



## EXPEDITION DIARY Slovakia 2007

By Melanie Schröder

6 August

Hi to everyone who is already looking forward to coming with me on to the expedition to Slovakia. I am Melanie and will be your expedition leader for the two upcoming slots. Matthias and I, still in Germany, are in the middle of our preparations, getting all the gear sorted and packed to hit the road with the two Land Rovers on Thursday.

First slot, remember I'll be in the lobby of the Chez David at 20.00 this Saturday if you would like to go out for a meal or drink before the expedition kicks off properly on Sunday morning. My mobile number once I am in Slovakia should be +421 910 185860. I say "should be" because we are not 100% sure whether the SIM card is still valid. If the number changes, we'll let you know. Please remember that this number is FOR EMERGENCY CALLS ONLY, for example if you are about to be late for assembly or are hanging off a cliff in valiant search for chamois ;->

Anyway, have a safe journey and I look forward to meeting you all soon!

9 August

Drove to Vienna last night and the next day went to pick up a shiny black second Land Rover and went straight to our base in Slovakia, which is as beautiful as ever. And get this – at base there is now also a sauna and whirlpool available!! We thought this was far too much luxury, so decided you can only get into the whirlpool once you've spotted at least 10 chamois and climbed three peaks ;)))

Until Saturday we will be busy with sorting through all the gear and setting up the base with all the many bits of equipment, books and papers, which we will need throughout our expedition.

Slavo, our scientist is on good form as usual and Matthias is looking forward to beasting you up and down the hills in the wind and rain ;-> First to whinge will be thrown to the bears, whom Slavo tells us are a real nuisance this year, having had a go at seven people already. More on this when you get here...

Some admin stuff: you may want to bring (1) some slippers for inside base (where there is a no shoes policy) and (2) swimming gear now that there is a sauna and whirlpool available. Unbelievable!

Finally, my Slovakian mobile number has changed. The correct number is now +421 910 574628.

See you soon.

11 – 13 August

Everyone there for assembly. After packing up both of the Land Rovers we set off to go to our base in Krpacovo. Arriving at base we moved in and went for lunch at Biotika, a few minutes from base. After lunch everyone introduced themselves we went back to base for the risk assessment and Slavo's introduction to the project.

Then Matthias gave a very thorough explanation of all the equipment (map, compass, GPS, binoculars, rangfinders, etc, etc) we are going to need in the field and which will (hopefully!) save us from getting lost in the Tatras!

The next morning Slavo showed everyone how to fill in the datasheets properly, followed by more training and practice on how to use the compass, take a bearing, navigation, etc.

After lunch we set off for our first look around the study site and to look for tracks and scats.

14 August

Today we had perfect weather - blue skies and no clouds, so we spent the whole day in the field to practice everything we have learned so far. The whole group went in both Land Rovers to a site about 40 mins. from base and started together, looking for more tracks and scats.

Just before lunch we split into two groups. One group went with Matthias cross-country and the other group went with Slavo and myself. At lunch Slavo was telling us all scary stories about bears becoming too "curious" about humans. Then we split up further and had the chance to either get lost with me or with Slavo 😊

Matthias wore out his group on an intrepid scramble/survey cross-country and tackling steep slopes head on, and brought back several bear and a very large and impressive wolf scat. They also came across a golden eagle and a wasps nests with Cathy getting stung twice, but holding out heroically despite aching all over from the scramble/walk and stings!

So we reckoned that we deserved a first visit to the whirlpool!

Tomorrow we're going up on the ridge to spend the night there in search of chamois, if the weather holds. Wish us luck!

15 - 17 August

This morning we packed up all the equipment, food and personal stuff that was needed to stay one night up in the mountains. All of us went together in our two Land Rovers up a very steep and scary mountain track to Durkova hut at 1749 m. Shortly after arrival there, we split up. Five of us stayed with me and six of our group walked with Slavo from Durkova to Chopok mountain to spend the night over there.

My group split up further into two teams of three to explore the eastern and western side of the ridge from Durkova the same afternoon. Back at six we cooked up our own pasta dinner on a couple of gas stoves outside the hut and went straight to the dorm style-beds to make sure we were fit enough to get up at 3.30 am to catch the sunrise on top of the ridge (which we did and it surely was an incredible sight)! The reason for such an early start is of course to observe chamois and other animals who tend to be most active at sunrise and sunset. And they were! First we saw two red deer walking towards a little stream to drink, then a group of eight chamois far in the distance resting on cliffs and when we were just about to head back, we saw a bear female with her cub ambling up to the same stream to drink as well! Seems like we have found a damn good observation point! Slavo's group explored the area around Dumbier, but were unlucky with the weather as it was just too windy to observe anything much. By the end of the afternoon we all met back at base, either having walked down the mountain or braved the Land Rover drive again.

