



EXPEDITION DIARY Slovakia 2006

By Paul Franklin

8 August

Time to kick off this year's Slovakia expedition. Yesterday at 05:30 we set off in the Land Rover from the UK in the pouring rain. We made good time and arrived at the Germany office in the evening. Today is being spent sorting out the expedition kit and loading up the Land Rover for the next leg of the journey. Tomorrow will be another early start for the drive to Bratislava where we will spend the night before heading out to the base camp the following day. At base camp we have a couple of days to set everything up, stock the larder and discuss final expedition logistics with Slavo, the research scientist. Then it's back to Bratislava, a four hour drive, on the 12th. Hopefully I will be meeting some of those expedition members that are already in town on Saturday evening (meet at the Chez David at 20:00 hrs). If not I am looking forward to meeting all first slotters at 08:00 in the conservatory of the Chez David on Sunday 13th. Having led the Slovakia expedition last year, I am excited about getting out there and doing it again. The area is beautiful and who knows maybe I will recognise some of the chamois from last year....

Paul Franklin
Expedition leader

14 August

The first slot of the Slovakia 2006 expedition is now well under way. Some members of the expedition started getting to know one another over dinner on Saturday evening in Bratislava and the whole team met for the first time on Sunday morning. We are a diverse mix of ages, interests and backgrounds that should make for an interesting two weeks. Among us are students (school and university), an ecologist and son, estate worker, computer programmer, artist, community worker and a radio journalist.

After a four hour drive from Bratislava we arrived in good time for lunch at base. There we met up with Slavo, the expedition research scientist and Michaela, a research student from Germany assisting Slavo with the study. In the afternoon it was down to work with introductions and safety briefing. Later Slavo gave an introductory talk about the research illustrated with slides of the study species and area. To avoid information overload we adjourned for showers and some relaxation time before dinner. Following dinner there was an opportunity to sample some of the local beer and slivovitz, a Slovakian plum brandy.

Today started with an instructional session on the research equipment, everyone having an opportunity to use binoculars, rangefinders, spotting scope, radios and digital cameras. The emergency field procedures, use of emergency flares and whistle were explained. A break was needed before tackling the important theme of field navigation. It is essential for this expedition that all team members are competent in at least basic use of map, compass and GPS. Not only does this minimise the risk of a field team becoming lost, it is also necessary for accurate recording of the scientific data. Fortunately the sun was now shining so we were able to practice outdoors the skills of orientating maps, taking bearings, recording coordinates and using them to find map position. Having practiced using all the equipment it was now time for Slavo to explain about data collection and recording. This is also a very important subject as data collected will only be useful to the research if it is recorded accurately on the data sheets. After a theoretical explanation of data collection we took a break for lunch before heading out into the forest to get our first hands-on experience of practical data collection in the field. Team members were able to collect and record bear scat and were able to start learning how to recognise tracks such as red deer.

A lot of information and techniques have been covered today and I must thank the team for being so patient and punctual to all the sessions. Tomorrow will be an opportunity to consolidate all that has been learned, gain some more experience identifying tracks and scats, practice using the equipment and collecting data in the field. We will start the day with a tracks and scats slide show put together by last year's expedition that is a big help to identification of signs in the field.

17 August

After two days training in the use of field equipment and data recording the expedition members were ready to get out on their own to start collecting scat samples and record locations of large predator tracks. Yesterday we split up into four groups to start surveying some of the trails starting in the lower forests and extending above the tree line into dwarf pine and alpine meadow habitats. Team one: Jamie, Fiona, Johann and Ariane, took a route that lead them up to a point on the main ridge and were able to make this year's first chamois observations, a group of seven individuals. We also collected the first two wolf scats of the year. Each evening, before dinner, we meet to review the results of the day. Each field team reports back on their days findings and Slavo has an opportunity to check that data sheets have been filled out correctly, with all the necessary information. Slavo also looks at digital photographs taken by the field teams of any animal signs they were unsure about. The difference between wolf and dog tracks sometimes causes confusion.

