



# EXPEDITION DIARY Slovakia 2005

By Paul Franklin

5 August

It's preparation time at UK HQ for the Slovakia 2005 expedition. The last two days have been spent sorting out all the equipment, paperwork and logistics that will be required for the research to come. Everything that will be needed, including binoculars, spotting scopes, cameras, tripods, GPS units, maps, compasses, books, has been packed into boxes and loaded into the Land Rover ready for our overland journey to Slovakia. Matthias and I (Paul, the expedition leader) have also been spending time printing off all the data sheets and research information that will be used for the fieldwork.

Tomorrow morning I will be leaving for the drive down to Dover and then on through Germany and Austria, arriving in Bratislava on Tuesday. Once in Slovakia I will be meeting up with Slavo (the expedition scientist) and Claudia (from Biosphere Germany) for some final preparations at base camp before the arrival of the first expedition team on Sunday. I look forward to meeting the first slot expedition team members on Sunday morning (or on Saturday evening 20:00 at the Chez David reception if you are already in Bratislava by then). Have a safe journey and hope your preparations are going well.

Until Slovakia!

Paul Franklin  
Expedition leader

7 August

Today the advanced party arrived, to be greeted by Claudia, at the Biosphere Germany office. Our trusty Land Rover Defender is performing well and the satellite navigation system has guided us accurately without having to resort to the use of maps. A shame we cannot use it to find the chamois, but then what would be the fun in that? At one point we thought we had upset the sat nav as she did not speak to us for a while, probably just having a little nap (sleep). After leaving the Biosphere UK HQ on Saturday we headed down to Dover and crossed to Calais through the Channel Tunnel. It was a new experience for me driving, rather than walking, down the platform and onto a train. We spent last night in Belgium. Our only noteworthy wildlife sightings so far have been the roe deer grazing in fields alongside the road. At least we did not mistake them for chamois, so there is hope ;->

It is one week today until we meet the rest of the expedition team in Bratislava. I expect the anticipation and excitement levels will be building while remaining items of kit are being purchased. The next diary entry will probably be on Wednesday when we arrive at base camp to unpack the equipment and do some final preparations with Slavo before the research begins.

11 August

On Wednesday the advance team arrived at basecamp, a total drive of 2126 kilometres from UK HQ. Since then we have been busy unloading and setting up our equipment, meeting with Slavo and acquainting ourselves with the surroundings. We have already experienced some mixed weather conditions.

Last night we had thunder, lightning and a torrential downpour. Today was much better with blue skies and sunshine. My advice to expedition team members is be prepared for any eventuality. There are still some patches of snow up on the main ridge study site and the temperature drops during the evening, but the weather is generally fresh and pleasant. We had our first chamois sightings of the season today, five individuals on the north side of the main ridge. We also saw a contented looking marmot with its mouth stuffed full of grass.

Tomorrow we will be stocking the food larder before I drive back to Bratislava. I will be meeting up with any expedition team members available to join me for dinner on Saturday evening (20:00 in the Chez David reception) or otherwise 08:00 on Sunday. See you then!

16 August

On Saturday morning we completed our expedition preparation at basecamp and made a shopping trip to buy food supplies. In the afternoon I drove back to Bratislava to meet the expedition team members. On Saturday evening we started the getting-to-know-one-another process over dinner with expedition members already in Bratislava. Sunday morning 08:00 was our official expedition assembly and after all the introductions we loaded luggage on the Land Rover and set off in a three vehicle convoy from Bratislava. Pia, our youngest expedition member (7), was observed stocking up on cakes at breakfast time. Perhaps she was a little concerned that there would not be any food on the expedition ;-> There was no need not worry as Claudia and Alan had a nice lunch prepared for our arrival at base camp.

It was a nice sunny day, so we were able to do our introductory briefings and safety talk outside. After this Slavo gave an introductory talk about the research accompanied by some pictures of the species we will be studying and their tracks and signs. To avoid an information overload on the first day, we finished with just a brief introduction to the expedition equipment.

