republic. 25 of these are on airfields, as they need large flat areas so they can see predators, and dry soil in which they burrow. We saw more hares and harriers and thousands of starlings.

Supper for vegetarians was something akin to cabbage soup with a salad side dish.



**Restuarant at Dubnany**



**Most of us were keen to see Susliks**

### **Monday 24<sup>th</sup> August**

The first day of work. We started work at 8.30am in the valley and divided into three groups. One group cut hay, the second removed the regrowth from the slopes cut last year, while the third group cleared false acacia in order to make a corridor through the woodland in order to link the two grassland areas. A local camera crew came to film and interview us and the Mayor came to see how we were doing.

In cutting the hay meadow, we came across several nests of various kinds.



**Day One!**



**Harvest Mouse nest**

After lunch there was some free time before gathering at the Town Hall for the Mayor's reception at 4pm. After supper we had a Czech language lesson with Nasta in the Culture House.



**Social wasp nest**



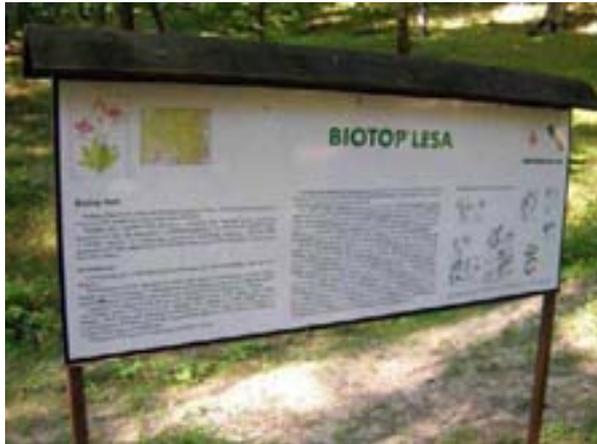
**Most of us were listening at the reception in the Mayor's office**

### **Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> August**

We had breakfast at 7am and left for work at 8.15. We continued working in three groups cutting hay, young ash from the top end of the valley, and false acacia. Adam the Mayor's son joined us, together with three Czech students. The four experimental goats arrived in the trailer and were happily tethered out, and the tent was erected by the fire site for the goat herds to sleep in.

After lunch we went for a walk with Mrs Zajickova who took us through the woods past the old castle the top of the hill, with a view over the town. En route we saw high brown and second generation pearl-bordered fritillaries. There was time before supper for a swim, and afterwards four people went goat sitting. The goats were gathered round a

tree with only the mother tethered for the night under Zuzana's guidance. Stuart the billy goat was very noisy and upset at being left in the pen at the hotel.



**The forest walk**



**Edible, lethal and horrible mushrooms**



**View looking south over Zdanice**



**Experimental Goat**

### **Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> August**

We had breakfast at 7am, it was misty and cool, and the poor Billy had bleated all night. It warmed rapidly though and was 20°C+ by 8am. The road has been dug up so we had to carry all the tools, and were on site by 8.30. We stopped for water and fruit at 10 and then tea and cake at 11.30, finishing at 1.30 for lunch in the hotel at 2.

We had a free afternoon with most of us going to the swimming pool. Four people continued to build the goat corral, and the Billy goat was reunited with the other goats.

After supper at 6.30 we took the moth trap up to the valley. Unfortunately it rapidly filled with hornets so we closed it down. A number of us stayed by the camp fire and the Czech students sang and played music. Three people camped and the female goats stayed in the corral with both male goats outside.

The moth trap was re-erected on the roof of the hotel.



**Harvesting the Golden Rod crop**



**Nigel and Kathy mothing**



**Gothic, Zdanice**

### **Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> August**

We started work slightly later than 8.30 because the road up to the valley was still closed, but we found another way round. We continued working in three groups and stopped for two breaks and had a goat watcher all the time. It was very warm.

We had lunch at the hotel and in the afternoon went for a guided botanical walk with Philip in the valley parallel to ours. We saw *Polygala major* and *Centaurea stoebe*, rare plants typical of steppe. David found communal Nickerl's Fritillary caterpillars on hoary plantain.