Today followed a similar pattern to yesterday with four field teams walking different routes. Jamie, Helmut, Leonie and Emily walked a route from Palenizka meadow along a side ridge up to Skalka peak. They managed to collect an impressive six wolf scats. We also found a large number of scats on this ridge last year so it seems to be a popular route for wolves. Bear tracks were also recorded in the forest zone and scats collected in the dwarf pine habitat above the timberline. The blueberry bushes are covered in berries at the moment, which provides an important food source for bears (judging by the colour of their scats) and also a tasty distraction from survey work.

18 August

Today we split into four field teams covering forest tracks in the Lomnista and Vajskovska valleys. This completes the initial survey of this zone before we move further west. I took two of the teams in the Land Rover to their start points in the Lomnista valley. Unfortunately the forest office had given us the wrong gate key and we were unable to open the gate. While I was trying various tools from the Land Rover tool kit that might have provided some solution to the locked gate, Helmut spotted a possible driving route that circumnavigated the gate. Driving across the rocky stream would be no problem but the black muddy hole and steep slope back onto the forestry road on the other side might present more of a challenge. We all carefully walked the route removing rocks and tree branches that were potential Land Rover obstacles. Poking a stick into the boggy bit confirmed that despite looking like it could swallow a vehicle, it did indeed have a solid bottom. All went well until the black hole where the Land Rover came to a halt, wheels spinning. Fortunately straightening the steering to reduce the resistance to forward progress was all that was needed to release us from the mire and get back onto the road. My quest to get the Land Rover stuck continues.

Our collection of wolf and bear scats continues to grow (as does the smell in the basement garage where they are being stored). The scats are first collected in a plastic bag, this bag is then placed in an envelope to which a label is stuck containing all the relevant data such as: type of scat, whole or partial, estimated age, GPS location and altitude. It is wolf scats that have by far the strongest smell and, along with size, this is one of their distinguishing features. The scats will be soaked in water and the contents separated and identified to provide information on the animal's diet. In the case of wolves, the scats contain many bones and hairs which can be identified under the microscope to ascertain the prey species. If wolves are predated the chamois population on the ridge it would be expected to find chamois hair in the scats. At the end of each year's expedition Slavo still has a huge task ahead of him to analyse the scats that we have collected. This year he is lucky to have a research assistant, Michaela from Germany, to help him with this laborious task. Michaela has already made a start processing the scats that we have collected in the last few days. This is also providing an opportunity for the expedition members to see how it's done and help out with this part of the study.

We are hoping that the weather will be good enough this weekend to make our first trip onto the main ridge for chamois observation. Good weather is important as low cloud on the ridge reduces the visibility and makes it impossible to spot the chamois.

22 August

On Saturday morning we loaded up the Land Rover with provisions and equipment for a two night stay on the main study ridge. The drive up to Durkova hut follows a winding forestry track up the side of Lomnista valley before eventually emerging above the tree line. Another opportunity to get some mud on the Land Rover. Once at Durkova those of us not staying in the mountain hut set up tents and then we had an early lunch before setting off in groups of three to search for chamois. Alan, Jamie and Leonie made the first sighting of an adult male near Chabenec. This coincides with the most westerly point where chamois were observed on last year's expedition. Lone animals are, generally speaking, male and can be difficult to spot when they are at some distance from the observer. The technique required is to find a good observation point from which a large area of slope can be seen and to carefully scan the terrain using binoculars. Alan, who was also on the Slovakia expedition last year, is by now an expert spotter able to show other expedition members how it's done. When chamois have been spotted it's time to get comfortable and make observations for a minimum of 30 minutes. Location of the animals is made by recording the location of the observer (GPS), distance away (Rangefinder) and bearing (compass). The number, sex and age of the chamois is recorded along with climate and habitat details. Behavioural observations are also recorded on the data sheet such as activity patterns, protection behaviour and escape reactions.

Further along the ridge another lone chamois was spotted by Imogen, Fiona and Emily. This animal was about one kilometre away so we used the spotting scope to get a clearer view. Although the equipment we use for observation and data recording is not complicated to use, it often does take some time and experience to become proficient in its use. A good example is using the binoculars: team members with previous experience as birdwatchers can switch between using the naked eye and binoculars, locating the subject immediately. Those unfamiliar with binoculars often have to spend time searching around with the binoculars to find the object they can see by eye. Practice using the equipment definitely makes for more efficient observers. The spotting scope is useful to get a more detailed view of important characteristics such as horn size and shape, which aids identification of age and gender.

