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News

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HELLO, and welcome to my second annual newsletter. I suppose this can now be regarded as a Christmas tradition.

It's been a very busy year again, and yet at the end of it I don't seem to have achieved very much. It's a little disheartening to look back at the plans I had last year, and to realize that all those papers from my thesis still aren't submitted . . . Maybe by this time next year?

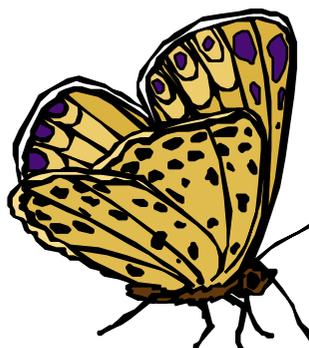
I've also become a bit disappointed with Switzerland, as although I've been here another year, I don't really feel that I fit in any better than last year. I think this is because the Swiss are a difficult people to get to know, rather than any lack of effort on my part. The language is still a problem, although I've certainly learnt a lot in the last year, and am much more confident at speaking German when I have to (I even drop in the odd word of the local dialect, sometimes without realising it). Still, I shall persevere for the remaining ten months of my contract here and hope to make more progress at fitting in this coming year.

On a more positive note, I completed the dance course that I started last year, and am now a *mean* tango dancer, so beware! I'm not bad at the Samba, cha-cha-cha, waltz (both Viennese and English) and the rumba too . . .

Work has been okay this year, but once again, progress has been slower than I'd hoped. After I returned from England last Christmas, I worked pretty solidly at counting the flea larvae and adults from last years frozen nests. This took me right through until April, when this year's field season began. I wasn't originally planning to do a full field season this year, but just collect fleas for my lab project. Unfortunately, this was not how things worked out in the end, as I took over a field study of blue tits and their fleas that had already been set up for another experiment (which hadn't worked). Although this seemed a good idea at the time, it meant that the experiment wasn't set up exactly as I would have liked, and the lab work had to be abandoned. Once more I have

many frozen nests from the field season containing fleas which will have to be counted, so it looks as though the first few months of 1997 will be very busy. I sometimes think I must have lost my sanity, because I have twice as many nests to examine this year, and it took me nearly six months last year!

One thing that I have managed to do this year is a lot of travelling - Mostly for conferences and workshops, but also a little for pleasure. I took a week off from the flea counting in March to attend a conference on Mathematical Biology at Bath. It was a good opportunity to visit the university again, and to catch up with the ant lab where I spent a busy year. It also coincided with a partial eclipse of the moon and comet *Hyakutek*, both of which were visible from the university playing fields on a very chilly night.



After the field season I don't seem to have been able to keep still. At the beginning of July, I went to Guarda in Eastern Switzerland for the annual workshop on Evolutionary Biology organized by Steven Stearns from Basel. This was great fun, not only for the science, but for the setting - The Alps at 2100m in late spring are wonderful, with loads of interesting plants and masses of butterflies. I even managed to see my first large blue butterfly (*Maculinea* species - now extinct in Britain) just 500m from the house in which I was staying. It was also a good opportunity to catch up with Wolfgang, Bea, Dieter and Natasha (friends from Silwood Park and Oxford), who are all now in Basel and also attended the course.

A couple of weeks later, I made my annual summer pilgrimage to England, and specifically to the Silwood summer ball. It was rather like a reunion this year as many friends from my Silwood days also came along and wiled the night away. Almost a week after my return to Switzerland, my parents and brother Pete came to visit me for ten days. We managed to pack a lot in, and covered most of the country - I think they were getting sick of mountains by the time they left. During their time here we spent a very pleasant few days in the Italian speaking part of Switzerland, and stayed in a

hotel owned by the father of Maddalena, one of my colleagues from Bern. Other highlights of their visit included trips to Luzern, up the Pilatus (a mountain nearby), to Grindelwald and its glacier, and to Murten (with beautiful Medieval walls) and Avenches (with its Roman amphitheatre).

