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David Nash New Year News 2000

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First of all, an apology for the lateness of this newsletter. My only excuse is that I've been globetrotting for the last few months, and I've not had a chance to sit down and try to recall everything that I've been doing until the Christmas holidays. This has partly been because my contract in Århus ended on the 31st December 1999, which means I've been busy looking for something to do next. In December I finally heard that my application for a grant from the Carlsberg foundation (Yes, the same people who make "probably the best lager in the world") was successful. This means that I shall be staying in Denmark, carrying on my work on *Maculinea alcon* for the next year, but I'll be moving from Århus to Copenhagen in January. Post and E-mail sent to Århus, to either my work or home address, should continue to reach me, at least for the first few months of 2000.

I hope that 1999 has been a good year for you. For me it has been hectic, but enjoyable. I've done lots of travelling and managed to spend time in eight countries on three continents. The year started off with my furthest destination, Australia. I was there for a Social Insect congress in Adelaide over the New Year, and I stayed on afterwards for a week to tour around South Australia with Thomas Als from Århus. Our time in South Australia coincided with a heat wave, with temperatures above 37° C every day, with the maximum for the week some 43° C. We were both very glad of the air-conditioning in the car we rented. We drove from Adelaide south to the Coorong nature reserve to do a bit of bird watching, and then headed north, getting as far as Wilpena pound. This is a "natural amphitheatre" and we invested in a light plane flight around the structure itself, which gave a great if rather jerky view of the pound and the Flinders' ranges. We also managed to see quite a bit of Australian wildlife, particularly parrots of various descriptions, ants, lizards and even the odd marsupial. My photographs of many of these creatures can be seen on my web site.



Wilpena pound from the air

The first few months of 1999 were spent working in Århus, and also making a web-site for the Social Insect Research Group at Aarhus University. If anyone is interested in finding out more about what I do in Århus, the address of the site is:

<http://www.biology.aau.dk/~biodrn/Atta>

In April I had to move flat yet again, a constant problem in Århus. I was stuck with nowhere to stay for the whole month, and ended up moving into a student hall of residence for most of it. This was a little more cramped than the accommodation to which I've become accustomed. The situation was eased for the second half of April when I went to the UK, primarily to do some more work on surface hydrocarbons of *Maculinea* butterflies and *Myrmica* ants at the University of Keele. This went pretty well, and after returning to Denmark I could move into a new flat, which I will be able to keep until the end of my time in Århus.

The late spring and summer were spent carrying out more fieldwork on ant-parasitic *Maculinea alcon* butterflies and their *Myrmica* ant hosts in Denmark. However, I did manage to take a break on the 20th June to attend the Christening of Alexia Marie Joy Mott Beale, the daughter of my long time friends Steve and Julie.

As in 1998, most of my fieldwork was carried out with Thomas Als. This year, however, our fieldwork was lent an extra dimension by the fact that Thomas' wife Anne-Birgitte was expecting a baby, so we had to ensure that Thomas was contactable at all times and could get home easily. This meant that Thomas carried a mobile 'phone in the field, but since his rather old model tended to lose contact with the Danish 'phone network rather too easily, and ran out of battery power far too quickly, I decided to invest in my own mobile 'phone. I don't use this for 'phone calls much, but I've discovered that the SMS (Short Message Service) facility is a great way to keep in touch with my e-mail wherever I am in the world. Unfortunately the 'phone didn't like being totally immersed in water as a result of my mistaking a tangle of floating weeds in a ditch for an island during fieldwork at the start of November. I wasn't so keen on the freezing water myself either, but at least I survived. The 'phone has now been replaced.

Thomas' son, Emil, was born on the 4th July, and is doing well. A few weeks later I was back in the UK again for a short conference as part of the TMR social insect network. This was held at Losehill hall, a very pleasant converted manor house in the Peak District. It was a useful meeting, but too packed to allow any external expeditions, and I didn't stay on longer in the UK because I had much more ambitious plans...

I was due to present a talk at the ESEB (European Society for Evolutionary Biology) meeting in Barcelona at the end of August, so I decided to visit a few friends on the way and turn it into an interrailing excursion through Europe. OK, so I'm a little over the 26-year-old limit for interrailing, but it's still possible if one pays about 50% extra. I started off by visiting my old school friend Robert and Iris in Leuven, Belgium, then went on to Mainhausen (near Frankfurt) to see Roland and Elke Maile and their (at that point) 8 month old son Jesse.



The total solar eclipse, 11th August 1999, as seen at Munich

The next stage was a trip to Munich to stay with Waseem Baloch. Steve Mott and Jonathan Beale also visited Waseem at the same time, as we all planned to watch the total solar eclipse together. In the end we were very lucky - we got a great view of the eclipse from Waseem's balcony in southern Munich, while the crowds gathered at the Olympic stadium 5km north only saw a cloud-filled sky. Unfortunately I only had my little pocket camera with me, so the pictures I took of the eclipse are far from spectacular.

From Munich I took a day trip to Übersee on the Chiemsee to catch up with Diethelme Ortius, Klaus Lechner and their son Jakob, and I was welcomed with their usual hospitality. Then it was time to head

for Switzerland. I started off by spending a few days in the East of Switzerland with Imelda Schmid and her cat, who had five kittens at the time. It was nice to be in the mountains again after the flatness of Denmark, and to see glaciers and snow in August. While I was there I attended one of the "Fires in the Alps" - bonfires lit on all the alpine passes on the 14th August to celebrate Alpine life. I also took a day trip to the town of Poschiavo, home of my friend Sarah Zala.

