



EXPEDITION DIARY Spain 2008

By Malika Fettak & Matthias Hammer

24 May

Hello everyone and welcome to the Spain 2008 diary. I'm Matthias, Biosphere's founder & managing director and also your expedition leader, and you will be hearing from me regularly over the next few weeks.

Expedition leader? Matthias? I thought it was Peter Schuette, I hear you cry, and you would be right. But nothing is as constant as the change of plan on expedition and so - guess what - the plan has changed! Peter is no longer able to do the expedition and had to pull out at short notice, so he is now my very special friend and you get me as your expedition leader for slot 1 at least. Whether this is a good thing, you'd have to ask Jane, Jennifer, Martyn or Marjorie, who have all been on expedition with me before and who will be part of the slot 1 team. Jane survived Slovakia, Jennifer some hardcore mountain overnight surveying in Oman & the Altai, Martyn more expeditions than I care to remember and Marjorie survived Brazil with me - just and with a broken wrist (get Marjorie to tell you the full story in Reus). If I now have you all quivering in your boots (not!), then this is intentional ;)

Anyway, enough of this silliness (I am German and not supposed to have a sense of humour, you know). We've packed up our zebra Land Rover Defender to the hilt and it's about to set off down to Spain tomorrow. We'll pick up a shiny Land Rover Discovery there and proceed to our base at Revilla to set things up for you.

That's the plan, anyway. I hope your own planning is going well and you are starting to get excited. There is no chickening out now!

More in a few days from Revilla, I hope.

Safe travels & hasta la vista!

Matthias

26 May

So the zebra Defender has made it down to the Pyrenees and is having a bit of a well-earned rest near Reus before we meet up with our scientist Oscar tomorrow and move into Monte Perdido Research Station, our base for the next few weeks. If you haven't seen pictures of Monte Perdido yet, then take a look at www.biosphere-expeditions.org/spain. We have solar panels, presentation equipment, running water (hot if you are lucky) and, luxuries of luxuries, porcelain toilets & showers there. Also bunk beds in pretty small rooms and no wardrobes to hang your clothes in (so pretty much what you'd expect from a mountain hut), so best to stick one set of clothes on and stay in them for the expedition, lest you ruffle your bags too much ;))

As of tomorrow, our "official" expedition mobile phone number should be +34 689176217, but please remember that this is for emergency purposes only (such as for example if you are about to miss assembly, which I am sure you won't ;).

Think of us over the next few days as we run around like headless chickens, desperately trying to get everything ready for you. Hard life, this expedition leader thing, you know.

More updates from the mountains to come, if I can find the time and internet connection!

29 May

Hello from a very cold Revilla. I have reports of more than 30 degrees C in Germany, but I am afraid here in Revilla, it's cold in the mountains (about 10 degrees C at our base at 1200 m) and it's also been raining a lot. So please come prepared for some cold and wet weather as well as warm/hot and dry weather. You never know what the Pyrenees will throw at us.

We've met up with Oscar and Diego, our scientist for this expedition. They have been joking that Spain will get its revenge on England and Germany and send over its pensioners if the weather stays like this ;)

Other than that, we are as ready as we'll ever be with all the activities now worked out. Oscar and Diego wanted us to add Boreal Owl research to our tasks, so we have, and the resulting activities and a day-to-day plan are in the attachment. Please note that the "snow partridge listening stations" activity requires clothing and equipment for the cold in the high mountains and that there may well be snow at the 2400 m study site. You don't have to do any of the activities, of course, but the more people can join in, the better.

Of course we will also talk you through all the activities and the general plan in much more detail when you arrive, so no need to worry now – there'll be plenty of time for questions and to make decisions once you are here.

Now a word about meeting up. For the first slot, I'll be coming straight from our Monte Perdido base early in the morning on Sunday. But as I think most of you will be in Reus the day before assembly, I suggest you all meet up in the lobby of NH Hoteles at 20.00 on Saturday (31 May) to go out for a drink or a meal. This is only a suggestion, of course, but I think it's nice to get to know each other and you should all have a list of team members to make your own plan.