On Friday it was time for Matthias and Andreas (a journalist) to say good bye to everyone and go back to Germany. The remainder of the team went to explore four different areas below the tree line, for the first time without any staff present as Matthias, Slavo and had some hand-over and admin stuff to do at base. All managed very well, none of them got lost and they were all back in time to their collection points to be picked up by Slavo and myself. We had the debriefing straight away, looked at the collected wolf and bear scats and went through the datasheets.

Tomorrow the forecast is for bad weather, so after the exertions of the recent days, we have decided it should be our day off.

18 August

We were surprised by the beautiful blue sky this morning and decided to have breakfast a bit later and to take it easy on our day off. Ed was brave enough to go for a swim at Lake Polianka and Cathrine, John, Joel and Pierre went for a four hour walk on which Pierre got attacked by a mad dog which is supposed to fight the bears (probably). But no serious injury just scared the hell out of everyone especially Cathrine who jumped on Joels back seeking protection.

I went to Brezno and took Lauren, Emma, Amy, Cathy and Ugo with me who were desperate for a pizza. We found a really 'jummy' pizza place and the one hour wait was worth it! Afterwards we had a little look around, went to an internet café which is unbelievably cheap and did some shopping. To top it all off some of us ended the day in the sauna and whirlpool at the Biotika.

19 August

Back to work. Slavo and I dropped the group off at Kysla to explore the northern and western area of our study site, which was mostly below the timberline. They found a few scats, but had no animal encounters but found for a dead deer, which was already half eaten by predators. Slavo reckons that the animal behaviour is changing due to climate change and that it's more likely to see animal encounters above the timberline and later in the evening. So we decided at our debriefing tonight that we will go up to mount Dumbier and Chopok again from Tuesday to Wednesday and survey the area in the evening until sunset.

20 – 22 August

Today we split up again into four groups. Two groups took easier routes and two groups went on more difficult ones. I went with Lauren and Cathy to Kotliska valley where we saw the bear with her cub the other day. It was a bit scary knowing that it might still be around and somehow we all felt watched! We found wolf tracks and came to a beautiful waterfall where we posed for several photos. Then we chose a great observation point from where we had a perfect view of all the surrounding cliffs. But it was a warm and sunny day and probably too hot for the chamois to hang around that section of the valley, so no luck for us today.

The next morning we decided at our morning briefing to go in two groups up to the ridge again as we did last week. The ones who went to Durkova before went to Chopok with me and Slavo took the others who went to Chopok to Durkova.

At 9:00 am we left the base in two Land Rovers. Slavo and I decided to approach Chopok from the north side this time and take the lifts up, which gives us more time to explore the areas which we couldn't cover last week. John was a bit worried to go on a lift as he has never been on one, but we could convince him and in the end he loved it. By the time we arrived on top of Chopok, the weather was pretty bad. It was cloudy and soon started to rain. That couldn't stop Cathrine and Cathy though to explore the western ridge but John, Ugo, Lauren and I decided to wait a little and luckily after a funny games of scrabble the clouds suddenly disappeared and we started to survey the eastern side toward Dumbier. We didn't need to go far until we saw our first chamois. It was a single male and we observed him for a while and soon spotted a group of females with yearlings a bit further away from the same observation point. So that was a good result with not much effort either ;) After a couple of hours we had to return due to a new change of weather, but this time it didn't matter and everyone was happy to have seen the famous chamois finally.

The next morning didn't look that bad at first, so we started our surveys but had to return after about an hour because the clouds kicked in and heavy rain started so that we all got pretty wet. We all spotted chamois again though so all in all it was a successful time for us at Chopok.

On our way back to the lift a crazy mass of tourists was heading towards Kamenna Chata wearing shorts and short sleeves whilst we were all wishing to have a fourth layer of clothes (preferably dry!).

Back at our base the sun came out and it was summer again. The weather really is unpredictable here! Slavo's group arrived shortly after us, just as wet and tired but with fewer chamois to show for it.

23 August

Today is the last chance for Pierre to duel with a brown bear and hypnotise him with his telepathic strength. The team split into four groups again to explore different areas. Pierre went with Emma and John to an area where Slavo expected a high chance of finding signs of bears or even to see one. They found a massive bear scat and Ugo and Lauren surprised even Slavo by finding a huge bear footprint of 20cm width! Slavo reckons that it must be a 300kg male!

24 August

Last breakfast at Biotika before heading back to Bratislava. Today is Emma's birthday and we ordered an enormous birthday cake for her as a surprise. And it was a surprise! We could hardly eat 1/3 of it but it was delicious!