After supper in the hotel we had a Czech language lesson in the culture house followed by a concert given by Vojta, Veronica and Jana in the hotel.



**Encroaching scrub in adjacent valley**



***Centaurea stoebe***



**Nickerl's Fritillary (*Mellicta aurelia*) `pillars on hoary plantain (*Plantago media*)**



### **Friday 28<sup>th</sup> August**

We were at work at 8.30 despite road works and continued the same pattern of working. The goat sitters were taken breakfast and the animals tethered out. The cut golden rod was burnt and the corridor through the wood was opened up, while the small ash at the far end was cleared.

We had a free afternoon and a few of us went to the pool, where we later put the moth trap out.



**Burning the Golden Rod**



**Dogwood, work site**

### **Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> August**

It was a damp start to the day with not a very impressive moth catch. We had a presentation by Zuzana's colleague from Daphne, Jan Hajek ('Onyx') about monitoring Natura 2000 sites. In the Czech Republic there are 4 National Parks, 25 protected landscapes and 6 Biosphere reserves, plus numerous national nature reserves and 'natural parks' (possibly equivalent to our Local Nature Reserves).

From 2000-2004, about 700 surveyors mapped all Czech habitats at 1:10,000 scale, identifying 863 top sites as potential Special Areas for Conservation. (There are 39 SPA for birds). The SACs selected are subsequently monitored, including vascular plants and butterflies.

We then went to look at the nature reserve of Na Adamcich, a very rich but small (7.7ha.) grassland site, particularly interesting as it is thought to have never been forested, so akin to steppe. Species included *Dictamnus albus*, *Phlomis rosea*, *Aster lyrosis*, *Dorocomium germanicum*, *Peucedanum alsaticus* and *Allium amersum*. Some scrub control is done, but it was unclear whether there is also grazing/mowing.



**Our Czech guides at Na Adamcich**



**Zuzana and reserve sign**



**The surrounding countryside**



**Eastern Bath White**

We returned to the hotel before going to the Knights Templars Wine cellar at Cejkovice. Here we had a guided tour, saw the huge wine barrels and tried 5 types of wine (2 red, 2 white and 1 rosé). Janos, a butterfly expert from Debrecen in Hungary arrived to join us.

In the evening a few of us went to the folk concert in the culture house in Zdanice to see the Czech band Ondras, while the ex-hippies went to Slavkov u Brna to hear Jethro Tull on their 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary tour.

Adam said the folk group is one of the best in Europe. The large hall was nearly full and the concert consisted of dances, singing and instrumentals, with some similarities to Austrian/Bavarian style dancing. The band had two dulcimers which received enthusiastic applause. There were a couple of more gypsy-style songs and dances, which I preferred.



**Knights Templar's wine cellar at Cejkovice**



**One of two dulcimers played at the folk evening, Zdanice**

**Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> August**

A free day. In the morning we went birdwatching as Karel to the 'Moravian desert', a large area of sandy heathland and grassland habitats near the River Morava, south of Bznec.



**The 'Moravian Sahara' or 'desert'**



**Sooty Copper**



**Sand Lizard**



**Water meadows, river Morava**

We returned at 2pm. I went for a walk along the valley which runs parallel to the work site, where we previously had the botanical walk. I then crossed over the top of the hill to the butterfly valley, via very large arable field.



**Clouded Yellows, Zdanice**



**Field Eryngo**



**Arable field on top of hill between work site and the adjacent valley**



**Fringed Gentian, work site**

We all met in Kyjov at 5pm at the Atlantic Bar for a meal.

### **Monday 31<sup>st</sup> August**

We worked as before in three groups and stopped for a water and fruit break and a tea and cake break, before having a late lunch at the Muskateers. Janos took two small groups of people to look for butterflies and explained about identification and ecology.