For slot 2, we will be in Reus on Saturday and wait for you in the lobby of NH Hoteles at 20.00 on Saturday (7 June). Anyone who would like to come and join us for a drink or meal is welcome to do so.

That's it. Looking forward to seeing slot 1 at 09.00 this Sunday.

3 June

The first team was all there, ready and waiting at Reus, and after a three-hour drive we arrived at FCQ's Eco Museo in Aínsa to meet our scientists Oscar and Diego and get an introduction to the area and its animals by getting our very own tour around the museum and its exhibits. We also had a quick stroll around Aínsa, one of the most beautiful villages in the Pyrenees with an unspoilt town centre from the middle-ages. Then the drive up to Revilla, along a steep mountain road with numerous switch-backs and good views of Monte Perdido, the second highest peak of the Pyrenees and backdrop to our home.

The weather was pretty kind to us on Sunday, but yesterday it showed us what it's capable of. The morning was sunny and pretty clear, but we were indoors finding out about our work here, the research activities, datasheets, the FCQ and the equipment that we'll be using. In the afternoon, as we were getting ready to practice our newly acquired skills in the field, the weather turned and by the time we were ready and all assembled in the yard, the skies were grey, visibility was down to a few hundred metres and it was pouring, and I mean pouring, with rain. Needless to say that we still braved the elements and went for a very wet walk where paths had turned into little alleys of big puddles or little streams. So we found a great rock overhang sheltering us from the rain and there practiced using the GPS, compass, spotting scope, binoculars and radio telemetry equipment. It was a pretty cold and wet affair, but we did manage to spot chamois with our scopes on the slope opposite. After a couple of hours of practice we started our walk back to base. As we did, gaps started to appear in the clouds, the rain eased and literally just as we got to base, a miserable day was transformed into a Pyrenean summer afternoon. So we walked straight past base and up the steep slopes behind it, boiling in our rain gear as we did. It's the mountains, you know ;)

Within minutes, lammergeyers, Griffon and black vultures, honey buzzards and other birds were out and circling overhead. So more time and better weather to practice for another hour or so until dark grey clouds started rolling in again from the end of the valley and it was back to rain.

Wet but in good spirits we arrived back at base as the weather turned yet again and clouds and rain were replaced by sunshine and blue skies to dry ourselves and our clothes in whilst sitting in the yard and enjoying the view.

In the evening, there was more work to be done in the lecture room, reviewing the skills learned, finding out more about lammergeyer biology and planning the next day. Then a late dinner (or early if you are Spanish) at 20.00 with some birthday celebrations for Birgit, one of our team members.

Today we are out in two groups. One at a hide to record birds that come down to feed at a feeding place and one to watch and assist some climbers as they mark lammergeyer chicks in a nest on a rock face. More about all this in my next instalment of the diary.

5 June

Good news – the weather has improved! There's been little rain and the temperatures down in the valley have been positively soaring to 21 degrees yesterday. Almost spring here in Spain ;) The better weather is meant to continue until the end of the week and until the beginning of next week too (see <http://www.aemet.es/es/eltiempo/prediccion/localidades?l=22022> for a prediction).

Our research work is going well too. The day before yesterday the hide group were treated to displays of numerous vultures frolicking right in front of their noses and they were able to identify 12 lammergeyers by their wing markers during their 4.5 hour shift of sitting still in the hide. The nesting checks group witnessed an unsuccessful attempt of climbers trying to mark a lammergeyer chick, which was getting too excited in its nest to be marked, and then continued onto radio telemetry work, checking the skies for passing birds with radio transmitters.

Yesterday the whole group spent the day sweeping a steep mountainside forest for capercaillie sign and our scientist Oscar was very pleased when we found droppings that confirmed that the remote site was used for courtship displays. When the work was done, we had a break at a spectacular mountain top site with stunning views of the central Pyrenees chain including its two highest peaks of Aneto and Monte Perdido.

Martyn, oh wise and mighty one, and veteran of this, his seventh expedition, outed himself as thoroughly English by falling asleep in the sunshine and then proudly displaying the bright red legs that are so closely associated with his fellow countrymen here in Spain. Sadly he did not bring a pair of Union Jack shorts to complete the picture :))

As I write this, people are floating in to breakfast and today is the day we leave for our overnight survey up in the snow at 2400 m at lake Urdiceto to study snow partridge. Pitching a tent in the snow, sitting on a snowfield for some hours before sunrise and surviving the night under those conditions will be a new experience for many, so there is a sense of expectation and trepidation in the air this morning.

