



EXPEDITION DIARY Slovakia 2010

By Malika Fettak & Matthias Hammer

17 January

Hello everyone and welcome to the Slovakia 2010 diary. Malika (Fettak), your expedition leader, and I will be sharing this diary for the set-up phase and first slot. My name is Matthias (Hammer) and I am the founder and managing director of Biosphere Expeditions and you will be hearing from us regularly over the next few weeks.

Malika and I will be packing/setting up until Wednesday before making our way to Bratislava where we will give a press conference at Land Rover and collect a vehicle before heading to the Tatra mountains and our study site. Since this is the first expedition to Slovakia with our new scientist Robin (Rigg) and working in winter, we'll have a full week or so to get everything ready at our base Pod Dobakom.

We'll be trailblazers on this expedition together, so please expect the unexpected and come prepared for anything ;)

Once we've made it to Slovakia, we'll be in touch again with news of the weather and the work ahead. We'll also buy a Slovakian SIM card and will let you have this as an emergency contact number.

I hope your preparations are going well and we look forward to seeing you in due course.

Best wishes

Dr. Matthias Hammer
Founder & Managing Director
Biosphere Expeditions

19 January

Packing, packing, packing - that's the story of the last couple of days. 15 snowshoes & poles, several pairs of skis (mountaineering & cross-country), ropes, descenders, binoculars, computers, books, projectors, you name it.

AND we found the Slovakian SIM card, so you can reach us on +421-191-0574628 (remember this is for emergency purposes only, such as being late for assembly - in which case you'll be sampling the delights of Slovakian trains by yourself :)

Safe travels & we'll see slot 1 soon.

24 January

We've been getting things ready for trailblazing slot 1, talking with Robin about the science, checking out the study site, unpacking, etc. Our host family at the Pod Dobakom cottage are as friendly and helpful as ever and the food is good and very plentiful.

The only thing in short supply so far is snow. This year there's been a weird inversion with England having snow, as well as Bratislava, but with relatively little in the Tatras. When we left Bratislava a few days ago, we did so in heavy snowfall, but as we got closer to the Tatras the snowfall stopped and the hills turned greener and greener. At the moment the tops and northern slopes have enough snow for tracking, but the valleys are largely green. But there is snow forecast and we'll keep you updated. It's certainly cold (yesterday morning it was -14 C) and we went up one of the northern slopes in beautiful sunshine and with plenty of good, crisp snow crunching away under our boots. Once away from the village, you have the mountains to yourself and there were plenty of tracks around, including wolf tracks and a rock solidly frozen pile of wolf scat too ;)

27 January

We're almost ready for you. The temperature is minus 17 degrees, breakfast has been set for 06.30 each day and a scary datasheet is attached alongside the day-to-day plan and the kit list, just to get you all into the spirit of things. Anyone still thinking they are about to come on a little "holiday", better think again ;)

But seriously, we are all looking forward to welcoming you to the Tatra mountains. The only thing missing now is more snow. It was forecast for yesterday and today, but all we had was glorious winter days with blue skies, sharp frost and a crisp dust cover of snow crunching away under our feet. It's good enough for tracking in most places, except the green valleys, but those of you keen on a ski mountaineering outing with Matthias will have to live in hope for the next few days.

Malika is off to Bratislava tomorrow afternoon. She'll be staying at the Chez David and will be in the lobby there at 18.30 from there she will go to the "Slovak Pub" for 19.00 where some team members have already arranged to meet up for dinner. Anyone wanting to join Malika at the Chez David at 18.30 or the crowd later at the Slovak Pub is very welcome to do so.

Oh, and by the way, a little joke is hidden in the attachments (and no, it's not the 06.30 breakfast ;). First one to correctly identify it gets to lie in until 06.45 ;)

See you soon

1 February

Pod Dobakom has become a lively place since the team arrived on Saturday. Everyone went through 1 ½ days of theory and practical training and is now well aware of risks in mountainous terrain in winter, has gained practical experience of map reading, navigation with compass and handling the GPS, etc., etc.. Heavy snowfall during our first field walk from base yesterday also felt like a heavy usage test of clothing and hiking boots ;).

Today 5 groups went out for survey walks along set routes. We recorded the routes in GPSs and will do so everytime we go out in the next couple of weeks. As part of the Data entry in the evening the track logs will be downloaded into a GIS program in order to create a map of the study area.

Best conditions for finding tracks today: The snowfall stopped during the night and therefore enabled us to clearly identify many fresh tracks - mainly Roe and Red Deer but also a fresh lynx track as well as wolf tracks. Some team members even came back with samples of hair & scat. It is obvious that the study species are around – depending on the weather conditions one group will try and track the lynx trail tomorrow.

3 February

All teams had an adventurous day yesterday. Apart from Tomas and Jeanette who were tracking a lynx trail, everyone came back late. Hip high snow, missed markings of the route and lost mobile phones were some of the reasons – only funny that it happened all on the same day.