**David, the Mayor and Ramon, on site**



**Destined to become slivovice**



**Garden flowers, Zdanice**

We had a free afternoon but were prevented from getting a last swim in the town swimming pool which had already closed for the year. So I had a walk round the town, did some shopping, and wrote some postcards.

A few of us had an excellent BBQ that evening at the camp, a good thing as it turned out as the hotel meal got a unanimous thumbs down!



**Traditional houses, Zdanice**



**Old Zdanice**



**New Zdanice**

### **Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> September**

We finished cutting hay, and continued cutting ash seedlings and felling false acacia in the wood. Between the breaks Janos took different people to look for butterflies, and he reported that he had seen *Colias erate* (but David was sceptical). A camera crew and television journalist filmed our work and interviewed several of the group.



**Queen of Spain Fritillary**

We had an excellent lunch at the Muskateers with mushroom and potato soup, followed by cauliflower with egg, more potatoes and raw cabbage – much better than it sounds! (The carnivores had duck and dumplings).

At 4pm Naša (the language teacher) gave us a short history lesson about the Czech Republic in the park. We then had a tour of the town museum. This housed the collection of a former resident German aristocrat from his travels around the world, so was quite a mixture. There were skulls, bear's teeth, lots of furniture, including an impressive 'Green man' style chest of drawers, and a boomerang! There were also local artefacts, including decorated eggs, agricultural implements, including a combined rake and scythe, and a bee hive made from a tree trunk.

Supper was a BBQ at the camp site and we left the moth trap out all night.



**Clouded Yellow (*Colias croceus*)**



**Tree trunk bee-hive**

### **Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> September**

We got to work just after 8am. Moths were again less than impressive. At 9.30 18 people from the Kooperativ Insurance Group in Brno arrived to help us. This was their 'make a difference day'. Most worked, earning their new bright yellow corporate T-shirts.

We burnt all the cut hay (even the freshly cut material) and some of the smaller ash seedlings and cleared an old track which led into the wood. Another journalist from the local newspaper came to interview us and to photograph our work.



**Corporate office staff helping out**



**Contented goats**

In the evening we had supper in the Mayor's wine cellar in the park, with a mix of folk and modern music, and dancing. The Mayor presented us with posters and Histopedal T-shirts.

**Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> September**

The final work day. Following breakfast at 7am, we started work just after 8am. We finished cutting false acacia in the corridor through the wood and burnt up several of the brush piles, and finished cutting and burning the ash and other scrub at the top of the valley. The goats were taken back home to the hotel with little trouble.



**False acacia stump treatment**



**Weaver's Fritillary egg-laying on the freshly cleared work site**



**After**

Stopping at 1pm, we spent some time admiring our work before returning to the Hotel for lunch at 3pm, followed by a visit to the bicycle museum in the Sport Hall across the park, which was also holding an exhibition of a local photographer's orchid pictures. There were some 19<sup>th</sup>C English bikes in the varied collection.

The area has a very impressive list of orchids, including bird's-nest orchid and the UK rarities, lady's slipper orchid and narrow-leaved white helleborine.

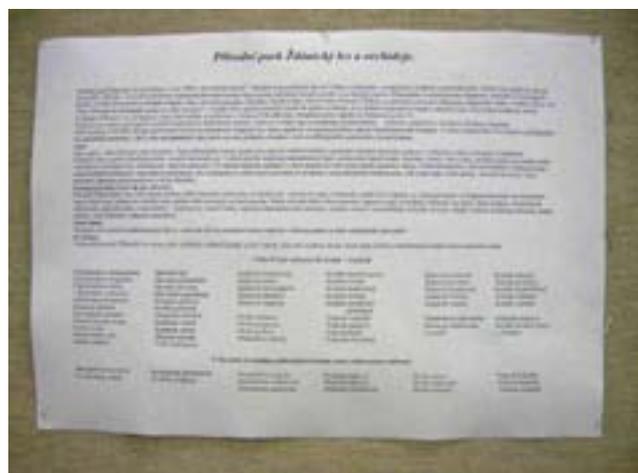
We had supper in the hotel at 7.30. Unfortunately the archive film of Zdanice proved damaged beyond repair, so we watched a 1970's Czech comedy film in the hotel. Some of us then accompanied David on a farewell tour of the town.