I'll be off the air for the next couple of days and should be back Friday night or Saturday with reports of snow partridge and nights on the mountainside.

6 June

We're back from a true (snow partridge) expedition to the mountains, which had it all. Camping in a snow storm, snow partridge sign, a fall down a steep slope of snow and ice (by oh wise and might one) including a rescue, as well as some amazingly good spirits, stiff upper lips, guts and determination by the whole team.

Thursday started with clouds rolling in as we approached our research site at Lake Urdiceto. The Land Rovers took us up to the snow line and soon we were plodding along some pretty steep mountain sides to where we split into pairs to pitch our tents. By the time we were up there, the wind was howling, visibility was down to a few metres and it started to snow. Nobody complained, though, and so we pitched our tents and settled in for the night and some pretty cold and uncomfortable listening and data recording duties. I heard the calls of the territorial snow partridge male a couple of times and very close, but there was no chance of seeing the animal. And you simply have to take your hat off to this totally, absolutely hardcore mother-of-all-tough-guys bird! I was pretty cosy in my tent in the howling wind listening to the snow building up on one side of it. But this bird was out there singing away!

The next morning I had to dig myself and the tent out of the snow and was wondering/worrying how everyone else was. But when I called on the radio, chirpy voices came back from all tents / listening stations. It would be a lie to say that everyone had had a good night's sleep, but you have to hand it to the whole team – despite Jennifer's frozen fingers, Birgit's frozen feet, David's soggy pants, Martyn's fall, Ian's wonky tent, Christine's exhaustion, Malika's bad hair day, Jane's high-number birthday, good spirits, stiff upper lips, guts and determination abounded. Well done everyone!

As we got off the mountain, exhausted, glad to be back in one piece and pleased with the research results, the weather turned into a glorious day, just in time for all of us to dry our gear in a colourful display of tents, sleeping bags, rucksacks, snow shoes and a multitude of other equipment.

I'm sure tonight will be a great last evening dinner and everyone will get back with some stories to tell!

8 June

Yesterday slot 1 travelled back to Reus in glorious sunshine with the best views of the mountains we've had all week. Today I have just waved slot 2, who have all made it safely to the assembly point, off on their journey to Revilla.

I have now handed over to Malika, who will be leading the second slot and writing further instalments of the diary.

Thanks to everyone on slot 1 for your commitment, enthusiasm, determination and plain good company. I've really enjoyed my time with you and you have been a great team – and you all know I'm not just saying that.

All the best to Malika and her second slot – you're in good hands & enjoy.

9 June

Hello everyone, I'm Malika and I'm taking over the diary and the expedition from Matthias...

After an enjoyable evening at Reus with some members from teams 1 & 2, lots of pasta and red wine and - of course - painful goodbyes from team 1, I took over team 2 on Sunday morning. Everybody was on time, so we had a relaxed journey to Ainsa. During our afternoon field walk later we watched a fantastic sunset (the first decent one of this expedition!) and after that we went through all the introductory stuff and risk assessment after dinner (Jane gave me 10 points of 10 for my performance!).

Having gone through more theory and equipment training today, everybody is ready to go out to the field tomorrow.

10 June

A great day, as we had a very close encounter with a lammergeier called Xielsa. She passed our observation point only a few meters from where we were standing - an exciting moment for the whole team. But also a bad day - as I didn't pass Jane's room check (by order of Matthias, she said) which reduced my points account ;)

Fully equipped and trained up, we started our research at the feeding point in Escuin. While Astrid, Kathleen and I were inside the hide, the rest of the team settled down with their spotting scopes to record activities from further away. What an amazing experience seeing 30 - 40 griffon vultures coming down all at the same time fighting for food. And what a bloody cold, windy and wet place for us to stay for hours, frightened about every noise our waterproofs made with every movement. You can imagine that we were happy when Oscar came to pick us up.

