

Slovakia & Hungary June 2006

Day 1 Sunday 11 June

The group met up with Rosemary at Heathrow very early in the morning at Heathrow. We flew to Prague and then on to Kosice, Slovakia, where Martin our Czech guide was waiting for us with the minibus. Very soon the luggage was on board and we were on our way through the countryside of open fields and the ubiquitous acacia (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) trees that although are introduction we saw everywhere.

Our first stop was at Turna Castle, a c. 500 years old castle overlooking the border with Hungary. Although the intention was to walk to the castle the great variety of the limestone flora made for slow progress, perhaps Martin may have got his first intimations of the 'slowest group' he had yet experienced! This was our only chance to see the rare endemic Turna golden drop (*Onosma tornense*) that only grows here and a site in Hungary just over the border. Soon we had to leave the delights of the flowers and singing blackcaps and nightingales and after a welcome drink at a nearby hotel left to drive on to the hotel.

Ranc Sugov hotel is a few kilometres from Medzev and lies in a valley surrounded by wooded hills. A lake and stream lie close to the building and in a 'grotto' beside the car park we could see grey wagtails feeding young. After dinner it was off to bed lulled by the sound of the stream outside our windows.



Day 2 Monday 12 June

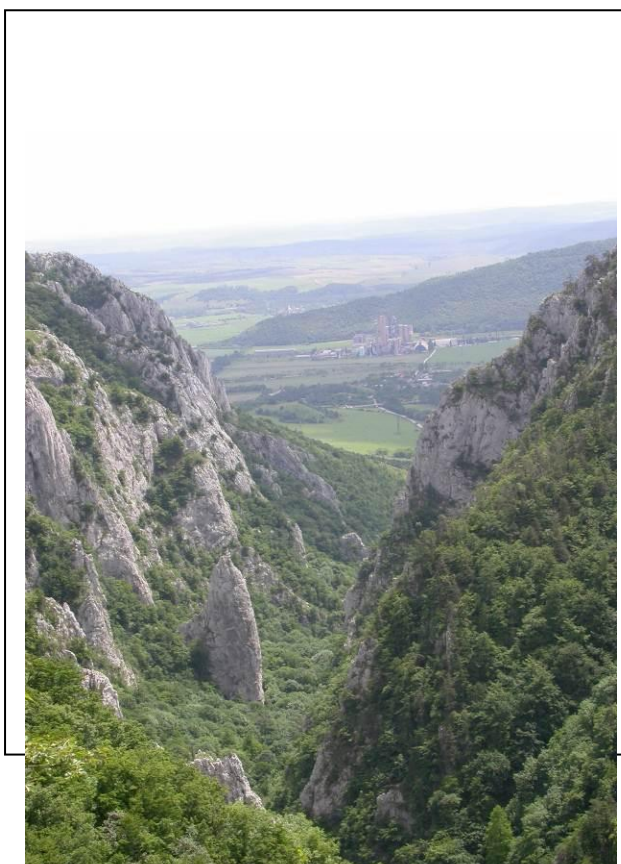
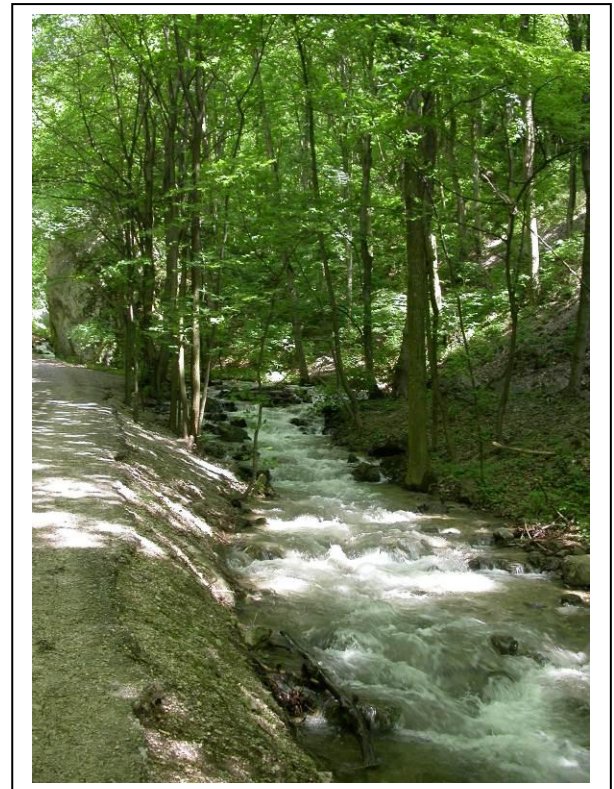
An early morning walk established the presence of hawfinches, collared flycatchers, buzzard and other species in the vicinity.

