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News 2009

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As I sit down to write this year's newsletter, the snow is gently falling outside, adding to a white blanket that has covered the house and garden for the last 4 days. It's a gentle end to a roller-coaster of a year.



Our back garden two days ago

2009 started in a rather sombre mood, as everyone at the department of biology waited to hear who would keep their jobs, after it was announced in late 2008 that the department needed to lose more than 30 employees. In the end, most of these were covered by early retirements and finding other sources of funding, so the final impact was not as serious as many people had feared. At the same time, I was waiting anxiously to hear about my application for a lectureship position in the department. I was invited for an interview in February, and was very happy to be offered, and take up the position in May. So, now I am a fully fledged lecturer, which doesn't make a lot of difference to what I do in my day to day research, but does mean that I can now officially supervise masters and Ph.D. students, apply for grants etc., and have more teaching responsibilities.



Matsula bay, Estonia

As usual, I have done a lot of travelling this year, for conferences and fieldwork, plus the odd bit of holiday. Last Christmas was again spent with Jane's mum, after which we flew to the U.K. for five days to celebrate New Year with my parents in Islip, and to catch up with my brothers and Robert, Iris and Aidan. I was back

in the UK very briefly in March for a one-day meeting on butterfly pathogens, and then we were in Islip again in April for Easter.

At the end of April I had four days in Matsula in Estonia, where I had co-organized a Ph.D. workshop on mutualistic interactions, and where it was particularly good to have old friends Duur Aanen and Heike Feldhaar as invited teachers.

András Tartally, my new postdoc, arrived at the start of June, and then my crazy summer began... The two of us immediately went up to the Danish island of Læsø to look for ants for five days. Then I returned to Læsø at the end of June, together with my Masters student, Erica Juel Ahrenfeldt, and Mette Rasmussen who carried out an undergraduate project on the flight patterns of *Maculinea* butterflies. After 5 days I returned briefly to Copenhagen for various meeting, and then rejoined the team on Læsø. This time, however, Jane came with me, and we were very kindly lent a car by Hanne while she and Jane's father were in the USA. After a couple of days more fieldwork, Jane and I then did something I have been meaning to do for years, which was to spend a few days on Læsø as tourists.



Conversation with armadillo

This was a wonderful few days, during which we stayed in a luxury self-catering flat at "Østergård", which I can thoroughly recommend. We then took the opportunity to drive back to Copenhagen over the course of five days, staying at various places in Jutland and Funen on the way. Highlights of this trip included visiting Claus Brusen's *Fantasmus* gallery in Sæby, visiting Jane's aunt Connie in Aalborg (and finally meeting her cousin Evy), communing with the armadillos at "Randers Regnskov", visiting the three highest points in Denmark (all between 147 and 171 m above sea level !), seeing the Jelling rune stone (which dates from the foundation of Denmark) and visiting Egeskov castle and seeing Piet Hein's sundial.

We then had a few days holiday in Copenhagen, before András and I took a two day trip to the Swedish island of Öland, where we completely failed to find and *Maculinea arion*, but we were much more successful finding *Maculinea alcon* in Skåne on the way home. After a 24 hour break we then carried on to various *M. alcon* sites in Jutland that I had not visited since 2004, and which were all still in pretty good shape. I then had the luxury of nearly two weeks in Copenhagen, before heading to Reykjavik in Iceland for the closing meeting of the NordForsk network on *Social Evolution*. Unfortunately my packed summer schedule meant that I couldn't spend any extra days on Iceland as a tourist, but I did enjoy an evening whale-watching trip with the other participants, and the experience (but not the taste) of eating rotting fermented shark...



An Icelandic Minke whale (delicious!)

It was then back to Copenhagen for one day, and then off to the UK for six days (the longest trip there in 2009) for a brief holiday with Jane, one day back in Copenhagen, and then a week in Turin in Italy, for the European Society for Evolutionary Biology meeting. I didn't get to see the shroud, but I did enjoy visiting the Egyptian museum on our free afternoon, and dining al fresco in the evenings, which was the only time at which the temperature was anywhere close to bearable.

September was a quiet month by comparison. Beatrice Steck was in Copenhagen for a few days for an international zoo meeting, so it was nice to catch up with her and show her a bit of the town for one afternoon. In late September I took my last international trip of the year (so far), when I was one of the invited teachers on an international postgraduate summer school about parasite-host interactions, held in a convent on the island of "Frauenchiemsee" in the Chiemsee in Bavaria. This was an idyllic location for a brainstorming meeting, with some excellent invited teachers (apart from me!), and motivated students, and a great day-trip to Salzburg during their Oktoberfest.

Since then, I have remained in Copenhagen, which has been quite a relief after the hectic summer! This does not mean that things have been less busy though, as I have been heavily involved with the preparations for the 16th international Congress of the IUSSI (International Union for the Study of Social Insects), which we will be hosting in Copenhagen next August. As webmaster for this, I spent an awful lot of time working on the web site before we went "live", opening registration in early December. (see www.iussi.org/iussi2010)

I have also been the organizer of the undergraduate course on Conservation this year, which has taken much of my remaining time since October, and which had the highest number of students since the first year it was run this year, perhaps because of the interest in the COP15 climate meeting in Copenhagen.

Unfortunately my busy schedule over the summer meant that I was not home for either Jane's birthday, or for our first wedding anniversary, which was real pity, as I have enjoyed my first year of married life immensely. I plan to go to fewer meetings and do less fieldwork 2010, partly because I'm sure I will need to be in Copenhagen for the IUSSI meeting, so I hope I'll be able to spend our second anniversary together. I also hope that we might finally get our "proper honeymoon" - which had to be cancelled this year because Jane suffered another minor hernia in the spring, which meant that we could not make any long distance flights. This is a condition that will need some fairly major surgery, which we hoped would be done before Christmas, but now it looks as though it won't be able to happen until the new year.



Autumn in the royal deer park north of Copenhagen

On another downer, after visiting this year's Copenhagen night of Culture, we returned home to find we had been burgled, and had lost my laptop and two of our cameras (fortunately I had a third with us). The worst part, however, was that the thieves had taken Jane's engagement ring (which had been my grandmothers') and another ring that had belonged to Jane's great grandmother. While the insurance company has been prompt in paying compensation, the two rings are irreplaceable

Even more unfortunately, the financial crisis has also started to bite quite heavily in 2009, with the very unfortunate result that Jane lost her job in November. As I write this, she is at a job interview, so I'm keeping my fingers crossed that goes well (which makes typing a bit difficult). The University has also announced that it will have to lay more people off in the New Year, so we are ending 2009 as we began, with a rather gloomy atmosphere pervading the work environment.

So, to finish with I'd like to look back on some of the happier moments of the year, such a several concerts by Mauro Patricelli and his Finisduo and Patricelli Group that Jane and I enjoyed attending this year, and the successful defence of my first Ph.D. student, Matthias Fürst in October, and of M.Sc. student Erica Juel Ahrenfeldt in November, and the record six scientific papers I had published this year. I hope that your 2009 has been a good one, and I look forward to good times in 2010.

David