

# **CONSERVATION VISIT TO ŽDÁNICE, CZECH REPUBLIC**

## **August 19<sup>th</sup> – September 7<sup>th</sup> 2010 – by Dan Nuttall**

### **Introduction**

For three weeks during the late summer of 2010 I was very fortunate to be a part of a team carrying out important conservation management work in the small town of Ždánice, located in Southern Moravia, Czech Republic. The majority of the work involved clearing invasive species, particularly robinia trees (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) and Canadian golden rod (*Solidago canadensis*) from a valley that is home to a very large number of moth and butterfly species. Other important work carried out were the creation of a large paddock for sheep and goats to graze on and the clearing of overgrown scrub from amongst the trees and across the valley floor.



Our team, fourteen strong (twelve volunteers, plus the trip organisers Nigel & Kathy) worked alongside Czech volunteers throughout the time spent in Ždánice – this provided us with good opportunities to not only practice our Czech but to bolster the number of drinking partners during the evening!

Within our group were qualified fellers and they had the job of felling the large robinia, plum and walnut trees that had encroached into the valley. The other members of the team carried out all other required duties, such as clearing and stacking the snedded trees, burning the small timber and scrub and brushcutting the site.

When we weren't working in the valley we filled the rest of day visiting various attractions in the locality; museums, wine cellars, towns and even a visit to Mr Miroslav Procházka, the mayor of Ždánice were the order of the day. This helped to create three weeks full of great memories from an unforgettable experience in the heart of central Europe.

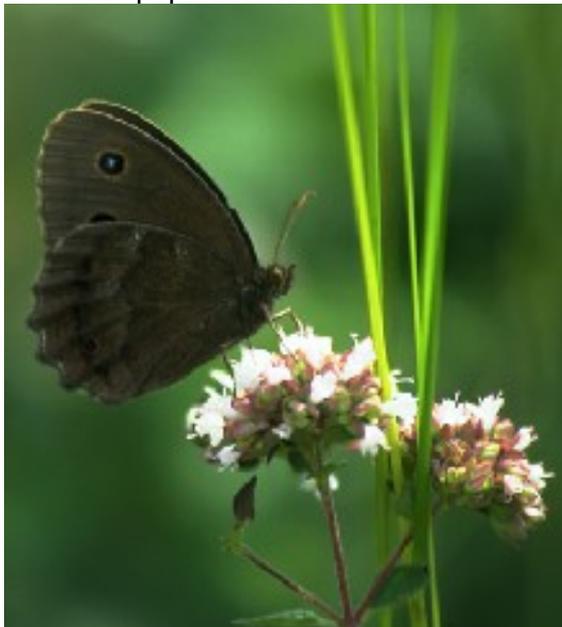
### **The Invertebrates Of The Valley**

The valley to the north of the town in which we worked is a very special location in respect to the large and varied amount of butterfly and moth species that inhabit the area. This is one of the important reasons why the site needs constant management, as even minor changes can affect the invertebrate population in the area.

To the north of Ždánice lies a very large area of woodland, primarily comprising of beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) and non-native conifers that have been planted as timber crop.



The above photo shows where the vast area of woodland meets the valley; the beech trees are to the left of the picture and the conifers are on the right. If the management of the area were to cease then the valley would gradually revert to woodland until it eventually resembled what is seen in this photo. This environment would be very inconjucive to butterfly and moth populations.



Purple Hairstreak (*Neozephyrus quercus*)



above, and Dryad (*Minois dryas*) pictured right – two of the butterfly species found in the valley.

I was lucky to catch a Silver-washed



Fritillary (*Argynnis paphia*) in the butterfly net during our first visit to the valley (see left).



The butterfly pictured right is an Adonis Blue (*Polyommatus bellargus*) – another butterfly I frequently spotted during our time in the valley.

Aswell as the valley being a host to a many number of butterfly species, it is home to an even greater number of moth species. Amongst the species I noticed included:



The Blood-Vein moth (*Timandra comae*) right, is a beautiful specimen with a dark red “vein” of pigment running in a rough V-shape along both wings.



Pictured right is the fantastically named Hebrew Character moth (*Orthosia gothica*) which I happened to come across one evening trapped in my room in the hotel!