After breakfast we set off by minibus for our first long walk of the holiday. The weather was already warm and sunny as we reached the bottom of the marked trails to Zadiel Gorge. The first part of the walk was along a hard track but even so progress was slow due again to the fantastic range of plants, most of which were new to us. We had the company of Emilia, a botanist from the Protected Area – so with her giving us the scientific names of all the plants there was a lot to take in. Meanwhile Martin was introducing us to a host of new species of butterflies including our first Hungarian gliders (they have a gliding flight) and Clouded Apollos. Gradually the path became steeper through woodland, in the shaded areas under

beech and maple trees were masses of birdsnest orchids. Eventually we arrived at the plateau on top of the hill where we found ourselves in beautiful, flower-rich limestone grassland with masses of butterflies. The superb views of the gorge are from one aspect marred by the incongruous cement factory in the valley below –a legacy of the Communist regime. Among the interesting plants was the rare austrian dragonhead *Dracocephalum austriacum* (named from the shape of the florets).

Picnic lunch was eaten in a large pasture that had been grazed by sheep. Gorgeous butterflies and birds were a considerable distraction. A goshawk displayed for several minutes above the valley. Then we continued our walk over an area of limestone pavement before descending to the village below via a steep and narrow path that zigzagged down the hill. Unfortunately Kelly slipped on the way down, breaking her ankle and we had a difficult task getting her down the narrow path and helping her to the car. It was due to the stalwart efforts of Martin, Brian and Sue that we eventually got down to the car park.

Later at the hotel that evening we saw Daubenton's and other bats that had been netted by several local rangers.