Tuesday was our day off. Some of the team went on a train ride to visit an open air museum about agriculture and forestry in Slovakia. Others preferred to relax around base camp. Leonie and Michaela even headed off into the woods armed with scat bags and data sheets (that's keen!). In the evening we had a barbeque and sat around the fire at base camp. After many enquiries we have eventually managed to borrow a guitar. While Helmut played, we sang along to some old favourites. Helmut plays regularly in a band and had brought a songbook with him. We started with Puff the Magic Dragon and finished with Bon Jovi. Great fun! Thanks Helmut! Maybe a guitar should be put on the expedition kit list? Helmut and his brother Johann have also turned out to be talented table football players. We have been holding a table football world cup at the local pub which we occasionally frequent in the evening. Germany beat England and Scotland, but were narrowly defeated by the local Slovakian team.

25 August

Despite a late night everyone was up and ready to get back in the field on Wednesday morning. Half the group went to Struhar valley with Slavo. This is an area used by both wolves and bears that has not been previously surveyed. Myself and the rest of the group drove to the chair lift and took it up to mid-station from where we walked up to Chopok hut on the main study ridge. The purpose of this was to get more data on chamois numbers from the eastern side of the ridge. We arrived at Chopok around lunchtime having seen four marmots on the way. Conditions were not ideal for chamois spotting in the afternoon with low cloud and a strong wind making observation difficult. We did manage to find one group of seven on the northern slope about 30 minutes walk from the hut. This was my first opportunity to spend a night in the hut at Chopok (usually I drive the Land Rover to Durkova hut, while Slavo covers the eastern section). I finally got to try the gulasch and hot wine that I had heard so much about from last year's team members. Definitely worth the walk.

On Thursday morning weather conditions were much better and we split into two teams to search for chamois to the west and north of Chopok. Both teams were successful with a total of 16 animals being observed. We also saw two doe red deer with fawns and Jamie spotted four adders (that probably gives him the expedition 'best snake spotter' award). Late morning we re-grouped back at the hut and tested to see if the coffee still tasted as good as it had at breakfast time. Then we all headed west to check for chamois on the ridge towards Stefanicka. We found another group of four and later a group of ten. The group of ten had three yearling animals but we saw no young (kids) born this year. This is unusual as it would normally be expected that 50% of adult female chamois would have young at this time. Chamois seen in groups are usually females and young, the males are usually solitary.

The implication of seeing no kids is that breeding success or survival of the kids has been very low this year. We had a good day all in all with a total count of 30 chamois. From Stefanicka we headed down the valley and back to the Land Rover. Back at base camp we met up with the others and joined Slavo for a de-brief of the last few day's findings and a preliminary review of the data collected by this first slot of the 2006 expedition. Slavo and Michaela also showed us some of the wolf scats that have already been cleaned and contain hooves of young deer as well as hair from wild boar and red deer.

Friday was the last day for slot one. The drive back to Bratislava took a little longer than normal due to traffic and heavy rain. This is the most rain we have seen this slot - at least it waited until we had finished the field work!

Thanks to all the slot 1 team members for your hard work over the last couple of weeks. We collected 27 bear scats and 16 wolf scats. We made over 80 chamois observations. None of this would have been possible without you. It will take Slavo and Michaela some time to examine all the scats and input all the observation data. After the analysis is complete Slavo will be writing a report of the findings which will be sent out to everyone. Thanks again!

31 August

On Sunday morning we gathered at the Chez David and made the drive to base. There was little traffic and good weather so we made good time. On arrival Michaela and Slavo had set out a nice lunch, after which we started on the introductory and safety briefing. This was followed by Slavo's talk on the scientific aspects of the expedition. With a little spare time Slavo was also able to talk briefly about some of his previous research on wolves and red deer in the area.