Once there, he showed us the breeding unit. Astrid immediately fell in love with the chick but "Mama" Walter refused to let her take it home.

Beside the "big birds", Jane, Andrew and John had a lot of good bird sightings, such as rock bunting, rock thrush, white stork, bee eater and golden oriole and other such species that get birders going.

We ended our day at a bar in Ainsa discussing the "feeding procedure" deciding to do the chicken dance for Xavier when he serves dinner. You can imagine the look on his face - astonished owl! Big laughs at the end of a good day.

11 June

Lammergeyer nesting check and ID on Wednesday. One group went to Pena Guara, a remote feeding point about 140 km from base. The hide looked like a luxury apartment: a small wooden house equipped with solar panel, cooking facilities and even a bed in it! Big mirror windows for an excellent view. But none of the birds seemed to be hungry except one non-marked lammergeier picking up one single bone. While sitting nearby on a big rock for about two hours at least he allowed us a very close look and intensive studies.

USUALLY - Oscar tried to explain - there should have been much more activity. that's because USUALLY there is no rain in June and USUALLY it's much warmer. No need to say that all of us laugh these days when Oscar's talks begins with "USUALLY"

Team 2 went to Valle de Anisclo. After a one hour walk with fantastic views they reached the study site. Equipped with spotting scopes and binoculars they scanned the whole area, knowing that there ARE two breeding units somewhere, but unfortunately they couldn't find the nests. Still, everybody returned to base in great spirits & impressed by the breathtaking, beautiful area we are working in.

Well prepared for the arrival of big boss Matthias the whole team lined up at 19.30 in the lecture room, ready for the expedition presentation, dressed in Biosphere T-Shirts and wearing whistles. And guess what: HE was late (his excuse was giving some of us a ride on his motorbike round the windy mountain roads, which was actually great fun)! Anyway, he was late (one again for the record) and so was dinner :)))

12 June

Blue sky in the morning and only 35% chance of rain on Thursday - good conditions for a capercaillie signs survey. On our way to Valle de Chiu we stopped to observe a group of about 15 griffon vultures, sitting on a rock beside the road, very close. They then flew up to the top of the cliffs and came down again. Very impressive.

Only half an hour later we spotted a couple of golden eagles while parking up the Land Rovers and watched them for 20 minutes. Even Oscar, Nina and Luis were impressed by this rare spectacle.

We then spent three hours in the forest, surveying different areas up to 2100 m altitude and found a lot of droppings and capercaillie diarrhoea (which means they were excited and breeding). What a successful day! Don't you love this work ;)

Back at base we enjoyed the afternoon sun in the yard, talked about plans for the next and also last day (already!) and agreed, that THIS may be the weather Oscar is talking about, when starting his sentences with "USUALLY ."

13 June

The whole group went out for a boreal owl survey this morning while I stayed back at base preparing all the stuff for leaving tomorrow. Almost three weeks but it feels like three months at Revilla, the time has gone so quickly! Everybody will help to pack up the zebra Defender later this evening, so that I can go straight back, passing through the tunnel of Bielsa to France and then on to Germany and the big wide world ;)

But before leaving there's one last evening waiting for us, and I'm sure it will be a special one.

15 June

I made my way back to Germany, driving the zebra Defender through the Pyrenees and across France. Two days after team 2 left Revilla on Saturday morning, taken by Oscar to Reus: 7 persons in the Discovery and all the luggage packed on the roof rack.

We had a great last evening at base, enjoying another excellent dinner thanks to Xavier and emptying all left over bottles of wine ☺ Needless to say that we forgot about the 23.00 bedtime rule...

Tired faces the next morning, but also happy about the good time we had. So let me say THANK YOU to everybody for taking part in our project, your enthusiasm, good spirit and work and for all your input to make it a successful expedition. A special thanks to Oscar and all of the FCQ staff for sharing their lives and work with us and untiringly answering all our questions in "Spanglish". And of course all team members for being flexible and dealing with whatever we threw at you (e.g. unusual bad weather!). You all made my job as expedition leader and/or assistant great fun!

Hope to see some of you sometime, somewhere. All the best to you all.

Malika Fettak
Expedition leader

P.S. Don't forget to share your pictures (see www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureshare).