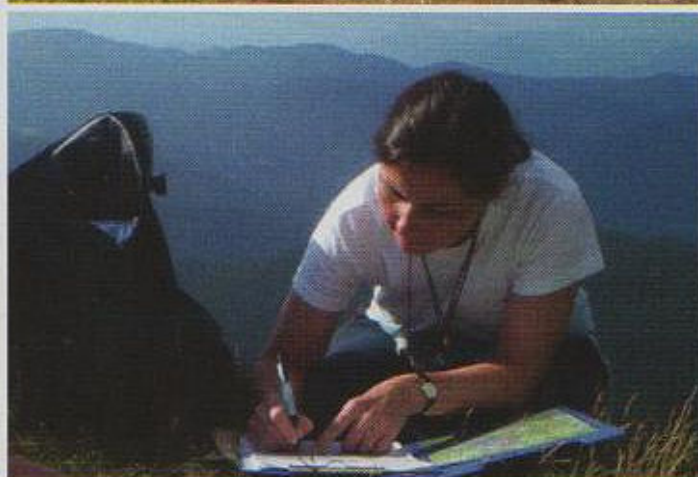




Wildlife
watch

BY CLIVE TUDY

In the heart of the forest-covered mountain slopes of Slovakia's Nizke Tatry National Park, a scientific project run by Biosphere Expeditions is documenting the movements of wild animals including wolves, bears and the endangered chamois



It is late in the afternoon, and after several hours of bush-whacking through dense forest while traversing steep slopes, suddenly an excited shout comes from the front of the group. "Wolf scat!"

Scat is not a term I have found myself using previously, although its more common alternative, another four-letter word beginning and ending with the same letters, may have passed my lips in extremis on the odd occasion. For the purposes of a family publication, what we are talking here is poo, or droppings. Indeed, it takes a certain kind of person to get worked up about what most would cross the street to avoid, even if the item in question is evidence of the recent passing of a beautiful wild animal.

I am in the Nizke Tatry National Park in the Tatra mountains of Slovakia, taking part in a scientific project run by Biosphere Expeditions. Indeed, as is pointed out on my first day, what I have joined is no holiday. It is not even a trip. It is an expedition, and the purpose is to assist local scientist Dr Slavomír Findó – Slavo, for short – to document the movements of wild animals including chamois, wolves and bears.

And so it is that we photograph said wolf poo with a compass lying next to it to provide scale, log its location on a data sheet using a GPS receiver, and bag it up to take back to base for Slavo to analyse. It joins several other bags of poo, including bear and a possible lynx. Today is something of a warm-up, getting expedition members used to logging both scats and tracks of wild animals, using two-way radios and GPS receivers, not to mention an enlightening return to traditional navigation techniques using map and compass.

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Animals such as wolf, bear and lynx typically inhabit areas within the forest-covered mountain slopes, but above the tree line is what we have all really come for, the chance to observe the endangered chamois, a type of mountain goat. Once upon a time, the closest you might get to a chamois would be when drying off your car after it has been washed, but while in other mountain areas of Europe they are quite plentiful, here their numbers are declining – a result of human pressure on their habitats, and climate change. But predators have an impact on their numbers as well, and that is the purpose of the study – to establish the relationship between chamois and other animals, as well as humans in the form of hikers on the trails that run along the main east/west ridge which they inhabit.

Research has shown that enthusiastic volunteers are every bit as good as scientists when it comes to making these kind of observations. If anything, they are better because they are rather more motivated, but it does all hinge on their being properly trained. The spread of participants in my expedition is certainly pretty wide, both in age and what made them decide to join. In general, the profile tends to be someone in their 30s and older – people who have had a chance to live life a little, and decide there is more to it than just self-gratification.

It was having three months available and a wish to do something of a voluntary nature that led business consultant Pierre from Belgium to sign up. By contrast, Lauren, in her early 20s, is studying for an animal science degree, so what we are doing ties in rather nicely. Others have come to escape their everyday lives, but still with

Above left: Land Rover supply vehicles under their Fragile Earth Policy

Above right: Logging details of animal sightings on a data sheet

Top right: Chamois are an endangered species

Main picture: Abode of the chamois – the main ridge in the Nizke Tatry National Park



When the mountain hut at Dúrkova is crowded, the tents make an attractive alternative on the ridge

➔ the motivation to do something which will be of real use. The oldest member of the group is John from Israel, whose past hiking hazards include wandering into a minefield while out walking on the Golan Heights.

The hazards of the Tatra mountains are not to be underestimated, either, as we discover when expedition leader Melanie Schröder delivers our risk assessment on the first evening. I am amazed to hear that statistically, going on an expedition is less dangerous than indulging in a spot of home DIY. And while the greatest risk in Slovakia is coming to a sticky end at the hands of lunatic drivers, the wildlife has been a particular problem this year. Here they have the highest density of bears in the world, and there have been no fewer than seven attacks on humans by brown bears. So if we suddenly find ourselves face to face with a bear, we are told to keep still, then slowly and gradually back off, avoiding the natural instinct to run like hell.