We have shortened the transects due to the fact that it is still snowing and walking in deep but very light snow slows us down and is very tiring. Again we found wolf tracks and will continue to follow their direction – if we are lucky we may find scat samples for DNA analysis.

4 February

Fantastic sunny weather today on the last survey day and great fun for all of us crossing untouched snow fields with snow shoes and walking through the amazingly beautiful winter forest. But also a great success for the research: More wolf trails were found and very fresh scat and urine (yes, we also collect the frozen stuff! ;)).

We had an early dinner and afterwards spent some time around a campfire outside kindly lit by Robert. Everyone had a hot after dinner drink as we had to say goodbye to the first slot.

Again, many thanks for your input and hard work, your enthusiasm & great team spirit. I hope you enjoyed the week as much as I did and I hope to see some of you again, some time.

5 February

The first team has travelled back to Bratislava by train today except for Michael, who is staying for one more week and decided to spend his "day off" at Pod Dobakom. Writing this, I'm at the Chez David in Bratislava, preparing to meet team 2 tomorrow morning at the main station. Some of the slot 1 team members are still in town so we will meet again later for the very last dinner..

Everyone from slot 2 is very welcome to join us and can meet me either at 7p.m. at the Hotel lobby or at the Slovak Pub (Address: 62 Obchodna Ul.,
Directions: northeast of the old town center, about 1/2 way between Postova and Marianska, Website:
<http://www.slovakpub.sk/>).

See you soon

8 February

Everyone from team 2 arrived safely & on time on Saturday and 8 of us had a comfortable train ride from Bratislava to Liptovski Mikulas. The IC from Zilina to Kosice is probably one of the newest trains in the whole of Slovakia! We had heavy snowfall during training days on Saturday and Sunday, so we had the best conditions for our first surveying day today.

Yesterday evening we saw the trailer about our expedition in the daily news, filmed and produced by Ratislav & Marian who joined us for 1 ½ days last week. It was very timely as Robin had a very successful meeting with National Park authorities today and some of the rangers already knew about the project...

Today we are all excited about the findings of Michael and Wilfried. They spotted blood on their transect route and followed the track expecting to find a fresh kill or a carcass. What they found was even more blood in the snow - on branches and reddish frozen water when they crossed a small river. Footprints from two wolves could be identified as well as the print of a wolf lying in the snow, probably cooling his bleeding nose. They took dozens of photos which are now on our expedition computer for everyone to see. As I write this Robin is still trying to make a story out of the details. We have already added an entry to the whiteboard: RESULTS / OTHER / BLOOD ;)).

10 February

6 teams were out both yesterday and today and Robert's extra fridge (for dog food) is filling up quickly with loads of samples that we have collected. A tip from a National Park ranger who called yesterday morning, led one of the teams to tracks of 3 lynx, presumably a mother and two young ones. The tracks could be followed for almost 2 kms and urine, scat and hair samples were collected.

Today all teams went to the area around Cierni Vah, a water resort in the foothills of the Low Tatra mountains. Sian and Michael found a carcass of a half eaten male Red deer but unfortunately didn't know where they were. They had taken the wrong map with them, but managed to make their way back to the pick-up point, once we had radioed the GPS position; FIND/WAYPOINT/GO TO - you will all learn how to use the GPS ;). Ash & Wilfried also got lost but finally reached a marked hiking trail. Thanks to our Land Rovers we were able to drive up the narrow and deeply snow covered path to pick them up. Although late, we decided to set up 2 camera traps at the carcass site, so it was only just before dinner when most of the team arrived back at base.

There was plenty of laughter during the daily review, when each team told their story. Hartmut, who set out together with Arne in his own car to collect samples he had lost the day before, proudly announced that the samples were found but announced that he again "lost" something - 100 Euros. He had been stopped by the police for speeding and unfortunately had no driving licence or ID card with him! Michael is "the guy who can smell blood" from now on and Wolfgang and Gabi, who had been reminded about working within a timeframe, eventually overcame their temptation to follow tracks until it gets dark!

12 February

The 2nd slot has come to an end and this morning we had to say goodbye. Gabi, Wolfgang, Hartmut & Mirjam left in their own cars and the rest of the team is now on the train to Bratislava.

Once again, all teams came back yesterday - our last day of surveying - with lots of findings & samples and the results checklist on our whiteboard is growing ever longer. We added "wolf sighting" in the 'others' section, thanks to Arne, who saw an animal crossing the transect some distance away. He wasn't sure exactly what it was that he saw, but when we finally reached that point, we found a very fresh wolf track. Without a doubt a wolf must have crossed our survey route!

This slot's survey results, presented by Robin as we stood around the campfire last night for our final evening celebration, are impressive. Based on the experience we gained during the first week, we were able to collect more than twice as many samples as slot 1. We have set 16 new survey routes and have now partly covered all 4 sections of the survey area at least once. Thanks again to all of you for your hard work, flexibility and good spirit!