Once again we have a diverse group of interests and professions within the group: Reija is from Germany and works in advertising; Georgia is from the UK and starts studying for a zoology degree in October; Dermot is a consultant and his son Liam has another year at school, by complete coincidence they are from the same small town in the UK as Georgia; Victoria is a student of animal management in the UK and this expedition will comprise part of her work experience; Michaela is a medical technician from the UK; Marc is an economics student from Luxembourg; Audrey is an attorney from Florida; Igor is a journalist from Russia for National Geographic Traveller magazine.

Monday was a nice day so we carried out equipment instruction outdoors. Then came the all important navigation session with instruction in the use of map, compass and GPS. After a short break Slavo went through the data sheets and scat collection. After lunch we went out to walk some of the nearby forest trails in the hope of finding some scats and tracks to practice on. Unfortunately we found only pine marten, red deer and fox scats. We are only interested in collecting the scats of the large predators: wolf, bear & lynx. These scats are then analysed to determine the diet of the predator and specifically to determine if the endangered chamois constitutes part of that diet.

Tuesday morning we woke to heavy rain and cloud. Slavo had three routes through forest, dwarf pine and alpine meadow habitats that needed surveying for large predator signs. The conditions were far from ideal for collecting field data, but everyone was eager to get out into the field so with waterproofs on we headed out. Despite the soaking everyone enjoyed being out and some useful field data was collected in the form of four bear scats. Other sightings included fire salamanders, black woodpecker and golden eagle. Igor collected some edible fungi which he cooked up with potatoes back at base. Demonstrating faith in his identification skills some of us sampled the fare and quickly cleaned the plate.

On Wednesday the weather was much improved. We split into four teams. Two teams surveyed forest habitat in the far west of the study area and the other two teams, forest and alpine habitats, in the east. Dermot and Liam found the first wolf scats collected by slot 2. These were above tree line on a side ridge leading up towards the main ridge. The wolf scats were quite old, probably left during the winter, and comprised mainly hair and sizeable pieces of bone. These scats were collected quite close to chamois habitat, so analysis will be important to determine if they contain chamois remains. The other survey teams found bear tracks and scats both in forest and higher up in alpine habitat.

On Thursday we had planned our first visit to the ridge to make chamois observations. Unfortunately we were defeated by the weather which was wet and cloudy. We need good conditions, at least clear visibility, to observe the chamois. Hopefully conditions will improve tomorrow, it is important that we collect more chamois data to verify population size and reproductive success. Igor left today - he had to return to Moscow for work. His cheerful demeanour will be much missed by the rest of us, not to mention his fried mushrooms.

7 September

Friday was again poor weather with more rain forecast for Saturday. We decided to spend today surveying more trails in the forest zone. We moved our day off forward to Saturday so that we could head up to the ridge on Sunday. On our day off we drove to Banksa Bystrica to spend a few hours in the old part of the town which has a nice square and old buildings. Afterwards we went to the supermarket to stock up on food and beverages for a barbeque in the evening. The fine art of delegation ensured the smooth running of the evening's activities. Michaela was bar manager with Marc her underling bar tender. Dermot, Vicki, Georgia & Reija prepared salads. Audrey made a punch. Liam was the Crazy Fire Starter and easily won the race against his Dad to start the fire using only a flint and steel. They did cheat a bit by using cotton wool as tinder rather than the more traditional birch bark. No guitar players this time, so we entertained ourselves with lateral thinking puzzles: "man wakes up in front of the TV, goes up the stairs, turns the light on, shoots himself" What happened? Yes or No answers only. For anyone who still hasn't figured out how to play the bone game, here is a final clue: "OK, I can play the bone game, the bone game, the"

