

First UK Wolf Conservation Trust Student Exchange visit to Bulgaria

In Sept 2007 the UK Wolf Conservation Trust sponsored two students on a student exchange programme to the Balkani Wildlife Society's Large Carnivore Education Centre in Bulgaria. The society has a close relationship with the Trust and we have over the years send much needed funding to help get this centre off the ground – it is still a work in progress and still needs our help both financially and practically. Below is Vicky Hughes and Kate Walker's impressions of their visit.



Vicky Hughes



Kate Walker

After much anticipation we finally set off to Bulgaria on the 8th September. Having said this, we didn't really know what we were anticipating! Following one meeting with Denise, Tsa (Trust Directors) and Toni (Education Officer), plus countless emailing back and forth!, looking back what sticks in our memory from that day includes tales of big scary dogs, treacherous roads, fleas and an outdoor toilet! Denise was wary of creating any picture which may differ from the reality of what we were to find 650m up in the Pirin Mountains; as the guinea pigs of the student exchange the idea was to remain open-minded.



Sofia Airport



Vicky & Elena shopping for supplies

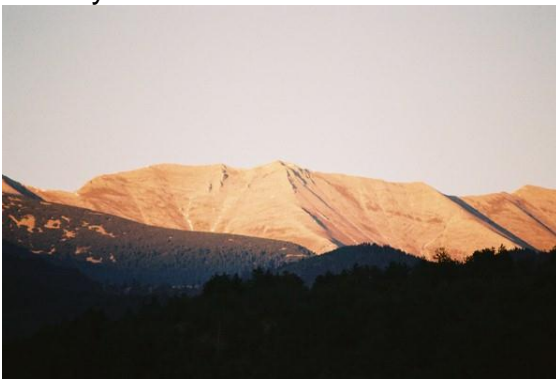
We negotiated our way through Heathrow airport with surprising ease, and arrived in the village of Vlahi after a 3 hour flight to Sofia (with cheering and clapping on landing which we learnt is tradition when travelling Bulgaria – Air) plus a car journey with Elena, slightly delayed by having to get the clutch fixed on a public holiday! Watching Bulgaria vs. Holland football match with some locally brewed beer was very welcome after stumbling down a steep hill, across a river and up the other side, in the dark, with all our luggage (of which Vicky's was much more practical than Kate's – rucksacks essential for any of you that visit!)

Sunday morning started early with the strongest coffee that either of us have ever tasted! Breakfast was lovely, and a good opportunity to chat to Elena, the project leader. Through her work for the Balkani Wildlife Society, which encompasses both the Large Carnivore Project and Education Centre, she met her husband Sider, who leads the Rare Breeds Project for BBPS Semperviva; both projects now run alongside each other in the village.



The Large Carnivore centre in Vlahi (work in progress)

In common with other Balkan countries Macedonia and most of former Yugoslavia, wolves in Bulgaria are not currently protected, in fact hunters still receive a bounty of 20BGL for a wolf carcass plus 2m³ of 'first class timber'. Following completion of a Bear Management Plan this year, a similar document regarding the wolf is now in progress as collaboration between various governmental and non-governmental organisations, including the Balkani Wildlife Society.



Pirin Mountains



Vlahi Village

We were introduced to Medo and Vucho, the resident bear and wolf, who were our charges for the week! Work also involved helping with tracking and scat collection to gather data about the local 'Rabish' wolf pack (named after a valley in their territory), one of three packs found in the Pirin Mountains. The wolf population in Bulgaria is currently estimated at 1000-1200 individuals; the Balkani Wildlife Society has a second study area in Kraishte, near to the town of Breznik, North of the Pirin Mountains. Future students and volunteers will be involved in data collection for this study, possibly with horseback as the mode of transport!



Medo (European Brown Bear)



Vucho (European Gray Wolf)

We were lucky to be shown around the Large Carnivore Education Centre, a work still in progress that promises to be amazing and a great asset to the project! The building will have a bar/ café area (with the best view we've ever seen!), accommodation for 18 people, a seminar room, an exhibition split over two floors, plus stabling for the Karakachan horses. This breed is named after the nomadic Karakachani people, who kept livestock including the like-named breed of sheep and dog, with the dogs traditionally used to guard against wolf and bear attack. Following the loss of many native breeds during the socialist regime, the Karakachan are now the only such dogs to be officially recognised by the Bulgarian Government, and are now successfully working in this original role through the Rare Breeds project. (10th August each year commemorates this recognition).



Karakachan Guarding Dog; Wild living Karakachan horses; Native goats and their guarding dogs

With hindsight, Denise was right in not attempting to create any strong impression of the place prior to our visit, since nothing that anyone could say or write would come anywhere near doing justice to the beauty of the mountains and the animals, and the spirit of the people and the project. It turned out that the dogs weren't scary, we didn't suffer any insect bites and the bathroom has moved inside (but we can't deny that the road is a little bumpy in places!) It sounds like a cliché, but we feel that this visit was really the chance of a lifetime, it's amazing to see the foundations and potential of a young project; the memories that people will take from each visit will be unique.

Thank you to everybody both at The Trust and in Bulgaria who made this trip possible, we look forward to following the project and hope that many more will learn from and contribute to it in the future.



Vicky and Kate