

Aggtelek National Park. Leonardo de Vinci project, Autumn 2007.

A journey to the heart of biodiversity

A golden globally warmed early September morning embraced us at Waterloo International Eurostar Terminal. Our crack team of 15 warriors, seconded from the disparate battalions of local government, aromatherapy, unemployment, architecture and conservation, sipped coffee, read newspapers and milled around with an alacrity of anticipation to do battle on foreign shores. Our chosen weapons, chainsaws, brushcutters, loppers, flora and fauna identification books, were bagged, tagged and bundled into an amorphous mass. A mellifluously melting voice caressed us to the carriage that would take us under the English Channel and across the European continent. Two hours in Brussels allowed us to imbibe and wallow in the heady heart of the EU. Germany's Teutonic grip pulled us ever onwards. Cologne offered up its cathedral for a weary march to the summit of inspiring spires. Darkness. Fervent fires of the righteous flickered within. The final push to the east would be taken aboard the serendipitous sounding sleeper train. Fetid odour of rank feet. Humanity boxed, swaying to the iron rhythm: fitful thick sleep, dreaming so deep.

Copper kings virulent in coats of verdigris. Shimmering echoes of heroes past. The portents of Budapest rekindled the embers of desire for the battle ahead. Just a few more hours to the far northern reaches of Hungary, the forested wilderness of our fate.

The limestone karst buttresses crenulated the understory beneath the dominant hornbeam and steadfast oak. The glowing orange fire salamander announced our arrival in the Aggtelek National Park.

Covering 20,000 hectares the first designated National Park in Hungary reflects the diverse habitat offered by the limestone karst system, complex plateau, covered karst, exhumed karst, sink holes, potholes, subterranean water courses and cave systems. The NW Carpathian mountains create conditions for Montaigne vegetation on the north slopes and Mediterranean on the South. The Carpathian mountains have sheltered an inner basin from ice age climate change which allowed the influx of great bustards from the frozen Russian steppes and the survival of the wolf and lynx. Steppe like grasslands, secondary and semi natural meadows, calciphilous karst and acidic heathland, thermophilous forest and extra-zonal beech forest all collide to support a bio diverse flora and fauna community: Imperial eagles, rock thrush, skink, ladies slipper, the Austrian dragonhead plant to name but a few.

Our mission. To re-establish the ecotonal grasslands within the forests. These semi natural grasslands opened by grazing animals of historic farming activity are now being choked by natural succession to scrub. Blackthorn and juniper begin to dominate simplifying the habitat reducing the grasslands bio diverse biological community. The reason, loss of grazing farming practices in the region. As industrial economic forces exert their influence the inevitable rural to urban migration of the population follows.

The cock indeed crows, the sun streams on endless verdant hills, our time has come. The chainsaws' razor teeth bared with intent. The brushcutters aligned in formation. Jerrycan moving down the line. The cloying aroma of cascading fuel fracturing the

sweet mountain air. Harness buckled, helmets on, visors down, body armour fixed. The staccato roar of internal combustion, rotating metal. Onwards. Our foe: *Prunus spinosa*, the blackthorn, advancing into precious meadow, the vanguard of forest forces reclaiming the natural order, healing the grassy scar. Sweat oozes from every pore, earth spatters visors, woody debris erupts with strombolian fury, another victim is slain. Thirsty machinery is refuelled, energized, battle recommences. Inch by bitter inch the thorny invaders are repelled, the meadow tide trickles forwards lapping at the shrubby shore. The forces for biodiversity march on with zealous zeal.

The evenings are a time for recuperation, licking the wounds of battle, and nourishment of the mind as visiting scientists lecture on the biogeography of the national park. The mayor visits and talks on the history and culture of the region and brings samples from the local distillery. A night is spent listening for the wolf pack which roams the hills. The red deer stags call to each other. On a clear cloudless night the Milky Way is visible, a silver sheen arcing overhead. A net is placed by a cave entrance seeking the twenty six species of bat resident in the Aggtelek caves. The Mouse eared bat, Barbastelle, Long-fingered, Mediterranean horseshoe, and Brown long-eared bat are captured and released back to their ultrasonic world. Inside the Baradla caves, formed with Triassic limestone 230 million years ago, the incessantly slow dripping waters percolating down from the surface have created mighty stalactites and stalagmites stretched and contorted into frozen fluid forms. A majestic backdrop to the cavern concert hall where another cultural night is spent listening to soothing classical music.

For nine days the battle rages. Blackthorn gives way to juniper scrub: no match for slashing steel. Hardened muscles glisten with fresh sweat. Scabrous scars are worn with pride as more meadow is opened to mountain skies.

A rest day. Aching limbs are eased over saddles. Bicycles head downwards to the plateau grasslands. Dingy skipper, Silver-washed fritillary and Clouded yellow butterflies dance eccentrically in the last vestiges of autumn warmth. The Great green bushcricket bounds from approaching feet. The Preying mantis looks piously on.

A final night. The now veteran warriors assemble for the last supper. Wild boar stew simmers over an open fire. The enemy has been vanquished. The meadow is safe for now but nature will rally and fresh volunteers need to be recruited and prepared for the fray again.

Farewells to our Hungarian friends, new allies in the global conservation cause. Mutual respect at a job well done. We turn and leave for Budapest. The long journey westwards back to Britain. Breathtaking views along the Rhine aboard the Orient Express.

Where will the clarion call of conservation take us next?

Derek Young, Leonardo de Vinci project volunteer