Back to business on Sunday and up to the main ridge for chamois observation. We split into two groups. Reija, Michaela, Dermot, Liama, Michaela & Slavo went up to Chopok hut towards the eastern end of the ridge. I drove up to Durkova with Vicki, Georgia, Audrey and Marc. In the morning it was misty on the ridge so we waited until after lunch before heading out from the hut. In the afternoon we (Durkova crew) observed a group of two female chamois and also a lone male on the western side of Chabenec peak. This is probably the most westerly record we have for chamois on the ridge. On our way back towards the hut, Marc startled the male chamois which had moved up onto the ridge. It ran off to about 15 metres away and we had good views of it during the moments when the mist cleared. The next morning conditions were not good, low cloud covered the ridge. We stayed in the hut until mid-day playing cards (only discovering this morning that Marc's deck of cards, which we were also using last night, was 11 cards short of a full deck). In the afternoon we headed out, despite very strong winds, and relocated the three animals we had seen the day before. Further along the ridge on the trail to Skalka peak we were able to observe another six chamois; females and one yearling. The Chopok crew also had good luck today and a total of 43 chamois were observed. Tuesday was also very windy and cold on the main ridge. The Durkova crew made more observations of the chamois group on the Skalka saddle and the Chopok crew were able to relocate the large group they had recorded yesterday near Derese. Some useful data have been collected over the last few days regarding numbers and distribution of chamois. Still worrying is the very low numbers of young kids that have been observed. Perhaps next year will be more productive for the chamois?

9 September

Wednesday and Thursday were spent back in the forest zone surveying some tracks and areas not previously visited. The forest survey has covered a large area. Made possible of course only by dedicated team members. During this second slot of the expedition a total of 32 bear scats and eight wolf scats were collected. Once again it has not been possible to collect any lynx scats (the lynx usually buries its scat like a domestic cat does). All three of these large predator species have been recorded in other areas preying on chamois. In our own study area there is some evidence, although not recent, of wolf predation on chamois: an observation on the ridge of two wolves hunting chamois, remains of one chamois killed by wolves, chamois remains in two wolf scats collected by Slavo. In total 59 bear scats and 22 wolf scats were collected this year. These scats have already been cleaned (the contents are broken apart in water) and dried. On Friday, our last day, Slavo showed us some of the dried samples. Initial examination shows that bear diet is largely blueberries at this time of year, wolf scats contain mainly remains from red deer and wild boar. The samples now need to be examined under a microscope to carefully check if any contain direct evidence of chamois predation. Although this year's expedition has come to an end, there is still plenty of work ahead for Slavo and Michaela examining the samples, analysing the data and publishing the report.

A total of 44 data sheets were completed for chamois observations during this year's expedition (one data sheet corresponds to an observation of a group or single chamois). A cursory examination of this data suggests, as was true for the previous year, that the majority of chamois and largest groups are found in the eastern section of the survey area. This corresponds to the area with most cliffs and rugged rocky habitat. It is also the zone most used by tourists and hikers. It is likely that proximity to cliffs is important to chamois in the Tatry mountains where wolf predation is a threat. It is difficult for wolves to hunt chamois in this rugged terrain, in the less severe alpine meadows of the western ridge section chamois could be easy prey. In the Alps, where wolves are not present in significant numbers, chamois regularly use open meadows and even forest habitats around the tree line as feeding areas. The chamois in our study area may also be taking advantage of the presence of humans to avoid large predators. Nearly all the wolf scats we have collected have been from areas least used by humans. The wolves probably avoid the more heavily utilised areas in the eastern section. Our chamois observations would seem to suggest that the population is at best stable, but probably not increasing.

Small isolated animal populations are known to be vulnerable to extinction and we can only hope that our Low Tatry chamois population will be sustainable in the future. As is often the case with ecological studies, the research is starting to provide answers to some of our questions but bringing up a lot of new ones.

Thursday night was our last at base camp and our final visit to the garage pub. After another table football marathon we headed back to Baileys, beer, backgammon and banter. Friday morning we packed up the kit, said our farewells to Slavo & Michaela, then made the drive back to Bratislava. For me the Slovakia expedition has once again been a great experience and I think we have successfully achieved our goals of safety, science and satisfaction. I would like to thank all the expedition members for the hard work you have put in over the last four weeks. It was a privilege to meet and share this time with you. Also thanks for all the feedback we have received both on the forms and through our varied discussions over the last few days. We do give serious consideration to all your comments and it will help us make improvements to the expedition for coming years. Slavo will be busy over the next few months analysing the data and preparing the research report. Everyone will be sent a copy. None of it would have been possible without you. Thanks again!

Paul Franklin
Expedition leader