After a couple of weeks of work, I was off again, this time to an Evolutionary Biology conference in Budapest. It was good to see Hungary again! On the free day of the conference I met up with Graham, Ric, Christine and James (all friends from Silwood who were also there), and we drove to visit Gyuri Csòka and his family. We were entertained in Gyuri's usual style, and given an amazing Hungarian soup which I still fantasize about! Shortly after returning from Hungary, Graham paid me a brief overnight visit on his way back to England - possibly encouraged by having left all his money in my hotel room in Budapest.

After another few weeks of work, it was off on the train again for another 16-hour journey, this time to Aarhus in Denmark, to visit Lotta Sundstrom, a friend who was at Bern when I first arrived. I gave the same seminar there as in Budapest - about my thesis work on butterflies and ants - and obviously impressed Koos Boomsma (the departmental head) enough to encourage him to support a grant proposal I've just submitted to do some work there next year on large blue butterflies (*Maculinea* species - now extinct in Britain).

Just a few days later came my biggest trip of the year, to Australia to attend the Behavioural Ecology Congress in Canberra. Of course it wasn't worth going all the way to Australia just for a week's congress, so I also did a bit of tourism, along with Sarah Kraak, a Dutch friend from Bern who also attended the congress. First of all we spent five days in Sydney, visiting Carlos Fonseca and Gislene Ganade (friends from Silwood and Oxford) and generally doing the sights - The harbour bridge, the aquarium, Taronga zoo, Ku-Ring-Gai chase national park and MacQuarie university. It was great to be back in Australia again, and to wake up to bright sunshine and the calls of cockatoos - even in the Sydney suburbs! From there we drove with Carlos to the congress in Canberra, and managed to stop along the way to look at some live echidnas (spiny anteaters) - an animal I've always been disappointed not to have seen when I was in Australia during my DPhil. The congress was good, and I managed to meet a lot of new people as well as catching up with many old colleagues (including Menna Jones and David Curl who I'd not seen for 8 and 12 years respectively). It was also pretty stressful, partly because Sarah had her passport and other documents stolen on the first day of the congress. Afterwards we flew to Cairns from where we joined an organised tour



of the Atherton tablelands. This was excellent, although there was a little too much bird watching and too little entomology for my tastes (but then again, I know I have strange tastes). We had an excellent guide who took us to see a wide range of habitats, and had a very good knowledge of the local flora and fauna. Probably the highlight 'though was watching a duck-billed platypus snuffling around in the small creek near the hotel at Yungaburra by street light. I managed to take 7 rolls of slide film while there, and got some wonderful pictures of various creatures, 'though it was too dark for the platypus. After the organised tour, Sarah and I took a day trip out to the barrier reef on one of the many boats that visit Michaelmas cay and Hastings reef. The weather was atrocious, with heavy rain, and I got violently seasick on both the way out and the way back. The reef itself was fantastic 'though, and I even had a first go at Scuba diving there - a wonderful experience, 'though I actually enjoyed snorkelling more, as there was more time to watch the fish rather than worry about the diving equipment. The next day we flew back to Switzerland, and on the plane I came down with one of the worst bouts of 'flu that I've ever had - I couldn't really do anything for nearly two weeks.

My final foreign trip of the year was to an international workshop on large blue butterflies (*Maculinea* species - now extinct in Britain) in mid November. I managed to combine this with a visit to Stefan and Carmen (friends from Silwood) in Düsseldorf on the way there, and to Robert (friend from school) and Iris (his Belgian girlfriend) in Leuven (Belgium, near Brussels) on the way back. The conference itself was also pretty good, and inspired me to put together the grant proposal for Denmark that I mentioned before.

So, what of the future? Well, there are still all those papers from my thesis which should be written soon . . . There is still that large near-by country called Italy which I've not visited yet, and there are still many fleas waiting to be counted. I should be in Bern until next October, but after that I'm not sure. If I get the EU grant I've applied for, then I may well be in Aarhus in Denmark, but that's by no means certain. What is certain, however, is that you'll get a warm welcome if you'd like to visit me - either in Bern, or wherever I end up after that, so do drop by if you get a chance.

In the meantime, have a great festive season, and a wonderful 1997!

David