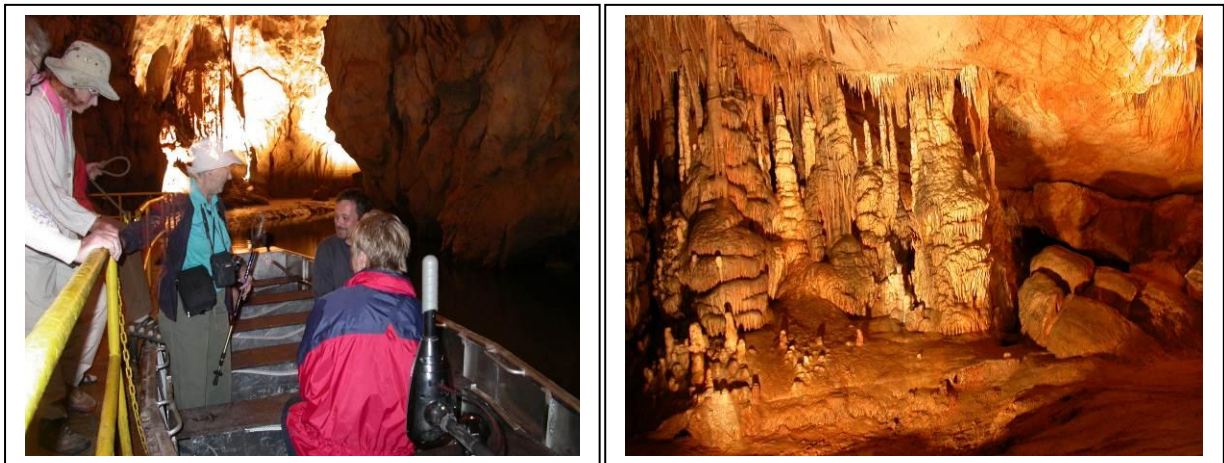
Day 3 Tuesday 13 June

Several 'early birds' went for a pre-breakfast walk again this morning. Both white-backed, great spotted and middle spotted woodpecker were seen plus hawfinches, grey wagtails and other birds.

Emilia joined us again today. Kelly came with us in the minibus although she was not able to do more than rest her foot. We set off for more areas of limestone karst walking along an area above the Dominica cave system that we were to visit later. More species-rich limestone was a delight and Martin again showed us an array of beautiful butterflies. Besides flowers and butterflies other invertebrate life was outstanding with long-horned and other beetles, a tiny *Atypus* spider and day-flying speckled yellow moths. In the distance the classic 'wet-my-lips' call of the quail could be heard.

In places scrub has invaded the hillsides since the cessation of grazing. On the top of the hill we stopped for lunch over-looking a view of the plain below, before walking down through woodland to the village. Now it was time for our guided tour of the Dominica cave system.

The caves turned out to be a great revelation; everyone thought them very impressive and better than anything any of us had seen before. Part of the conducted (and nicely low-key) tour included a short trip in a boat along an underground stream. Horseshoe bats were seen in several parts of the caves and in one section they could be seen hanging on a stalactite above our heads. Finally we stumbled out into the baking heat of a sunny afternoon and made for the ice cream stand. A red-backed shrike opposite the car park was a nice end to the day and we left for the hotel, saying goodbye to Emilia as we dropped her off on the way.



Day 4 Wednesday 14 June.

The early morning stroll produced more treats, a flock of six male golden orioles and for some a black woodpecker carrying food. Instead of the usual buzzard we saw a sparrowhawk.

After breakfast we packed the minibus ready for our journey to Hungary. But first we went via a hospital, as we were very concerned about Kelly's ankle. The first hospital at Moldava nad Bodvou sent us on to a larger hospital at Saca. Here sadly we left Kelly to have an operation on her broken ankle with Margaret electing to stay with her while we travelled on.

Driving along the new motorway speeded our journey, unfortunately despite calling at two garages for the special sticker we could not find one and so we got pulled over and Martin got a c£40 fixed penalty fine. We noticed the next driver too got fined –despite protesting they also couldn't find anywhere with stickers for sale.

Arriving at the Hortobagy we stopped by a farm where red-footed falcons breed. Although we did not see the falcons --it had become very windy -- we saw our first 'puszta' plants. Driving into the village of Hortobagy we stopped briefly to look at the famous nine-arch bridge and the statues of the herdsmen coming for water. There was just time to buy maps and cards before the Folklore Museum closed. Then on to our hotel at Haduszoboszlo and a meal at a nearby restaurant.



Day 5 Thursday 15 June

After breakfast we drove to Hortobagy again where Zsolt, the deputy head ranger at the National Park, joined us. Zsolt speaks very good English and told us about the Hortobagy, which incidentally is twinned with Dartmoor National Park! We visited several sites in the National Park. First we walked along a narrow track between tall reeds to a raised platform over-looking colonies of breeding spoonbills, pygmy cormorants, purple herons, little egrets and glossy ibis, also ferruginous duck and bearded tit. It was a scene of intense activity and everyone had excellent views of the birds.

Our next stop was at a marshy area with breeding 'marsh terns', white-winged black terns and whiskered terns. These graceful birds were feeding and included at least one newly fledged white-winged black tern. Leaving the terns we stopped next at a farm where red-footed falcons nest in boxes (as opposed to their usual sites in abandoned rook's nests). Soon we could see the falcons flying over as they visited their nests. A couple of rollers on wires nearby proved a new attraction so we went off to look for more rollers in the area. We saw several perched on wires and Martin tried a bit of 'digiscoping' to secure a photo of them.