Monday and Tuesday were spent learning to: use the navigation and observation equipment; identify measure and record tracks and scats; fill out the data sheets correctly. Most of this was done out in the field where the team have also been able to experience the varied weather conditions that the area has to offer!

Now our training days are over, although there is plenty left to learn, and tomorrow we will begin collecting data on bear and wolf tracks and scats in the forest areas of the study site.

After our work is done in the evenings some of us have sampled one or two of the local beverages in a nearby bar. They have table football, so with our mix of nationalities we can stage our own mini world cup.

21 August

Today is a rest day following our first week of data collection. Following our training days on Monday and Tuesday, we were greeted by torrential rain on Wednesday morning. Fortunately conditions improved a little in the afternoon and we were able to get out on the forest trails checking for tracks and collecting wolf and bear scats. Thursday was also spent mainly in the forest zone although one group ventured up onto the ridge to find that visibility was limited by low cloud. On Friday we decided to get everyone up onto the main ridge for chamois observation despite the changeable weather conditions. We stayed on the ridge in the mountain huts on Friday night allowing us to continue field work on Saturday morning. Fortunately the cloud stayed off the ridge and visibility was good. We split into two groups so we could cover both western and eastern sections of the ridge; the team was then further subdivided into survey groups of three or four team members.

The west ridge team had an exciting if bumpy ride in the Land Rover up to their hut at Durkova. The east ridge team had a smoother ride on the chairlift up to Chopok. It took until lunchtime to get everyone up to the Durkova hut. After bagging our sleeping spots in the bunkroom and eating our sandwiches we headed out to survey the ridge. Our first chamois encounter was a lone male that Alan spotted resting on a flat rock. We were quite close, 60 metres, so Steve and Claudia were able to get some good photographs. We observed the male for 40 minutes sharing its time between resting and grazing, not too concerned by our presence. Further on we observed a group of seven chamois from about 1 km grazing on the northern slope. The same area of the ridge also proved productive the following morning with a total of 13 individuals being observed at distances between 40 metres and 1 km. Eleven wolf scats were collected on the ridge although all quite old, the only recent evidence of wolf we have found so far are one set of tracks in the forest zone. The scats will be useful for analysis of wolf diet and in particular to see if any evidence can be found for wolf predation on chamois.

Other observations included a sighting of golden eagle, numerous marmot, a pair of basking vipers and a red deer with a fawn. Helen thought she heard a frog on the main ridge but realised it was actually a raven when it flew over her head. So we are all still on a steep learning curve improving our identification and observation skills, but collecting

valuable research data along the way. As a team we are getting to know each other better as the days go by. Particularly noteworthy behaviour observed within the group are Tracey's ability to sleep anywhere at anytime.

We are hoping for some clear weather next week so we can get back up onto the ridge for more observations of the chamois population. This is important for estimation of the population size and reproductive success.

23 August

The last couple of days have been rather cloudy and wet so field work has been restricted to walking the forest trails in our continuing quest for wolf and bear signs. Jurgen & Silvia found fresh wolf tracks yesterday in the Struhar valley so today we concentrated further searches in that area.

Roger and Hanns returned with a large quantity of scats including two from wolf. While driving along one of the forestry tracks yesterday, we encountered two big piles of bear scat which were collected for diet and DNA analysis. Fresh tracks of an adult and cub were recorded close by and today another pile of scat had appeared in the same location. We have been photographing some of the finer examples of tracks and scat to make a slide show which will be useful for training the new field team arriving for the second slot next week. Slavo has been impressed with the team's navigational abilities and so far (touch wood) no-one has got lost.

Yesterday evening we resisted the call of the bar and headed back to base with a couple of bottles of Slovakian wine in tow. Slavo gave us a very interesting presentation on the radio telemetry studies he has been conducting over the last couple of years on red deer and wolves.

