



Leonardo da Vinci
European Training for the UK



EUROPEAN CONSERVATION ACTION NETWORK

Impressions of Hungary, July 2010, by John Black



Introduction

Like many people, I heard about the European Conservation Action Network (EuCAN) by word of mouth, from a colleague who had been on the visit to Hungary in July 2008. She returned to work with a tale of travelling for three weeks, chasing butterflies in the sunshine, eating nice food, and not having to pay for any of it! I was intrigued, as travel and conservation are two of my favourite things, and the opportunity to pursue both for free sounded too good to be true.

EuCAN dropped off my radar for a while, as I was extremely busy at work and soon left my charity sector job in Nottinghamshire and moved to a public sector job in Kent, but eventually life settled down and my thoughts turned to finding something interesting and worthwhile to do in my holidays. My girlfriend Vicky and I both decided that EuCAN looked like a great opportunity, so applied, choosing the Hungary visit in July as our preferred option, and were lucky enough to be chosen as part of the team.

One of the requirements for inclusion in the visit was to write a report about it afterwards, with freedom over the content as long as it was relevant and personal. Others have already done excellent work on trip diaries, or comparisons of EU conservation law in Hungary and the UK, or the autecology of large blue butterfly species. I have decided to do a trip report containing thoughts and details that I think I would have found interesting to read before going on the visit, not particularly scientific or structured but definitely personal and relevant.

The Work

They say there's no such thing as a free ride, and EuCAN is no exception, but the ride can still be fun though! The preparation weekend at the Kingcombe Centre was an excellent introduction to the ethos of the project, and strove to ensure that there were no misconceptions about our visits - providing new skills and experiences to the participants by doing important and worthwhile work with our European partners.



Our group was as I expected, an eclectic mix of ages, experience, and backgrounds, some people had a basic knowledge of conservation and some seemed to have an encyclopaedic knowledge, but everyone brought something to the team, either for science or entertainment! Some of the group were very outgoing and gave the impression of being instantly at ease in a new situation, others, like me, were more shy, but everyone was friendly and united by our common goal to do a good job for EuCAN and get as much as possible from the visit. Personally my scientific knowledge is quite focused on certain taxa, and my knowledge of European

butterfly conservation was small, so I came away from the visit with a sense of achievement for learning new skills, and satisfaction for being able to contribute to the ongoing work. I was a bit self-conscious about my lack of butterfly knowledge, and some revision would have helped a bit, but nobody looks down at you for not knowing something, and we all learned from our Hungarian hosts and each other. Some of the survey work was less well organised by our hosts than I expected, and the processes were repetitive as they must be to be scientifically robust, and the work physically demanding, but there was always something new and interesting to discover, and although we did not always appreciate the full picture of what we were doing initially, it all made sense and was worthwhile in the end.

During the visit I gained a dazzling array of insect bites and an appreciation for how hard butterfly surveying can be, trapping, marking, and recording butterflies in large areas of difficult terrain and high temperatures, it was genuinely hard work at times and is no easy option. Despite a little adversity and cumulative fatigue, the mood in the minibus was always good, even if the smell wasn't!



The Play

The itinerary was flexible, and our leaders Nigel and Kathy had drawn up a plan of where to be and what to do, but this had to be quite fluid to allow for matters out of their control relating to travel, weather, and the actions of others. They kept us pretty much in line with the itinerary, which must have been like herding cats, but did not make each day too biased towards work, so there was plenty of free time.

Hungary is not particularly developed yet, thankfully, and we were staying in quite remote places, so our free time was restricted to seeing whatever was in walking distance or tagging along with Nigel in the minibus to do whatever nature watching or exploring he had planned for the afternoon. Although we did not have much input into the plan, it suited me down to the ground as my work is all about making hard decisions and being involved in confrontational situations sometimes, so being able to sit back and go with the flow for a few weeks was just what the doctor ordered.

During our first week, staying at Fertő-Hanság National Park, we prepared our own breakfasts and lunches usually and ate out in the evenings, and the meals were very good for the most part. I can heartily recommend the beef steaks and venison dishes, but the options are more limited for vegetarians. While we stayed at our second work area, in Aggtelek National Park, nearly all meals were made for us by the lovely Hester, so we got to experience some Hungarian home cooking in contrast to the more extravagant restaurant meals.