### The Invasion From Abroad...



The above image shows the moment a robinia is brought crashing down to the ground. Nigel and Graham were the two members of our group responsible for felling these trees, which grow vigourously and in numbers that often exclude native tree populations. Much like Sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) in Britain, the robinia propagates by throwing down a lot of suckers (young saplings) that take a firm hold and grow to create one huge monoculture; parts of the valley we were working in were carpeted with robinia saplings. In addition to the felling Nigel and Graham carried out, I worked brushcutting robinia saplings on a patch of hillside, of which the upper-half was almost completely covered with saplings. Another member of our group followed behind and painted the stumps with herbicide to kill the tree. Unfortunately on the last day the heavens decided to open and we had to abort soon after!

The robinia is a tree in the pea family Fabaceae. It is native to the south-eastern United States, but has been widely planted and naturalised elsewhere in temperate North America, Europe, Southern Africa and Asia and is considered an invasive species in some areas. Although the robinia is considered invasive where we were in Czech Republic, it is not a tree without merit; the wood of this tree is extremely hard and rot resistant, making it an excellent choice for fence posts. Additionally, the wood is an excellent choice for burning as it gives off little smoke and burns slower than other wood, producing a higher degree of heat and light.



The image above was taken by me during a walk through the southern edge of the huge broadleaf forest that bordered the valley we were working in. It illustrates the stark contrast between the native beech and the invasive robinia environments. Even though here the local population have unfortunately stripped the forest floor of important dead wood, there remains a lot of open areas in the canopy to let light in and encourage an understory – the areas of the valley occupied by robinia were in contrast very dark and the trees grew close together; the image on the previous page shows the spindly trunk and extremely ascending limbs of the robinia, illustrating the speed that the species grows at in order to compete for light.

As mentioned in the introduction, another non-native plant that has become a problem (and not just in Ždánice) is Canadian Golden Rod (*Solidago canadensis*), which is a herbaceous perennial plant of the Asteraceae family native to North America. The plant grows erect in large clumps as can be seen in the background of the image below.



Canadian Golden Rod has established itself well out of its native region – this is due to the plant having been brought over from North America to different parts of the world by botanists. For example, in 1935 the plant was introduced to China where it is now such a huge problem it has taken over an unbelievable *third* of the entire Chinese mainland.



Capable of swamping entire habitats – like many non-native species introduced without caution – golden rod had happily established itself in the valley where we were working and

large areas at the bottom of the valley had been taken over by the plant. Working in teams, our brushcutters were employed to cut down as much of this invasive plant as possible.

Looking out along the bottom of the valley where we were working - Canadian golden rod can be seen in the background (above).

### **A look into the fungi-side of things...**

For me, as a bit of a fan of all things forageable, one of the delights of the trip was beholding the wonderful variety of fungi that grew in the area. The huge broadleaf sprawl of woodland to the north of the town was home to some of the largest, most varied, colourful and not to mention tasty fungi I had seen.

Different fungi prefer different habitats; broadleaf woodland is home to many species, including boletus, amanita, cep, agaricus etc. During our time spent walking in the woodland we encountered not only a host of good-sized edible mushrooms but also lots of poisonous species, including the deadly (and aptly named) Death Cap (*Amanita phalloides*) – a species which accounts for the majority of worldwide fatal fungi poisoning.



Death Cap – one of the world's deadliest fungi (above).

Luckily we were not without our local Czech companions who had a keen eye for the edible species and after a few hours spent harvesting a good amount of large fresh mushrooms,

we were all invited to David's place to try the wonderful stew he had prepared from fungi picked that same day!



A very tasty mushroom stew David cooked for us (above)



Nigel inspects a *boletus* fungi (above)

### **The culture of central Europe**

The people of the Czech Republic really know how to have fun, and we were lucky to get involved with a few of the local festivals and events that took place in and around the locality. As well as attending the local “Histopedal” bicycle festival in the town, we attended the harvest festival – an event filled with traditional song and dancing, as well as the ceremony of locking the vineyard gates to protect the crop and erecting a large wooden mast with wine bottles attached to celebrate the years grape crop.

We also visited a magnificent natural cave system, gorge and a huge wine cellar that was founded by the Order of the Knights Templar in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In the extensive corridors of the cellar were some incredible barrels, two of which each contained eight thousand litres of red wine!

