

Hungary's butterfly Shangri-la

The stunning Valley in the Bükk Hills

Conservationists Rob de Jong and Sárián Szabolcs describe a valley in Hungary that is butterfly paradise

Hungary's geographic position and complex climate make it a fascinating place for those interested in butterflies. After the last ice ages, species from Southern Europe, the Balkans as well as from Asia and Asia Minor dispersed into the Carpathian Basin. The varied climate, with continental, boreal and Mediterranean influences, facilitated this process. As a result, Hungary now combines butterflies that are familiar to the Western European traveller with Asian and Mediterranean species.

Prominent members of these two categories are the Pallas's Fritillary and the Cardinal respectively. Recently, we have witnessed very interesting dispersive behavior of these two large fritillaries. All over Europe, 2003 was a year when the prevailing conditions favoured such dispersal. In the first half of July, after an exceptionally hot and dry spring, both the Pallas's Fritillary and the Cardinal were on the move in Hungary, the Pallas's travelling westwards and the Cardinal moving north.

Butterflies of each species settled in a beautiful valley along the south eastern edge of the Bükk Hills in north eastern Hungary, far from where they were originally found. In the five years prior to 2003 both species were absent here. The valley has a good population of Corncrakes and is being managed so that the birds are not disturbed during the breeding season. This delay in mowing till late summer benefits



Pallas's Fritillary

butterflies as well. A survey in this damp stream-valley on 31 July 2006, produced an incredible 68 butterfly species. Particularly striking were the 16 Fritillary species, including Dark Green, High Brown, Silver-washed and Marbled. In addition, we observed Camberwell Beauty, Lesser Purple and Purple Emperor, Large Tortoiseshell and Common Glider. Earlier in the season, Scarce Fritillary, Clouded Apollo, Chequered Skipper and seven other species were sighted.

Three years after the exceptional summer of 2003, it appears that the Pallas's Fritillary and the Cardinal have established populations in this terrific valley.

Threats

Unfortunately, expansion of such exciting butterflies is mirrored by the decline of others. As elsewhere in Europe, the biggest threat centres on the abandonment of traditional pastures, hayfields and forest-steppe habitat.

Forest-steppes were once home to the Danube Clouded Yellow. This species is on the verge of extinction not just in Hungary but globally, due to the cessation of coppice management and loss of forest pasture. Repeated searches in historical localities in western Hungary suggest that it may in fact be extinct here.

The importance of hayfields can be illustrated by the decline in numbers of Dusky and Scarce Large Blues, Marsh Fritillaries and Large Coppers. Although



The Large Chequered Skipper INSET Scarce Large Blue



Large Copper



Scarce Swallowtails meet to drink

not yet rare, because their habitat is still relatively common, traditional management has disappeared from most of the localities.

Pastures provide habitat for several rare Hungarian species. The Anomalous Blue and Osiris Blue are species that originate from The Balkans. They need large populations of the host plant, Sanfoin, which occurs on dry, unproductive sites. Afforestation and cessation of grazing are the primary threats to these enigmatic species.

Opportunities

There is a growing interest in Hungary and neighboring countries as destinations for butterfly holidays. The decline of biodiversity in the West encourages eco-tourists to explore countries to the East. This is a sad but hopeful development, as eco-tourism may stimulate local authorities to maintain their natural resources.

Eco-volunteer projects could be another tool to raise awareness locally and to enhance co-operation between East and West. Another article in this issue of *Butterfly* (page 8) tells of one such project involving volunteers from Butterfly Conservation's West Midlands Branch.

However, given the EU's promotion of intensive cultivation of 'waste' land, there is growing danger of the destruction of large swathes of butterfly habitats in Hungary. This underlines more than ever the need for a pan-European approach to conserving butterflies. 🦋



Blowing in the wind

An example of how weather in Hungary has played its part in butterfly dispersal is provided by an invasion of the Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell in the third week of June 2006. A strong warm wind from the north-east transported incredible numbers of this Asian butterfly to Hungary. The authors saw hundreds in the Zemplén hills and several on the dry plains of Hortobagy, a well-known paradise for birdwatchers. This species was thought to be extinct in Hungary. Recent findings of caterpillars and pupae prove that the species has now managed to breed here.