Although we had time to relax, most days included special visits or events for us to take part in, from open air folk concerts to jazz gigs in limestone caves, swimming in local lakes, visiting ancient castles and churches, private tours of superb limestone caves and mine workings, and having lessons in Hungarian history, language, wildlife, conservation, and dancing. It was a great way to become immersed in local culture and start to gain an understanding of where Hungary fits in with the rest of Europe, past and present. I really don't think much more could have been packed into each day!



Of course, during our social time we were able to sample some of the local tipples as well, as part of our duty to experience as much Hungarian culture as possible. The local drink of choice was palinka, a fiery brandy that could be made from various fruit but was derived from special plums in the areas we visited. Many houses had their own trees, and the quality of palinka plums is apparently a matter of family pride, and we heard tales of Hungarian men who were enraged by their plums being mishandled or knocked off, which is exactly what we accidentally did on one day whilst trying to drive up to a church. Ooops. Although I don't have much of a palate for spirits, and think that palinka might be better used as paint stripper, I do enjoy red wine and do appreciate a nice beer. The local wines were all agreeable, and certainly cheap, and I was particularly impressed with the regional speciality white desert wines, known as Tokay (or Tokaj), which were excellent, and far too drinkable. The beer was very good as well, I have partaken of many varieties all over Czech, Poland, and Slovakia, with

varying qualities, but Hungary can hold its head up amongst its beer producing neighbours and I can recommend Soproni beer as my favourite overall drink of the visit.

Landscape and Conservation

I was fortunate to drive along the southern Slovakian border with Hungary in 2007, and expected Hungary to look quite similar. The areas that I saw around Aggtelek National Park in the north of the country were indeed very similar, and the landscape was dominated by extensive deciduous woodland in the montane habitat and a mosaic of woodland, meadows, and wetland in the valleys. One of the issues that was brought to our attention was the significant reduction in grazing throughout the park area, as a result of farming and demographic changes in recent decades. This is leading to ongoing degradation of the open habitats that specialist species like the various large blue butterflies rely upon, and if something is not done to turn the tide extinction of species will be the eventual result, which would be a disaster for European biodiversity.



The landscape we experienced in western Hungary was a complete contrast, with wide open flood plains and the largest reedbed I have ever seen, around Lake Fertő, topped off with huge skies and exceptional temperatures, which were in the high 30's every day that we were working there. Grazing was much more evident, which is apparently one of the success stories of the National Park Directorate in this area, and it was delightful to see rare breed Hungarian Grey cattle and Racka sheep grazing in the fields.

Part of the valuable work that EuCAN is doing to help involves practical habitat management, followed by annual monitoring of species, and we were able to see the results of this very close to our hostel in Aggtelek, where a small area of meadow had been saved from becoming woodland by a EuCAN group a couple of years ago, and the rewards were obvious. Not only did the meadow have a wonderful variety of flowering plants, but within an hour we had recorded 30 species of butterfly in an area about half the size of a football pitch! Central Europe has a much higher diversity of species than Britain, partly because of our fragmentation from the continent, combined with climatic factors, and the amount of damage that we have caused to our own landscape in the last century, so no surprises to see more butterflies than in the UK, but it did drive home the great natural wealth that they have, and also that they could quite easily lose if sympathetic habitat management is not restored and maintained in these areas. At least the habitat management work done by EuCAN is proven to be successful and can be shown as an example to other land managers, as long as the faunal species persist in an area close enough to colonise the restored habitat. Some of the difficulties facing the Hungarian conservation workers were explained to us, involving conflicts with landowners who were being subsidised, for example, to cut meadows at inappropriate times of the year, or major problems with enforcing approved management in protected areas, and even seemingly basic things such as finding the responsible landowners for areas of once species rich meadow and fen that are now rapidly changing to less desirable habitats. The greatest challenge

will be finding a way to convince landowners to manage their land in a way that is beneficial to wildlife, and the bottom line for most people is of course financial. It may be seen as hypocritical for comparatively richer countries in Europe to retard the pace of development in poorer countries for the benefit of wildlife, especially as we have already done many of the things they wish to do and benefited financially from it, but we have a responsibility to try and stop other countries from making the same mistakes we have by changing and poisoning our environment.



