



## Making hay while the sun shines

*Transylvania's annual hay-making festival attracts people from across Europe, who help preserve the world's most flower-rich habitat whilst feasting on the culinary delights it provides, as Nicky Penford reports.*

The hay meadows of Transylvania, in the Eastern Carpathian mountains of Romania, have evolved over centuries of management by scything and are probably the most species-rich meadows in the world, with over 60 species per square metre. Hay is the mainstay for farmers, where the average farm size is often only one hectare. The hay feeds the dairy cows over the long winters and it is said that a cartload of hay is needed for each leg of the cow, and as can be seen from the photo each cartload is pretty substantial, consisting of several haystacks. As we scythed the hillsides it seemed almost sacrilegious to be cutting swathes of fragrant orchids,

Cartload of hay being pulled by the dairy cows that will feed on it through the winter – "a cartload of hay for each leg of the cow". Photo: Nicky Penford.

gentians and other flowers that in the UK are largely confined to protected sites and nature reserves. However, without annual cutting the meadows would quickly be invaded by trees making the meadow impossible to cut, leading to abandonment.

It is ironic that I went to Romania to stop trees invading the uplands, whilst in Scotland much-needed woodland expansion is thwarted due to high deer numbers. In Romania bears, lynx and wolves keep deer numbers in check and they have never reached the unsustainably high numbers that have developed in Scotland due to the scourge of sporting estates and the elitism attached to deer stalking. Romania is a well-wooded country, indeed the name Transylvania refers to its

extensive woodlands. Maintaining a diversity of habitats within one of the most forested countries in Europe maximises biodiversity and maintains the cultural value of the landscape.

The Csángó people, who live in a Hungarian-speaking enclave in the Gyimes valley, have the highest level of plant knowledge anywhere in the world. Most locals can name half of the plants that occur in the area, a staggering 309 out of 621 species, and have extensive understanding of their medicinal and culinary use. This was certainly apparent from all the people we met, and our hosts Attila and Réka produced gourmet food with many herbs and berries gathered from the hillside to supplement the home-produced vegetables and cheeses. Attila even knew the culinary



preferences of his cows; when I encountered the parasitic plant 'dodder' as I scythed, he knew what it was and said his cows rejected it in the hay over winter. In contrast, our challenge was to scythe the rosette-forming carline thistle low enough to include it in the hay as it is like a globe artichoke and a favoured treat for the cows.

### The art of scything

Our days often began at 5.30am to start scything before the sun became too hot and to get the first cut ready to be dried by the sun before raking and turning. The day was a well-ordered structure of scything interspersed with fantastic picnics of home-produced herby cheeses, sour dour bread, salami from the house pig, and pork fat - an acquired taste. It was immensely satisfying to literally eat the view and be part of the process that produces an edible landscape; a perfect example of a closed food circle with virtually nothing purchased and no food miles! Summer barns were used to produce the cheese and butter daily and we stayed overnight to see the process and help milk the cows. Palinka, a local hooch made with plums, was drunk at 8.30am with breakfast after several hours scything, and red wine at lunchtime with a substantial goulash cooked in an iron pot over an open fire required a substantial siesta before scything could resume!

The hills were full of people as scything is a communal activity, with scythers working in rows downhill in unison, keeping up a cheerful banter. We got tuned in to the sound of the hills with the rhythmic swish of the scythe and the rasp of regular sharpening to keep a well-honed blade and the regular tap of the hammer on the peening stob that flattened the scythe blade prior to sharpening. Scything is a deeply satisfying art but one difficult to perfect. Although our hosts were patient tutors, the locals must have looked aghast at our scraggly sward

Left, clockwise from top: Making a hay stack is a group activity, rolling the hay downslope with rakes; Scything next to woodland that will rapidly encroach if left uncut; Farmer's son in haymeadow. Children inherit a rich knowledge of plants from the community. Above: Haybarn where hay is stored through the winter and collected by horse drawn sledge in the snow. Photos: Nicky Penford and Jackie Cumberbirch (encroaching woodland).

compared to their bowling green finish. We slept in hay barns on fragrant hay when cutting the highest meadows and watched nightjars flit around the us, catching moths as we sat by the fire after a long day.

### A precarious lifeline

These hay meadows and the way of life they support are threatened by rural depopulation and the lure of jobs in the west and many young people have left, leaving an ageing population to carry on this arduous work. As a result, only 20 per cent of the meadows are still being cut, with some meadows converted to sheep grazed pastures whilst others are being abandoned and lost to scrub encroachment. The most biodiverse meadows are the furthest from the villages and therefore the ones that are the first to be abandoned so it is these that are targeted by the hay-making festival.

An EU funded agri-environment scheme based on cutting the hay late enough to protect late-nesting corncrakes pays 400 euros per hectare and 90 per cent of farmers in the area have signed up to this, including many that would have no other incentive to cut their hay as they no longer have dairy cows, but can sell the hay to neighbours. So one small iconic bird is now responsible for the funding of a scheme that is helping to maintain the remaining hay meadows, but the byzantine complexity of the Common Agricultural Policy and its associated funding mechanisms means this is a precarious lifeline. It is a blunt instrument as the corncrake grass cutting date of 1 July is too late for lower meadows. This penalises farmers who have traditionally cut their meadows earlier, which resulted in a tapestry of diverse meadows with different cutting dates favouring different botanical composition of the swards. The Pogany-havas Association<sup>1</sup>, who organise the festival, work on a range of projects to help farmers to maintain their livelihoods and local environment and lobby the EU to implement support mechanisms relevant to small-scale, traditional farming systems, such as greater flexibility with cutting dates.

Eco-tourism<sup>2</sup> could play an important role but is currently in its infancy. However, after the festival I spent a fantastic week with a local guide mountain-biking over mountain tracks and hurtling down recently cut meadows, botanising at speed and staying in farm guest houses where



the range of home produced food made it a gourmet tour. One of our group, Alex Hill, noticed that many of the abundant apples were going unpicked and as he manufactures the UK's leading range of apple presses and is behind many community juicing projects<sup>3</sup>, he has returned to the valley and donated presses which are being used by the community and may lead to an apple festival to add to the hay-making festival.

I would urge anyone interested in the culture of traditional farming and food, wildflowers and working with like-minded folk to conserve these fantastic meadows to book a place on the next hay-making camp on 9-16 August 2015 or, for the less energetic, take a tour with a local guide. The links below provide details, but if you want to discuss it further contact me.

[www.treasuresoftransylvania.org](http://www.treasuresoftransylvania.org)

### References

1. [poganyhavas.hu/main.php](http://poganyhavas.hu/main.php)
2. [aldomas.ro](http://aldomas.ro)
3. [vigopresses.co.uk](http://vigopresses.co.uk)

*Nicky Penford is a Director of Reforesting Scotland and a lecturer in Countryside Management at Scotland's Rural College (SRUC). E: [nicky@farmland.plus.com](mailto:nicky@farmland.plus.com)*