Our final destination was a walk to a bridge where we would get a good view of an area where great bustards sometimes came to feed in late afternoon. We walked along the track, meeting up and passing a local herdsman with his dogs and cattle. We could clearly see the mosaic of different groups of plants associated with wetter and drier areas and the white patches of drying soda. Lots of butterflies also flew along including restless large coppers. We also saw tiny, green tree frogs, a grass snake, noisy marsh frogs and several species of dragonflies – as well as more butterflies. After a wait on the bridge –no hardship as there were night herons, flying

bittern and many other birds to entertain us. Although no bustards turned up we still had an excellent day – 67 species just in the one area!

After dinner we went for a walk around town and stopped outside the spa and visited a large sculpture with huge bells that appeared to be some kind of memorial. On the way back to the hotel we were tempted by more of the local fruity ice creams!



Day 6 Friday 16 June

We left Hajduszoboszlo after breakfast driving over the typical countryside of the Hungarian Plain and through villages with numerous white storks' nests – in one village, Gorbéhaza there seemed to be a nest on every pole.

We had two brief stops on our way back to the motorway. First, besides a typical farmstead with a nodding crane well. Here we could walk among typical 'puszta' plant species. Then we stopped beside a canal and again spent some time exploring the waterside plants and watching from the bridge from where we saw several species of dragonflies and also golden orioles flying from one side of the canal to the other. Just before we left Brian saw a terrapin basking on a log and while we watched saw two more on the log.

Once more onto the motorway we drove along until we reached one of the garage and picnic stops that occur about every 10km. Here we had a table in the sunshine and a number of interesting plants in the adjoining grassland! Then we drove on until we saw the foothills of the Matra approaching and turned to visit Hollókö village, a UNESCO Heritage site. Some of us went to visit castle and saw *Elaphe longissima*, the regions longest snake. Then we crossed the border into Slovakia again. As we passed by Martin pointed out some of the border castles – including ones we hoped to visit tomorrow.



Soon we were booked into our next hotel where later we would have dinner in the courtyard under a tree of Heaven and with a black redstart singing from the rooftop.

Later that evening Martin & Rosemary drove back to Saka to see Kelly & Margaret at the hospital, returning in the early hours.

Day 7 Saturday 17 June

We woke today to the insistent songs of serin & black redstart. After breakfast we started off to explore places in the Cerovia Hills. Csaba, another local warden, joined us.

This part of the country is different to other areas we have visited in that the hills are volcanic in origin and the over-lying soils are sometimes neutral or slightly acid. So we were expecting to see these differences reflected in the flora.

Our first stop was an area of beautiful woodland where we walked up a path skirting a series of former fish ponds fed from a spring in the rocks. At the top of the slope we crossed an impressive rockslide formed of blocks of broken basalt. Csaba pointed out a fine, 400 year old specimen of *Quercus dalechampii*. Below the castle there is also a particularly fine exposure of basalt columns. We then continued up to the castle and while some climbed up to admire the spectacular views others wandered around looking at plants growing on the ruins.

Our next stop was on a farm. Avoiding the attentions of a very pretty pony we climbed a gentle grassy slope full of grasses and wild flowers and settled down to eat our lunch and watch the opposite slope for susliks. Susliks are small rodents that resemble ground squirrels that live in burrows in the ground. Very soon we started to see them emerging and before they could be seen digging, sunbathing and even a family group with babies. As we left some more flowers including big patches of two species of hairy flax, ground pine, salvia and other plants.

We next drove up a narrow track to a small reservoir. Here we identified a few more plants and birds. Then we stopped at roadside colony of Bee-eaters. Our final stop was a small detour to look for Scarce Fritillaries, which Martin soon located. Walking back to the village we stopped for a cool drink and then a last walk up the nearby hill to the ruined castle.