Tomorrow we have planned another trip up to the main ridge. Hopefully the weather will improve as low cloud on the ridge will make chamois observation difficult, if not impossible. Fingers crossed.

26 August

Wednesday morning we woke to another cloudy day, less than ideal for chamois spotting on the ridge. Still undeterred and hopeful for a change in conditions we prepared for departure. Once again we split into two groups, four with Slavo to Chopok hut at the east end of the ridge and the remainder with me for the white knuckle ride in the Land Rover up to Durkova hut on the western side of the ridge. We reached Durkova at about 11:00 after stopping to collect a fresh bear scat from the forestry track on the way up.

Conditions were terrible for chamois spotting with low cloud and poor visibility. We would probably walk into a chamois before we actually saw it. Rather than sitting around the hut we decided to brave the elements and venture out onto the ridge. As expected we did not see any chamois, but we were rewarded with two fresh wolf scats, bear and red deer tracks. Back at the hut we heated up some pasta and sauce, which turned out to be a vast improvement on the starchy mess we produced last week. This was followed by tinned peaches for desert and washed down with red wine, which had somehow found its way into the food crate.

Conditions had not improved the next morning, but we set out again so at least we would be in a good spotting location on the ridge if visibility did improve. It did! For a couple of hours at least. During the clear spell we were able to locate a male chamois in exactly the same location as it was seen last week. We watched it for about 15 minutes from 30 metres away before it moved off around the slope. Jurgen managed to get some good shots with his telephoto lens and Tracey, who was unlucky not to see a chamois last week, got her first sighting. We continued along the ridge but the clouds returned and we were unable to locate any more chamois. A radio message from Alan & Hanns informed us that he had found a group of 29 animals at their location on the eastern end of the ridge. Their tally for the day actually went up to 46 individuals and in total the survey teams on the eastern end of the ridge had 80 chamois sightings. The results are interesting because they fit in with Slavo's theory that the chamois prefer the eastern side where there are more tourists and consequently fewer predators. On the western side we have recorded fewer chamois but found many wolf scats. This spatial distribution of chamois, predators & tourists is something we hope to investigate further in the next two weeks. This is a good example of how a negative result i.e. not seeing chamois on the western side, can be just as useful to the outcome of the research as positive sightings. The chamois observations also emphasises the benefits of using a relatively large number of field workers simultaneously surveying a large area.

Today is the last day for the slot one team and in a little while we will be driving back to Bratislava. It has definitely been a successful two weeks both for chamois observation and predator scat collection. We have collected over 50 bear scats and 20 wolf scats which will be used for analysis of diet and also identification of individuals from DNA. Thanks to the slot 1 team for all your hard work and good humour.

I will be meeting the second slot team members on Sunday morning at 08:00 (or for dinner at 20:00 on Saturday evening in the reception of Chez David, anyone already in Bratislava). Hopefully the weather conditions will improve a little in the coming two weeks. We still have many areas that need to be checked for predator signs and more observation time needs to be spent on the main ridge.

1 September

The second slot started with a torrential downpour on Sunday morning. Wiper blades were working full speed as we left Bratislava to make the four hour drive to base camp. We had a slight delay when water found its way into the distributor on Slavo's car, but it was quickly fixed and we were on our way. At base camp the new team were initiated with the normal introduction & risk assessment briefings followed by Slavo's talk about the research objectives.

On Monday we started bright and early with a look at the field techniques and equipment that will be used during the expedition. After looking at the various datasheets and maps we went out into one of the forest areas of the study site for further training in the use of GPS, compass, rangefinders & spotting scopes. Bears had been very active in the area so there was plenty of opportunity to practice scat collection, track measurement and data recording. Emmanuel also found time for some mushroom collection to supplement the next days breakfast.