The way back to Bratislava was quick with no big traffic jams and great weather. Everyone stayed on in Bratislava for one or two nights to go back home on Saturday or even Sunday. That gave us all the chance of meeting up again for dinner and delay that final good-bye after two weeks of toiling in the name of conservation together ;) We had a great Mexican dinner and strolled through the old town. There was some kind of festival going on with live music here and there. Cathy and Joel will return home on Sunday and might come with me tonight to welcome the new slot.

Looking forward to it!

26 - 27 August

We all met at the Chez David early Sunday morning to set off once more with the second slot to our base. We have Chuck and Fiona from the Isle of Wight who are passionate birdwatchers, Samantha from near the Lake District who was desperate to escape her office for a while and do something completely different, David our youngest member of 18 years wants to study ungulates when he finishes school and step into Slavo's shoes, Dieter from Switzerland who was brave enough to drive the second Land Rover from Bratislava to the base (thanks a lot!), Jane from Ireland who made up her mind last minute to join us and our two journalists Kyley from London and Emmanuel from the Bretagne.

When we arrived at the base, we sorted out sleeping arrangements and went to have lunch soon after that at Biotika. Back at base we went through the risk assessment, all the equipment and Slavo gave his introductory talk about his research. That was it for the day as we were all pretty tired from the journey. After dinner everyone was just keen to hit the sack.

This morning Slavo went through the data sheets and told everyone how to fill them in properly and showed them also how to use a map and compass. Then we set off in two Land Rovers to Kotliska valley to practice using the equipment in the field. We passed a waterfall where we had lunch and later stopped at the timberline where we had good views. We had only just set up the spotting scope when David spotted the first chamois! It was a group of females with yearlings and kids all in all seven animals. Unsurprisingly everyone was really pleased and it made for some great conversations at dinner tonight!

28 - 30 August

We split into two groups in the morning. David, Kyley, Dieter and Emmanuel went with Slavo while Chuck, Fiona and Jane came with me to find the "Garden of Eden" after a hell of a walk! At the beginning we just couldn't find the start of our track and wasted the first hour looking for it in the wrong direction and then tried to find it by walking at least in the right direction with GPS, compass and map orientation! About half way, after walking on steep slopes, we came to a little hut where all of a sudden the right track appeared in front of us out of nowhere. We spotted a golden eagle due to a yoghurt that was drunk during lunch brake (no further explanations!) and deer tracks.

On Wednesday morning Dieter, Sam, Jane and Emmanuel came with me to check another part of Kotliska valley. Pretty much at the beginning of the walk Emmanuel took a great photo of a golden eagle carrying some prey in his claws (probably a marmot). We went to the end of a path and then split up further. Dieter, Jane and Emmanuel surveyed the northern side towards Chabenec and Samantha and I tried to find a way through the dwarf pine, which was pretty impossible. We found some deer scat and the others some bear scats, but no further animal sightings. The weather changed pretty abruptly and when it started to rain, we decided to head back. The other four - Kyley, Chuck, Fiona and Dave were dropped off by Slavo at Kysla and found a couple of red deer bones as well as bear scats.

Thursday morning Slavo had prepared four routes for that day so it was Chuck and me and Jane and Samantha going for an easy forest walk through an area where bear sightings are common.

Chuck and I saw deer tracks all along, a couple of bear cub tracks and just before the end of the walk, in a little dried out puddle we saw big bear tracks as well as lynx and badger tracks all together in one! Very surprising so close to the village of Jasenie!

The other group split up in pairs, so it was Kyley with Dave and Dieter with Emmanuel. Those lucky bastards! It was just shortly after we started our walks and when we were still close enough to hear each other over the radio when Kyley and Dave had their first close bear encounter! It was a mother with a three year old cub hiding behind a fallen tree, looking for insects when Kyley and Dave gave them a fright which made the bears shake the tree so hard that Kyley and Dave almost froze to death when they saw the two heads with the fluffy ears popping up not more than 20 m away! Dave managed to save the waypoint immediately into the GPS (well done Dave!!) while Kyley clung to his arm. The two bears meanwhile disappeared out of sight. Only about an hour later it must have been the same bears who made Emmanuel and Dave jump when they saw them briefly. Not long enough to take any pictures, but wow, what a day!

31 August - 1 September

The weather looked pretty promising this morning and it was the last chance for Kyley (a journalist) to go up to the ridge and experience staying the night at Durkova hut. So after breakfast we packed our stuff and went. Chuck and Fiona decided to walk up to the hut with Emmanuel and David while Slavo and I drove up in the two Land Rovers. We bought some food on the way for breakfast next morning and arrived at Durkova around midday. We had a short lunchbreak and decided our survey routes. Slavo made up funny names and started calling us the "Eastern Chamois Observers" and the "Western Shit Collectors" and couldn't stop laughing about it! Very funny Slavo!