Day 8 Sunday 18 June.

This morning we left Lucence just after breakfast on our way to the High Tatras. First we drove north to the Muran Plateau, passing the Low Tatras to the west. Haymaking was in progress in some places and it was lovely to see traditional farming still taking place. Then we climbed up through hillsides covered in dense forests of beech and conifer. We made one stop, to walk along a secluded track where we saw our first lady's slipper orchid in full flower. A little further on we saw more orchids growing beside a stream and northern wall brown in abundance.

Lunch was to be a picnic on the edge of meadows that are part of a nature reserve where there were picnic tables and a spring. Probably to Martin's dismay the picnic area was already occupied by three coach loads of schoolchildren so for a short while we were 'people-watching' instead of birdwatching. But once the children had moved on we had a chance to enjoy all the wonderful wildflowers. As we drove away we saw huge drifts of globeflowers along the streamside.

Our next stop was on a roadside where we were able to see another endemic, a beautiful creamy wallflower *Erysium wittmannii* growing on the rocks in a 'natural' rock garden. As we drove on we could see a species of tall, yellow foxglove growing on the slopes above the road.

Soon snow-topped mountains came into view and before long we were arriving at our new hotel right on the edge of the mountains. We just dropped off the luggage & had a refreshing drink in the café next door before setting out for a look at some grasslands. These turned out to be fantastic damp meadows, very similar to English northern hay-meadows with wood cranesbill, bistort, marsh orchids, Jacob's ladder and in the wetter places marsh lousewort, cottongrass and the rare 'Moor King' *Pedicularis sceptrum-carolinum*. The calls of corncrake, quail and singing marsh and River warblers enlivened the day. Then as the mosquitoes homed in we retreated to the hotel and dinner.



Day 9 Monday 19 June

Our last full day in Slovakia. Today was due to be our longest expedition from Javorina to Kopske. Martin clearly thought that at our 'normal' rate of progress we would never reach our goal – the alpine meadows above the trees and even the 'saddle' at the top of the pass between two peaks. So we all resolved to not dawdle on the walk up and reserve photography for the return!

Leaving the village we climbed steadily, the track following a mountain stream. Although we did not stop for photographs it was impossible not to admire some of the wonderful plants as we passed. Every so often we had a brief stop to catch our breath, have a drink and enjoy the scenery. Our last stop before the meadows was beside a spring where we re-filled our water bottles and drank ice-cold water. Then another climb and we were in the open surrounded by grassland and what Martin described as 'sub-alpine' plants. Sitting near the path for lunch we could see chamois high up on the slopes among patches of snow, some of them had kids with them.



The saddle was in sight, but still quite a long way ahead. Martin and Brian decided to walk up to the saddle while the rest of the group would walk up a little further then turn back. Higher up among scattered pines we heard and saw the parachuting tree pipits in their song flights. This would make the return trip an opportunity for photography and more leisurely botanising. So we were able to admire the Sudeten violet, narcissus-leaved anemone and Hungarian snowbell as we descended. Martin and Brian would catch us up later. Near the end of the walk some of the group had a chance to paddle in the ice-cold waters of the stream – very refreshing! When Martin and Brian caught us up they had tales of least primrose, white pasque flower, gentians, water pipit and alpine butterwort!

A very satisfactory day, and we were pleased to have accomplished the day in good time. So back to the hotel for dinner and our last evening. Tomorrow will be an early start.

Day 10 Tuesday 20 June

Early start. The hotel supplied tea and coffee & cereal as well as a packed lunch to eat on the way. We had several hours drive ahead of us with a slight detour to the hospital at Saca to collect Kelly and Margaret. Arriving at the hospital we found Kelly and Margaret all ready and waiting and we all drove to the Airport. Before long it was time to say goodbye to Martin. Soon we were airborne and on our way to Prague on the first leg of our return home.

Rosemary Parslow & Martin Hrouzek
August 2006