I am now looking forward to meeting slot 3 tomorrow. Safe travels to everyone & see you soon.

15 February

My colleague Aino met team 3 on Saturday morning at Bratislava station and the whole team arrived safely in Liptovski Mikulas. Training days as usual - and the first field walk with the whole group on Sunday was great fun. There was some snowfall in the past few days however the temperature has risen to -3 degrees in the mornings - much too warm as the snow becomes wet these days ;).

2 SWS members (Slovakian Wildlife Society) have joined the team:

Michal, from Slovakia has been with us since Saturday and was forced to do the GPS training even though he doesn't like electronics at all ;) as well as tracking expert Peter, from Northern Hungary, who joined us on Sunday.

Today we went out in 5 groups for surveying transect routes, all in the Western Tatras - an area we haven't covered yet. The review after dinner revealed, that Ilka and Ulf might have had the most exhausting day of all of us. Led by local guy Michal, they found themselves tracking lynx and wolf tracks cross country the whole day - up and down and uphill again, until they lost their orientation. Well done, Ilka and Ulf for guiding the group back to the car in time. Peter and Steffan found BLOOD today, so this is not only Michael's domain anymore.

Writing this at 9.30pm the plan for tomorrow is written up on the whiteboard for everyone to sign in. I can still hear laughter from downstairs but am sure that it will be quiet shortly ;).

17 February

Except for one urine sample and a couple of wolf and lynx tracks we didn't find much during the last two surveying days. This doesn't sound rewarding but is as valuable as any other result from a scientific point of view. But it is great that with 5 teams logging new routes each day, the GIS map is now showing survey routes throughout the study area.

It has been much warmer in the last few days: only -3 to -6 degrees in the mornings. Still, the GPS batteries seem to suffer a lot. Gently treated by being kept in a warm & cosy place, hopefully they will keep the GPSs going for two more days.

Yesterday evening, after dinner and the daily review, Steffan presented a slideshow of the Namibia 2007 expedition he and Kerry took part in. Well equipped with laptop and loudspeakers we saw lots of beautiful pictures - thanks Steffan for the professional performance. Peter then showed some of his own camera trap videos of lynx.

Today two teams headed out to Cierny Vah again and will also check the camera traps, while another team with Peter will do a mix of transect and tracking in the High Tatras area. Allison, Kerry, Aino & Steffan went to Maluzinska to survey two valleys we haven't been to yet, while I went back to base, catching up with admin work. More about the results later and hopefully some photos from the camera traps.

18 February

The last surveying day was full of action and anticipation as Robin sent the teams to track wolf and lynx cross-country based on the findings of the previous day. The small teams spent a good few hours tracking up and down the mountain ridges, and this time they didn't have to come back to base empty handed. Scat turned out to be the theme of the day as one of the teams presented a sample of a lynx scat and the other one had been lucky enough to collect an impressive amount of wolf scat. This finding inspired Ash, Ilka, Ulf, Jane and James to make it into an educational occasion for the whole group by announcing a competition. Proudly presenting the sample during the review after dinner everyone had to guess the weight (Tesco had kindly provided scales for this experiment ;)). The sample's weight was 300 g and the winner with the closest guess was Ulf who was presented with a chocolate log!

Another highlight was the collection of the camera traps that were set next to the carcass by slot 2. However, unfortunately the pictures were of two foxes and the key species remained out of sight.

In the evening Robert proved to be the perfect host again and provided the tired but happy team members with a hot drink and a good laugh round the camp fire.

The earlier guessing game got the team's competitive spirit going, and the group also initiated a few other slightly less educational games. Slot 3 would like to thank Sian for the kind liquid donation, which was happily downed during one of the games.

19 February

The last day of Slovakia 2010 Project, and I'm saying farewells to both the last team and the Tatra mountains. The last meeting with Robin confirmed my perception, and we both agreed that this project resulted in a lot more data than any of us expected. This is thanks to all our committed, passionate and hard-working team members who carried out the work. A quick summary shows that in the last 3 weeks we found more than 20 lynx tracks and 50 wolf tracks, and followed 23 of them cross-country. We also collected over 60 samples for Robin to analyse and report back to us.

Aino and I would have loved to celebrate the success of this project with slot 3 in Bratislava on Friday night but unfortunately did not make it to the city until late. But I'm sure you had a few for us too ;)

21 February

Today I arrived back home in Germany after a looong drive with the fully packed Defender. Writing this the equipment, snow shoes and poles are back in the storage waiting for the next winter project.

Before saying over and out for the last time, I would like to say thanks to you all. I had a great time, and I hope you had too. I will upload my photos to box.net soon and would be grateful if you share some of yours on our pictureshare site (please see www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureshare for details).

Best wishes to you all and thank you again for all your hard work and enthusiasm

Malika Fettak
Expedition leader