"Bears can run much faster," we are told,

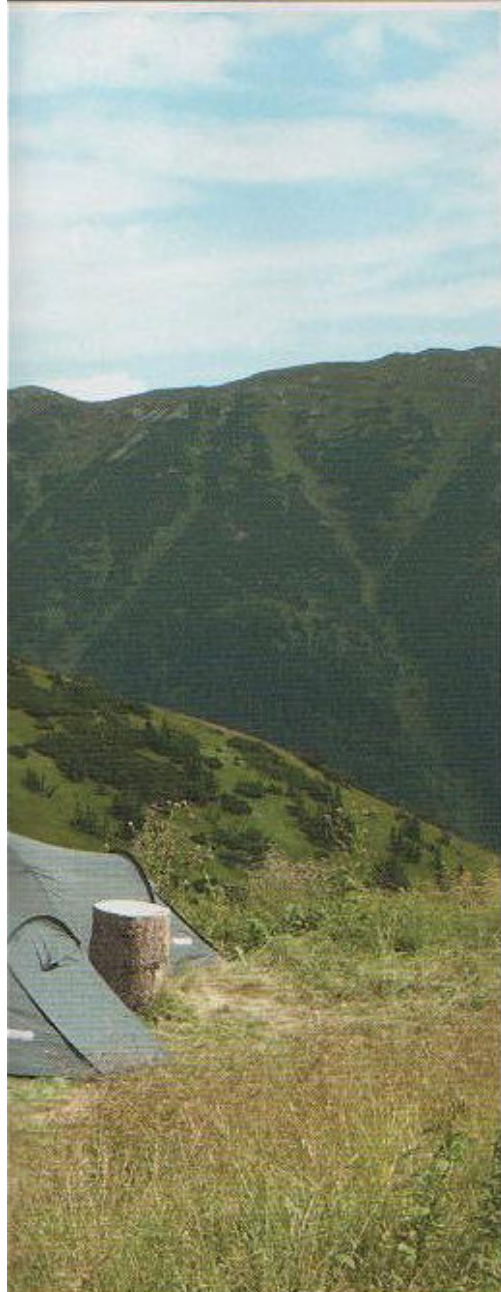
While hikers sharing the huts are still happily snoring away, expedition members are up at four to get ready to head for their observation sites

"and they can climb trees. If it comes to it, lie face down on the ground, hands over the back of your head and neck, and elbows out to prevent the bear from rolling you over."

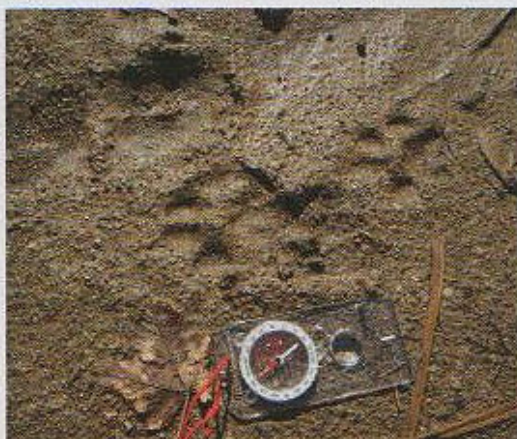
It is this advice which races through my mind on our first night. I have opted to relieve the pressure on bed space in our base house by sleeping in a tent out in the garden. At night, the surrounding forest is full of sounds, occasionally accompanied by the noise of breaking branches. It matters not one jot that I have been reassured no bear has ever come this far down into the valley. Lying in the tent in a semi-stupor, my

only thought is to roll over, elbows spread wide as my over-active imagination pictures intruding bears about to slice their claws through my sleeping bag.

And so I survive the night ready for the next day, which involves some basic training. We have our maps and GPS receivers to plot our positions, and we also have compasses - used to provide a bearing for any animal sightings. We have laser rangefinders to give us distance, and radios to communicate with each other. And when things are going less than swimmingly, we have flares to indicate we have a problem,



A high-powered telescope set up at an observation post is ready to spot any wildlife movement



Wolf track, photographed with a compass to provide scale



You will be lucky to see a wolf

red for life-threatening, and white for non-critical emergencies.

Our first little foray into the forest with Slavo reveals a 'bear tree'. This is where the bear has ripped the bark off the trunk to get at insects underneath. It could have been damage caused by a passing forestry vehicle, but the evidence of hairs stuck to the oozing sap provides the confirmation.

Getting to and from the study areas is not all about slogging up and down hills on foot, although there is plenty of that anyway. Biosphere Expeditions is one of the few organisations, along with the Royal Geographical Society, to be sponsored by Land Rover under their Fragile Earth Policy, so we have a couple of smart Land Rover Discoveries to get us about. And on the subject of sponsors, it is also worth mentioning outdoor retailers Cotswold Outdoor, Buff (manufacturers of wacky and versatile headwear), and Motorola. As a non-profit organisation, Biosphere values any help it gets, and of course the less money it has to spend on equipment means more of

the income from expedition team members goes into the scientific research.

During the fortnight, expedition members pay two visits up on to the main mountain ridge, staying overnight in mountain huts. And while the hikers sharing the huts with them are still happily snoring away, they are up at four in the morning to get ready to head for their observation sites. This is where your typical hill walker might see the difference. Instead of keeping up a good pace, you have to be prepared to sit still for hours at a time with binoculars or a telescope on a tripod, so a good range of clothing is essential.

During the day, the chamois tend to keep out of the sun on north-facing slopes, but then at sunset they come up on to the ridge. Get up early enough in the morning, and that is where you see them. The training also includes identification – male and female chamois have different shaped horns, and the males tend to wander around on their own, while females and kids will stay in groups.

Unfortunately, my flying visit of just a few days means that while I do get to climb up on to the ridge and sample its spectacular views, I do not get to stay there overnight, but some of my fellow team members strike gold the following day. One group led by expedition leader Melanie spots two red

deer heading for a stream to drink, followed by a group of eight chamois resting on cliffs. Then, just as they are about to pack up and go, they see a female bear and her cub ambling up to the same stream.

While my wildlife spotting is confined to a small snake and a few piles of poo – sorry, scats – I have come away with the firm view that if you want to do something for conservation, this is far better than simply writing out a cheque for your chosen charity.

This way you can provide scientists with the manpower to enable them to make a difference – in this case, the outcome will be a scientific paper – and have an unforgettable experience at the same time. **OP**

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