The wildlife of Hungary certainly did not disappoint, and was very memorable for the invertebrates of course, especially the butterflies, dragonflies, and fields full of wasp spiders that we had to walk through! The birds were also impressive, with breeding white storks in many areas, various typically elusive raptors, and a lovely visit to a bee-eater colony that Nigel knew of, where we enjoyed the sights and sounds of these amazing birds. Mammals were less evident, but close encounters with wild boar and souslik (ground squirrels) are memories that will stay with me. Wild boar also featured on the menu a couple of times, which was also memorable, and less likely to induce a fear response!



Photography

I have never learnt anything about photography formally, and have a fairly cheap and run of the mill Panasonic FZ18 camera, but have always enjoyed taking snaps and our visit offered constant opportunities to look through a lens. In fact I spent a little too much time lagging behind whilst pre-occupied with stalking a shy dragonfly or similar, and possibly tried the patience of some of my companions on occasion! It isn't easy to get a good photo when there are 14 of you in one area, so

lagging behind turned out to be a good strategy for taking some nice photos. I don't have any great technical advice for budding wildlife photographers, but taking good photos involves being in the right place at the right time, and being lucky, and knowing something about the behaviour and habitat preferences of your subject is an advantage as well. An eye for composition and a lot of patience are essential skills also, and you tend to get your best shots when you are not hurried, and often on your own, as nature photography is not a group activity and watching someone else stalk a butterfly to get the right photo for half an hour is like watching paint dry! You also have to be responsible, and not do anything that significantly disturbs the species or damages its habitat, as some professional wildlife photographers have been accused of in the past.

Finally, photos are an excellent aid to species identification, when you come across something you don't recognize and are able to get reasonable reference shots of it, you can identify it at your leisure without memory glitches or incomplete notes getting in the way of accuracy. Sometimes a seemingly normal photo can even become important at a later date, as a photo that I took at Aggtelek of what I thought to be the upper wing of a silver-washed fritillary (*Argynnis paphia*) was looked at by Hungarian entomological expert Janos Toth several months after the visit, and found to be a much more rare Pallas's fritillary (*A. laodice*). This species had been a target of EuCAN surveyors a couple of years ago in the area, and had not been recorded, so my photo, even though I had not known it at the time, became quite important.



End Thoughts

People have asked me whether I had a good time on my EuCAN visit. The answer is no, I had an excellent time, and comments from my companions was that the feeling was unanimous. So many things about the visit were good, such as the environmentally conscious travel by ferry, train, and minibus, which took longer than flying of course but was all part of the adventure and took us to some lovely places along the way there and back.

I was very impressed with the wildlife of Hungary, and the people as well, who were generous with their knowledge and hospitality. I can see dark days ahead for Hungarian conservation as the country is pushed more towards embracing western development and intensive agriculture, but hopefully the work of people we met and others like them will help to protect Hungarian biodiversity, with the help of organisations such as EuCAN.

One of the most important outputs of this project is giving people from the UK the opportunity to get out of their comfort zone a bit and experience the wonders of nature, and also gain an appreciation and respect for other countries and cultures. If anybody wishes to try conservation

volunteering as a hobby or is trying to get paid work in the industry, a EuCAN visit is a safe, easy, and free way to gain invaluable experience and broaden your mind. If you don't like it then you have not lost anything, but I'd be surprised if a participant did not return home after the visit not wanting more. They say that if something seems too good to be true then it is, but EuCAN is an exception to that rule.

Although I now work in conservation, it took me around two years of volunteering initially to get my foot in the door, and ten years later I still go out and do volunteer work for charities. As a result of my participation in the EuCAN visit, I have done three practical volunteer days that I would not normally have done, and publicised the good work of Nigel and Kathy to other members of my organisation. Speaking of Nigel, he has enough drive, energy, and enthusiasm for several people, as the organisation and delivery of all of the visits must entail a huge amount of work and logistical challenges. I thank him for including myself and Vicky on the visit, and salute his efforts in guiding the work of EuCAN to where it is today.

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).