Next on the agenda was a trip to Winterthur, to visit Beat and Arianne Wechsler and their son and daughter, Cyril and Sophie. I was pleased to see that Cyril no longer burst into tears on seeing me, and Sophie was charming despite never having met me before. My hectic schedule meant that I had to head on to Bern within 24 hours where I stayed with Markus Frischknecht. It's the first time I've been back to Bern since leaving there more than two years ago. While there I managed to visit the Hasli (my old department, which has changed hardly at all since I left, though new blood is expected soon) and also managed to see Maddalena Tognola and two films at the cinema in three days.

From Bern I went up to Basle and spent an enjoyable evening and night with Wolfgang Weisser and Bea, including a trip across the German border for an excellent meal. I had planned to visit Beatrice Steck and her boyfriend Urs in Basle the next day, but that night Urs went into hospital in agony suffering from kidney stones, so I only got to see Beatrice, and only between her visits to the hospital. I hope to see them under more favourable circumstances soon.



Gaudi's "la sagrada familia" in Barcelona

The next day was spent very pleasantly visiting Giorgina Bernasconi in Zurich, including a nice boat trip on Lake Zurich in perfect August sunshine and an excellent lunch at a lake-side restaurant. After another excellent tea, I then took the night train for Barcelona.

The conference there was large and hot, but once again air-conditioning came to the rescue - I loved the coolness of the rooms, but others were to be seen dressed in thick Nordic woolens at the height of the Spanish summer. As well as being a good place to catch up on the latest developments in evolutionary biology, it was a good conference for renewing old acquaintances, and I was particularly pleased to meet up with Tom Tregenza, Nina Wedell and Göran Arnqvist again.

Barcelona is reputedly one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. I attempted to venture into the city to confirm this for myself on three separate occasions, however the fates seemed to conspire to thwart me every time. On my first day in Spain, as I was waiting at the railway

station to go down town to sightsee and get some dinner, various colleagues from Århus arrived on the opposite platform. When I told them I was visiting the city, they reminded me that I should be back by 5pm for the official reception. Since I had been out of touch for the last three weeks, I assumed that this was some recent addition to the program, so I only spent an hour in the city, looking around the old cathedral etc. On returning to the conference site, I found that there was no reception, so I could have spent longer in the city. Worse still, there was no food to be had anywhere on the campus, and I ended up going to bed hungry. On the middle day of the congress I took the morning off to try to go down town again to book my train out of Barcelona, and then do some tourism. Due to the length of queues and being sent to the wrong window several times, it took 3.5 of the four hours I had set aside to get my train ticket, which meant that I only had time to briefly circle "La sagrada familia" and take a few pictures before returning for the afternoon session.

My final attempt at sightseeing was on the day of my departure. My train didn't leave until 7:15 pm, which should have given me plenty of time to drop my luggage at the station and then see the Parc Guell, where I had arranged to meet various people. Unfortunately I had not reckoned with the slowness of the metro and the distance from the nearest Metro station to the park, and had to turn back at the very gates of the park so as not to miss my train.

There then followed a very uncomfortable overnight train journey to Leuven (The sleeping car was small and full of cigarette-smoking Frenchmen, although officially non-smoking and despite my protests). I arrived there in time to help Robert and Iris pack and clean their flat before their migration to England. I had planned to cross the channel with them, but due to a change in their planned dates, I instead flew from Brussels to the UK, so that I could give a presentation at the 3rd international meeting for Butterfly Conservation in Oxford. This task completed successfully, I spent a very pleasant Sunday afternoon punting on the Thames with Robert and Iris (who had now arrived in Oxford from Leuven) and Maddy Mitchell, an old friend from my Oxford days who had recently moved back there.

In late September and October I spent some time in Copenhagen, visiting Koos Boomsma there and putting together my application for the grant from the Carlsberg foundation. In the middle of my second stint there I flew to Switzerland to celebrate Sarah Kraak and Beat Mundwiler's wedding. They had actually got married on the 9/9/99 in the UK, but the main party was in Switzerland. It was quite a moving ceremony, particularly the music played for everyone by Beat and Sarah themselves, and was followed by a fun party. It also gave me the opportunity to see a few more friends at the wedding, including Markus and Maddalena again, and Theo Bakker. The day before the wedding, I visited Drude Molbo, a new friend of mine who you'll undoubtedly hear more about and who comes from Århus, but is doing her PhD with Laurent Keller in Lausanne. On the day after the wedding I visited the newly-wedded Claudia Roden and Christoph Hauert, and met their one-month old daughter Julia, who was amazingly well-behaved and criminally cute.

On my return to Århus from Copenhagen at the beginning of November I discovered that my flat had been broken into, and my video, television, hi-fi, cameras and about 400 CDs had been stolen. Rather annoying, but at least none of my data or anything really irreplaceable had been taken.

Since then I've been doing even more rushing around. I made a 5-day visit to Lausanne to see Drude again, and then headed off for 2.5 weeks at Harvard University, visiting my old DPhil supervisor, Naomi Pierce. The plan was to write up some of my backlog of papers, and although some progress was made, I seemed to spend more time playing with her twin daughters, Kate and Megan, who are great fun. I also overlapped with Thomas Als who was there working out a phylogenetic tree of the Maculinea butterflies based on DNA sequences - He has some very interesting results, so stay tuned...

On my return to Denmark I had a couple of days to recover before I went over to the UK for a quietish Christmas with my parents. My younger brother Pete and his girlfriend Marion were also there much of the time, with their wonderful daughter Christina. My older brother Paul and his girlfriend Alison also visited on Boxing Day and there was much mirth as always.

I returned to Århus on the 30th December, and spent millennium night watching the Århusian fireworks with Drude. I hope that wherever you were then, you had fun, and that the year 2000 will bring you much joy and happiness.

David