

**Building the future in Bulgaria.  
(Article for Wolf Print Magazine – Visit to Bulgaria May 2007)**

As the plane came in to land at Sofia airport, I jokingly said to Chris Senior, my travelling companion and colleague, that very soon we would probably be able to add building construction to our CV. The next day as we walked up the hill to the new Education Centre, we both quickly realised that the joke was going to become a reality.

Although great progress had been made on the building works since our last visit in December 2006, it was clear that there was still a long way to go. Elena Tsingarska, Bulgarian project leader, had forewarned us that the official opening of the centre would be postponed until later in the year, but we hadn't appreciated how far behind they were. It later turned out that the funders in Germany who were financing the capital part of the project had delayed getting the money to them.

Undaunted, and in the true Bulgarian style we have come to know and love, the team assured us they would be ready for the first phase opening. They were going to host a seminar for 50 schoolchildren from around the region, who would later visit the project's resident large carnivores: Vucho the wolf and Medo the brown bear.

All well and good, but standing in the middle of what was essentially still a building site, Chris and I looked at each other and wondered how on earth they were going to pull this one off. There were no windows or doors, no education displays, and a lot of builders (most of whom spent most of the time sat around smoking), plasterers (who grafted like there was no tomorrow) and the general construction site muck – huge piles of rubble, planks of wood and discarded cement bags. Having seen some rapid major project turnarounds in my previous incarnation of running a contract cleaning business and undertaking many new building cleans, I knew that technically they could get the ground floor ready for the visit, but it would be darn hard work. There were just three short days before the opening on Saturday. Time to roll up the sleeves!

The new building will eventually be the Large Carnivore Education Centre. Based in the Pirin Mountains, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, in the village of Vlahi, the Centre is already a commanding site in the foothills of the mountains. The Centre is two storeys high and will house accommodation facilities, stables, a café and shop as well as exhibition halls and a seminar hall. Bulgaria still has a major problem with how negatively many people perceive large carnivores, and as we have previously reported numerous times in Wolf Print, wolves still attract a bounty. Elena recently reported a case to Chris and myself of a wolf having been tortured shortly after our last visit. The poor animal suffered tremendous cruelty that was both mindless and needless. The project team needs no spurring on to carry out their work, but cases like this do highlight how important it is to educate people about wolves, and about wildlife in general.

Visiting Vlahi now feels like a homecoming. The sights, smells and sounds of the village with its numerous goats, sheep and dogs have become familiar to us. It is a special place,

full of special people and animals. And although we could well do without the fleas and their vicious bites, these too are somehow part of the charm of the place.

The purpose of this visit was for a team from Education 4 Conservation to review the progress made on the education centre. The Darwin Initiative (a DEFRA project) has provided the funding for salaries, and for the educational materials and displays at the centre. The UKWCT has raised funding to produce a Wolf Management Plan and to help equip the café and accommodation block.

Over the next few days Chris, myself and my seven year old daughter, Charlotte (also now an intrepid traveller to projects with me), got down to work. We cleared rubble from the front of the site, painted newly erected stud walls, and swept and mopped the stone tiled floors. Meanwhile, Elena's husband, Sider Sedefchev, his father Philip and his brother, Attila, spent time completing the doors and windows they had hand-built, building stud walls for the displays and then installing the doors and windows into their frames. They worked late into the night every night and were up at the crack of dawn every day.

There was one point when we did wonder whether we would make the deadline in time, probably at the stage when it was realised that the holes for the windows were all different sizes! Philip, who is a craftsman of great skill, was not at all impressed by this, but stoically he resolved the situation by going round with a tape measure, carefully taking note of all the measurements, and then patiently instructing the builders what they needed to do to remedy the situation. The next problem was that the glass for the windows had been cut to the wrong dimensions and each pane was half a centimetre too big. Thankfully it was summer, the weather was warm and it didn't really make too much difference that the windows weren't glazed at this point. It would be obvious to the visitors that the building was a "work in progress".

More mopping, more sweeping, more painting, more moving of rubble. In between we managed to spend time with Vucho and Medo. It would be lovely to think these wonderful creatures recognised us as old friends, but I suspect deep down that the food we took to them made all the difference. Medo has settled into his new life very well. He loves to greet visitors, and if you spend any length of time sat outside his enclosure, often he will plonk himself down next to the fence by you, and doze in the sunshine. Although he is a captive wild animal, this is a far cry from his previous tormented life as a dancing bear.

Charlotte literally found her feet in Vlahi on this her second visit. She spent a lot of time skipping up and down the steep slopes like a little mountain goat, with Elena's son, Hanko, who is the same age, there being only a month's difference between them. He is hugely protective of her around the large Karakachan livestock guarding dogs, and when they go on their adventures hunting for green lizards and frogs. Neither can speak the other's language, but they have formed a strong bond, and somehow seem to communicate very well. Hanko spends a lot of time in the surrounding hills, and is

extremely comfortable around creatures of all sizes. He shows no fear even though he is dwarfed by some of the animals, and he has an incredible relationship with Vucho.

One evening, Todor, one of the shepherds, came back to the house with a poisonous snake which he had come across earlier that day whilst out with the flocks. He thought it would be great for the children to see. And so for two days, the children spent a lot of time looking at the snake, thankfully safely tucked away in an empty two-litre clear plastic bottle. For much of the time, it seemed content just to lie quietly, curled up in its new temporary home. But clearly this wasn't a long term option, and we eventually released the snake in the village graveyard, which was a very tense moment. It refused to slither out of the bottle, and so Elena had to cut the bottle open and gently ease the snake out. It was at this point that the bell in the graveyard started to ring out. Something we'd never heard before in Vlahi, and judging by the general state of neglect in the graveyard, something that doesn't happen too often. The bell tolling seemed very ominous at the time – an omen of some kind. Elena explained later that it was St George's Day the day after and the bell was being rung to notify the villagers of the impending celebrations.