As weather conditions were predicted to be good for the next few days it was decided to go straight up onto the ridge on Tuesday morning for a two night stay. Half the team to Chopok hut on the chairlift and half to Durkova in the Land Rover. By late morning we were out on the ridge surveying for chamois. We quickly found our first wolf scat for slot 2 which was deftly bagged by Bernd. A little while later we found my old chamois friend, the Chabenec male. We had been watching the male for some time before we noticed another, female chamois, even closer to our observation position. As we turned our attention to the female it became apparent that she was part of a group of seven.

On Wednesday Jordan, Anne, Bernd and I headed west along the ridge from Durkova. The main purpose of this excursion was to check for evidence of large predators. We found two wolf scats on the saddle above Durkova hut but no evidence further west. This suggests the wolves are not utilising the ridge west of Durkova so provides us with useful information, if not an action packed day for the field team. Well, we did get to see a golden eagle and a viper on the route back. So far our scat collection suggests that wolves are active on the main ridge between Durkova and Kotliska but do not venture further west or east towards Chopok. The wolves are also using the Skalka side ridge that heads down to the south and some of the side ridges heading north from the main ridge.

We will spend the next two days in the forest zone surveying some new areas for large predator signs. Sunday is a well deserved rest day and then back up onto the main ridge next week for our final chamois observations for this field season.

5 September

Since returning from our last excursion up to the main ridge we have been working in the forest zone collecting more scats and track data for wolves and bears. Anne has compiled a complete list of all the scat samples so far collected this year. The totals collected during the first slot were: 37 bear & 16 wolf scats for analysis of diet; 8 chamois & 26 bear scat samples for DNA analysis. Combined with the growing pile of scat sample envelopes currently being collected during the second slot, the overall totals will be impressive. The lab analysis of this pile of samples will keep Slavo busy for some time after we leave!

On Friday we said goodbye to Konrad & Emmanuel who had just joined us for the first week of the second slot. Konrad has been filming the expedition for German TV. Emmanuel is a photo journalist writing an article for the French magazine "Forets". What with Sandy, an American photographer, on the team as well, the second slot members have been spending plenty of time staring down camera lenses.

On Saturday we varied the program a little with a late afternoon/evening outing into the forest. The idea behind this was to increase the possibility of wildlife sightings and listen for calling wolves and red deer stags which are just starting to rut. Some of the team spent the night camping and did an early vigil on Sunday morning. Late evening and early morning is a beautiful time to be out and about in the forest, although we were not lucky enough to make any observations of large mammals on this occasion.

The remainder of Sunday was a day off for most, except for Roger and Jutta who decided to visit a section of trail that they had missed on Friday, resulting in a good haul of bear scat. The day finished pleasantly with a barbeque in the evening.

Tomorrow we will head back up to the main ridge for our final chamois counts and observation of this field season.

## 8 September

Today we returned from a two night stay on the main ridge, our main purpose being our final chamois counts and observations for this field season. On Tuesday the team on the west side of the ridge located the Chabenec male again and also managed to observe and photograph three females and three kids from a distance of fewer than 10 metres. Two remaining ridges running north that had not yet been looked at were checked for wolf scats and a couple more added to the collection. This morning Birgit and Dagmar valiantly braved the cold wind on the ridge and made observations on a group of 10 chamois. Nicole and Anne had some fantastic luck when they set off ahead of the Land Rover to walk down the forestry track into Lomnista valley. When we caught up to them in the vehicle Anne was jumping up and down with excitement. They had met a wolf on the track which on being discovered ran off down the slope through the forest! So finally we have a large predator observation to add to the data.

This afternoon Slavo and I packed up the expedition equipment as another Slovakia field season draws to a close. Definitely a success with a large number of scats collected and many good observations of chamois.

Tomorrow we will drive the team to Bratislava for final farewells. Slavo will then become a scatologist for a while analysing the samples and I will be driving a Land Rover full of expedition equipment back to the UK.

A big thank you to everyone who has helped with the field work this year. The research would not be possible without you. I look forward to seeing the findings of our labour when Slavo has had time to sift through a lot of scat and analyse the data!