**Bicycle Museum, Zdanice**



**Orchid exhibition**



**List of orchids found in the area**

### **Friday 4<sup>th</sup> September**

We had breakfast at 8.30am and cleared up our things in time to leave the hotel at 11.30. Mrs Zajickova came to say goodbye, and the Mayor and Roman and hotel staff also waved us off.



**Team picture, Hotel Radolec, Zdanice**

We stopped for lunch in the Kařák Restaurant at Bučovice before driving cross-country to avoid the motorway to the rail station at Brno with fifteen minutes spare to catch the train to Prague. We said our goodbyes to Zuzana, Kathy and Nigel.

At Prague there were a few minutes to view what is left of the magnificent 1920's railway station. A couple of us also managed to use the few minutes changing trains in Cologne to view the cathedral. The journey was uneventful but enlivened by the company of a couple of Brazilians on tour and a woman from Sudan studying forestry in Belgium.

### **Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> September**

We arrived back in St Pancras on time after changing trains in Brussels.

### **Concluding thoughts**

We had an extremely enjoyable, productive, hard-working but totally worthwhile two weeks, with fantastic hospitality from our Czech hosts, and superb support from the Czech NGO staff and students. The organisation was excellent and Nigel and Kathy were wonderfully enthusiastic and knowledgeable leaders. Fellow participants all had different skills and interests, and were great company. We also had great weather. You could not ask for more!!

## **Further information**

### *European Conservation Action Network (EuCAN)*

EuCAN was established in 2007 by The Kingcombe Trust, a charity based at The Kingcombe Centre in west Dorset (registered charity no. 1054758 and dedicated to conservation and environmental education), 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.

For further information go to <http://www.kingcombecentre.org.uk/> or contact Nigel Spring (t:0044196323559; m:00447981776767; e:nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk).

### *Butterfly Conservation*

Butterfly Conservation was formed by a small group of dedicated naturalists in 1968 following the alarming decline of many beautiful butterflies. Most British butterfly species remain in decline. We aim to halt and reverse these declines. Our vision is of a world rich in butterflies for future generations to enjoy. We are also committed to the conservation of moths, which are close relatives of butterflies and are in rapid decline. Butterflies are beautiful and intrinsically valuable. Together with moths, their sensitivity to environmental change makes them valuable indicators of the health of the countryside.

For further information go to [www.butterfly-conservation.org](http://www.butterfly-conservation.org) or contact our HQ (t:00441929 400209; e:info@butterfly-conservation.org).

### *Butterfly Conservation European Interests Group*

The BC European Interests Group was formed in 2006 to:

- Circulate information on European butterflies and moths to members and partners in Europe.
- Encourage recording of butterflies and moths in Europe
- Publicise the plight of butterflies and moths in Europe where changes in agriculture, particularly land abandonment, are a huge threat.
- Help set up projects with partners in Europe.
- Provide a skilled volunteer resource for European nature conservation organisations such as national parks.
- Assist the work of Butterfly Conservation Europe (BC Europe) and act as ambassadors for BC in Europe with partner organisations.
- Work with partner organisations in lobbying in Europe.

For further information go to [www.bc-eig.org.uk](http://www.bc-eig.org.uk) or write c/o Butterfly Conservation, Manor Yard, East Lulworth, Wareham, Dorset, BH20 5QP, UK.

### *Butterfly Conservation Europe*

The association aims to prevent the extinction of any species of butterfly and moth, especially in Europe, and promote all activities and initiatives to conserve butterflies, moths and their habitats in Europe. A major focus will be to help implement the Convention of Biological Diversity with respect to butterflies, moths and their habitats, and contribute to the EU target of halting biodiversity loss by 2010. We regard butterflies as a vital part of this.

For further information go to [www.bc-europe.org](http://www.bc-europe.org)