On the day before the opening of the Centre, it was all hands to the deck. The final painting of the stud walls was done, windows were put into their recesses, and some of the doors were hung. There was much sweeping and mopping. The plasterers were still hard at work rendering the walls in the seminar hall, and the final piles of rubble were removed from the front of the building.

The big day finally arrived. We were all up early and walked over to the Centre soon after breakfast. This might seem a simple thing to do, but walking anywhere at all in and around Vlahi involves very steep hills, and in my case, aching muscles and getting out of breath. We had three hours before the children arrived, and we got to work straight away. To our dismay, the builders also turned up, and started working in the seminar hall. We'd spent much of the previous evening getting the floors cleaned, and all this hard work had now been for nothing as they laid their plastic sheets and started finishing off the plastering work. By the time they had finished, we had just one hour before the children were due to arrive to clean up again. We also had 50 brand new chairs that had to have the polythene removed from them, food and drink to set out, projection screens to put up, and the final touches to the education displays to be made. Another problem was discovered when the interactive display about the bear's life cycle had not been cut properly. This display comprised a round wooden outer board with pictures of bears, and an inner circular board with text which, when revolved, is matched with the pictures. The pictures and text were on self adhesive poster material and had to be fitted to the revolving boards, but they had to be cut properly in order to do this. Philip, Sider and Elena all spent time discussing how they were going to put this right, and then got down to the time-consuming job of carefully cutting the circles of the displays and fitting them to the board.

At 11 o'clock we received the news that the children had arrived in the village. How we had achieved it I don't know, but we were almost ready to receive the children at the

Centre. The walk up the steep hill from the village would take them another few minutes, so everyone frantically dashed around cleaning away all the tools and cleaning materials, and carrying out the last minute sweeping and mopping. All the chairs and tables had been laid out in the seminar hall. All that remained was for the exterior door to be hung. As the children came slowly up the hill, the last heavy wooden door was hung in its frame. Phew!

Elena greeted the children, and welcomed them to the new centre. She spent some time explaining how the centre had come about, and the children then went inside to see the displays. Mobile phones and digital cameras came out in force as the children busily read the posters, took lots of photographs and made their way around the exhibits. When the Centre is finally completed, there will be lots of interactive displays about large carnivores. What has to be borne in mind is that a lot of the children who will visit the centre live rurally, and in a culture where hunting and pastoral farming is endemic and attitudes towards large predators are, on the whole, very negative. As with a lot of similar programmes throughout the world, the aim is to present an accurate picture of large carnivores so that adults and children alike can form their own opinions about wolves, bears and lynx. Of course, the hope is always that by presenting the facts about large carnivores, people will learn to at least respect and tolerate them as part of the landscape in which they belong.

After the children had watched a short film about the brown bear project in Russia, they eagerly downed lemonade, ate some very delicious cookies, and set off for the other side of the valley to meet Vucho and Medo. The children were split into groups of ten, and the first group walked up the hill to Vucho's enclosure. Elena was, by this time, inside the enclosure with him and the children kept a safe distance from the fence. Vucho was as nervous as they were and paced around Elena with his tail firmly tucked between his legs. Finally, he sat on Elena's lap, and looked out at the children apprehensively. So much for the image of the big, bad wolf that the children were probably expecting. As Elena continued to talk, both wolf and children relaxed and by the time their visit was over, they were up against the fence touching Vucho and he was responding by licking hands and faces. Mobile phones and cameras came out again, and Chris was tasked with taking lots of photos of children with their new friend, Vucho.

I wandered down to Medo's enclosure before the first group of children arrived, laden with bags of bread and apples. Medo came to greet us and we were very quickly joined by ten clamouring children charging down the hillside to see him. They each grabbed an apple or piece of bread, and Medo, unperturbed by the noise, delighted his audience by rearing up on his hind legs as the food was thrown over his fence.

It was finally time for the children to leave, and their teachers told us they had had a great day, and would be back again soon.

Back at the Centre, we sat down to enjoy the remaining cookies, and a very large container of home-made wine. I spent some time talking with a representative from Sofia Zoo who works with the wolves there, and told her about our wolves at the Trust. I was

trying to explain to her in Bulgarian that we had nine wolves, having just been taught by seven year old Hanko how to count from one to ten in Bulgarian (or so I thought). Theresa looked at me with a quizzical frown on her face, and I shouted over to Elena: “What is nine in Bulgarian?” Her response made no sense to me and I asked her to repeat it. “That’s not what Hanko taught me I replied.” It turned out he’d been learning Japanese at martial arts classes and found in me a willing pupil. I had no reason to suspect that a seven year old Bulgarian boy would teach me anything other than Bulgarian and so I had been merrily practising counting one to ten in Japanese, thinking unwittingly (not knowing any Japanese) that I was learning Bulgarian. It was at this point that everyone collapsed in hysterics at the visions of me tramping up and down the hills reciting Japanese diligently for three whole days.

Bulgaria is a beautiful country. The people in the village of Vlahi and at the project are a joy to be with, and make us feel very welcome every time we go there. The Education Centre will breathe new life into the village, and everyone who has contributed to this project has helped to create something that will have an impact for generations to come on both the human and the biotic communities.