Another cultural highlight was a visit to an organic herb festival, organised by the Sonnentor company, where traditional dance and music was laid on as well as stalls selling local wine and wares.



The local bike festival, where boneshakers, penny farthings and Victorian town bikes featured heavily! (above)



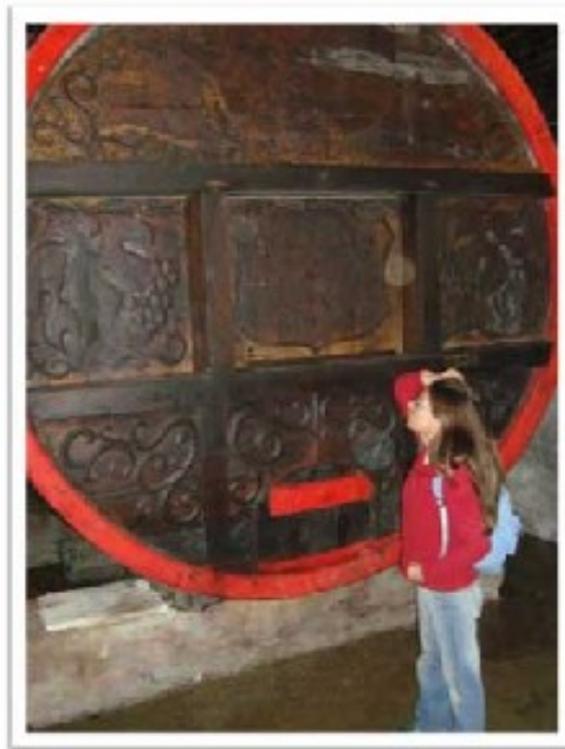
The harvest festival (above) with traditional singing (and lots of drinking!)



A visit to the town museum in Ždánice (above). Inside was full with various cultural exhibits, including model farmyards, traditional Czech dresses, religious icons, old notes and coins, militaria and even an entire room dedicated to Napoleon!



A tiny fraction of the wine maturing in the Templar wine cellar (above)



One of the huge barrels containing around eight thousand litres of wine (above)



nal dancing at the organic herb festival



### **Making a difference**

The satisfaction that comes after working hard on a task for a number of weeks and actually seeing the difference you and your team have made is a fantastic feeling, one that proves a thousand times over the worth of joining a conservation team and making a difference to a local environment. Along with the clearing and felling, a fence line had to be erected; a hefty undertaking in itself – and after it had gone up there needed to be a constant human presence on site to look after the sheep and goats.



Imogen helps to stack snedded timber upon the fire (above)

Another area we helped to clear was the large garden owned by a local “celebrity” resident - Mrs Eva Zaijkova, who had competed as a cyclist in the Olympics as well as scaling Kilimanjaro and other famous summits. The job involved clearing a lot of long grass and plum saplings which had steadily taken over as the years had passed. The garden looked transformed after we had spent the day working on it (below).



Everyone was very thankful for the work we had undertaken during our time in Ždánice. Our team was even invited to visit the mayor in the town hall, where he read out a speech (in very good English I might add) and we toasted the meeting with a glass of palinka (below).





The opportunity provided by EuCan is truly enriching and beneficial for all those involved. For me, the opportunity to visit a country and make a real difference on the ground was one of the most important and deciding factors; visiting a country as a tourist is often a one-dimensional experience, where as joining a team such as I did not only enabled me to work and socialise with people from all different walks of life, but also to meet locals and experience the Czech Republic in a way I had not before (I had visited the country twice before), allowing a deeper understanding and immersion of the people and culture.

For me the entire trip was a perfect balance of practical work and cultural enrichment. The visits to various museums, festivals, restaurants, wine cellars all balanced with the work we were undertaking in the valley have inspired me to travel again to the Czech Republic and other parts of central Europe in a similar capacity. The friends I made, the places I visited and the difference I made helped EuCan Czech 2010 become one of the most memorable and enjoyable ventures to date.



*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.kingcombcentre.org.uk](http://www.kingcombcentre.org.uk) or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559/mobile: 0044.7981.776767.Email: [nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk) ).*