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Report from Slovakia

A little help goes a long way in the hands of some of Slovakia's dedicated conservationists

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A little help goes a long way in the hands of some of Slovakia's dedicated conservationists . . .

By Brian Keeley and Sara McCabe

Every year BCI responds to hundreds of requests for assistance from bat conservationists around the world. At the same time, there are locations in critical need of conservation attention where we know of no one to take on the responsibility. Slovakia, which in the last decade has become an independent country and made a turbulent transition from communism, was one such place where bat conservation had long been neglected. So in 1996, when BCI received a letter from Peace Corps volunteer Kent Jarcik representing a group of Slovakian bat conservationists, we were eager to see what work they had planned. Organized as The Center for Environmental Awareness (but commonly known as BAMBI), the group made the simple request of a donation of bat detectors to help locate bat roosts. With a generous discount from detector manufacturer Pettersson Elektronik AB of Sweden, we were able to fulfill their request.

Soon after, BAMBI leaders Stefan Matis and Laura Dittel sent us reports and photographs showing a surprisingly broad spectrum of work that included not only research using the bat detectors, but education and conservation efforts as well. The BAMBI volunteers had involved students, teachers, and other community members in their research. They had helped schools host bat house-building workshops and had published several children's stories about bats. In addition, they had produced brochures about bats and convinced owners of bat-occupied buildings to preserve their roosts.

Their work was impressive, to say the least, but they weren't finished. After surveying for bats across the country, they decided to target one vital region, the Kosice Valley karst area in the northeast. Dotted with underground caverns and small villages, the valley is the shared domain of bats and people. The BAMBI team outlined a plan that would educate valley citizens and lead to the protection of many thousands of bats. With their prior successes to recommend them, they were able to win financial support not only from BCI, but also from government agencies

and local businesses.

Currently, the BAMBI team is in the second year of their Kosice Valley project. In the summer, the group surveys bat roosts in old churches, castles, and other buildings--no less than 150 such buildings to date. In winter, their research takes them to hibernation roosts in caves, tunnels, cellars, and abandoned mines. In between, they give lectures and field trips to schools and church groups. They hand out educational booklets and brochures among these groups as well as to people on the street and in pubs. They have even chipped in to clean guano out of attics where bats are roosting--a strategy that definitely helps persuade proprietors of these buildings to keep their bats. Last fall, they also succeeded in protecting one of the most important caves in the Slovak karst area--one that houses 12 species of bats--by placing a bat-friendly iron gate across the entrance. Meanwhile, the group is continually meeting with both government and nongovernment agencies, museums, caving organizations, foresters, and others in an ongoing effort to find partners to support their work.

This project is the first of its kind in the Slovak Republic. With such profound political change in the recent past, it's no surprise that bat conservation has not been a high priority for the government or citizens of Slovakia. It is precisely circumstances such as these in which a few individuals make the biggest difference. Although Slovakian biologists have researched and monitored bat colonies in the past, they had never before made concrete plans for protection of habitat or public education. BAMBI has made a considerable first step in that direction, and we eagerly await news of their future successes.

Brian Keeley is Director of BCI's North American Bat Conservation Partnership. Sara McCabe is Editor of BATS.



Right: BAMBI has produced a variety of brochures, which they give to priests and other proprietors of buildings that house bats, as well as to the general public. Slovakia's Ministry of the Environment ordered 100 copies of one brochure, calling it "mandatory reading" for all employees who handle projects dealing with biodiversity.



In winter, BAMBI volunteers monitor caves, tunnels, cellars, abandoned mines, and other such hibernation roosts.



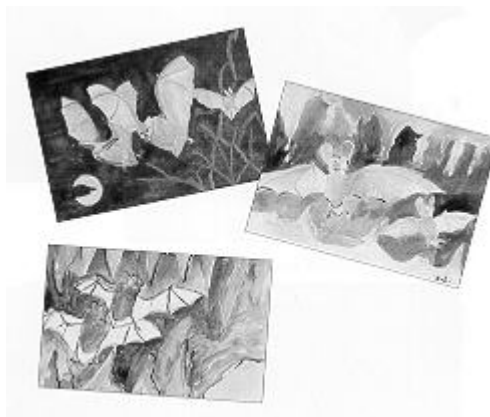
With the construction of this custom gate, BAMBI protected the winter roost of an important colony of bats that includes half of all of Slovakia's known species. Constant local visitors had been disturbing the bats during hibernation.



In summer, BAMBI teams survey bat roosts in old churches, castles, and other buildings. The group has had much success convincing proprietors of these buildings to protect their bats, perhaps in part because they often offer to clean bat guano out of the attic. Local farmers happily volunteer to cart away the guano to fertilize their fields.



The Western barbastelle bat (*Barbastella barbastellus*), one of the rarest bats in Europe, is one of 24 species found in Slovakia.



In spring of 1998, BAMBI worked with the Hungarian Bird Conservation Society to organize an art contest for 40 elementary schools in Slovakia and Hungary. More than 300 students showed their appreciation for bats and storks through their drawings, which are currently displayed in a traveling exhibition. Several pieces, such as the ones pictured here, were selected to be printed as postcards. Proceeds from the postcards will be used to fund next year's competition.

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