After lunch Jane and Kyley went to the western ridge to "collect shit" while Dave, Samantha and I went towards Chopok until we bumped into Chuck and Fiona and then all together turned back to Durkova. Around 7 pm we were all back to have Durkova's famous lentil soup for dinner. It was pretty busy that night and people were even sleeping downstairs on the wooden benches of the dining room! We didn't get much sleep because it was pretty loud and smelly under the dormitory roof, so it was quite a relief to get up at 3:30 am and experience a beautiful sunrise on top of the ridge! Emmanuel, Dave, Kyley and Jane went off towards Chopok while Chuck and Fiona and David, Samantha and I were still on shit collecting duty at the northern and southern slopes of Durkova.

After the beautiful sunrise the clouds kicked in pretty quickly making everything look very eerie. Then we came across some chamois on the ridge and Emmanuel took some great photos of them in the mist only 20 m away! Altogether they observed 18 chamois.

Well, we are all pretty tired now so for tomorrow we have decided to take a break as I think we all deserve it!

2 September

Today was our day off so we decided to have breakfast an hour later – luxury ;). At 10:30 I dropped Kyley off at the bus station in Brezno and luckily we just got there in time.

There are always those in the team who can't get enough exercise and this time it was Chuck, Fiona, Samantha and Dave who went on a 7 hour walk up to Baba on their off day. They took the GPS, map and compass and recorded two fresh bear tracks and a big bear scat - well done!

Emmanuel and Dieter headed off to the cyber-café as soon as it opened. After dinner we had another go with our survival game. Well, at least Chuck knows now that powdering your car inside-out might not be the best way of finding out if somebody has tampered with your car!

3 September

Early this morning at 2:30 am Emmanuel decided go up to Chopok (with Dieter who was volunteered to carry his 5 ton tripod!) to try and take some good shots of the chamois at sunrise and good weather conditions. He was checking the weather forecast for the next couple of days while he was at the internet café, which predicted sunshine in the morning and rain in the afternoon as well as the following days. But nothing here is predictable. In the early morning it was raining and in the afternoon it cleared up a bit!

4 September

This morning started with pretty bad weather. It rained and also the temperature has dropped down to 9C°. So we decided to stay inside and watch some of Slavo's DVDs! One of them showed a bear that stuck his head into a tin bucket and couldn't get it out anymore. Slavo tranquilised it and some foresters freed the bear by cutting the bucket off his head, poor bear! He woke up just before they could finish the job. So they had to pull the bucket off his head as the bear was coming to! The whole film was more exciting than any thriller!

Eventually the rain cleared away and we were able to get some survey work in after all.

Tonight was Emmanuel's last evening with us as he finished his job here taking great photos of the chamois! After the debriefing he showed us the selected "top ten" and some other images of his previous work, which was all pretty impressive!

After dinner we had a little "expedition" through Biotika's spirits department and ended up at base, drinking Emmanuel's apple cider and playing our "worst-case scenario" game again. "How to foil a UFO abduction?" Matthias, I think we need to include that in our risk assessments! Apparently, it can happen to everyone everywhere! The correct answer was: "Focus your thoughts towards the alien. Tell it, "leave me alone and go away. I have a virus!"

5 September

Today's weather looked worse than yesterday, so we decided to visit the nearby ice-caves which were worth seeing! On our way to them we could see that all the surrounding mountains had snow on top, wow! It's only the beginning of September! Only three weeks ago Ed had a splash in Lake Polianka and now it looks like the skiing season will be upon us soon!

Back at the base we helped Slavo with his data entry, for which he was very grateful.

6 – 7 September

This morning everyone realised that today is actually the last day and last chance to go up to Chopok and maybe see some chamois.... and some snow! The weather was pretty bad, it was cold and drizzly but nobody could stop our keen lot to say goodbye in their own way!

Slavo and I dropped them off at the southern ski lift and planned to pick them up again around 3 pm. That gave Slavo and me enough time to do our very own expedition de-brief. The team returned with tales of Dave disappearing into the snow up to his hips, which made him a perfect target for a joint snowball attack. The mist prevented chamois observation, but still everyone was glad to have been up top one last time.

Straight after breakfast on Sunday morning it was time to pack our Land Rovers with all the equipment and head back. The journey was miserable, the rain got worse, the closer we got to Austria! But still we managed to arrive at the Chez David in Bratislava spot on at 1 pm! That gave me some time to have a last lunch with everyone before it was time to say goodbye!

I would like to thank you all for your support of Slavo and his study. Isn't it funny that you can even become fascinated with scats when you know you're collecting them for a good purpose☺!

Throughout these four weeks we had 36 chamois observations, collected 35 bear scats and 15 wolf scats. Look out for the report in six to ten months to show you all how your time and effort has helped Slavo. Thanks to all of you! Slavo and I really enjoyed working with you and I hope you did too.