

A MACEDONIAN ADVENTURE

by Robert Angus

Summer 2006 seemed rather heavy going. True, it had been rewarded by completion of my ongoing "*Stictotarsus*" *griseostriatus* chromosome story, now written up as part of a Master's degree by Lauren Dutton, and submitted for publication. But the combination of trying to keep my garden alive while struggling with a hosepipe ban and helping students with beetle chromosome projects when the drought had effectively "switched off" many of the beetles left me feeling not a little jaded. Still, by mid August all seemed under control, and we had even had some really useful rain. I could have got on with my sorting out of the *Pterostichus nigrita* complex of Carabidae, but no, I fell to thinking about some of the remaining loose ends of the *griseostriatus* story, and in particular of *S. macedonicus* Georgiev, described from two very small beetles (length 3.8–3.85mm) from Livadica Lake (Livadičko Ezero) in the Šar Planina mountains of northern Macedonia. The Natural History Museum in London has a female from the same locality, 3.9 mm long. Bulgarian material collected by David Bilton had been suggested as belonging to this species, but this material is consistently larger, and Georgiev himself in the Fauna of Bulgaria recorded *griseostriatus*, but not *macedonicus*, as occurring there. Then the decision: "Sod it! I'll go to Macedonia and get the thing myself." (A bit like Mole with the spring cleaning at the start of *The Wind in the Willows*.)

The decision having been taken, it proved a little tricky to put into effect. To begin with, Skopje is not on the destination list of either Ryanair or EasyJet. Google searches for "Cheap Flights + Skopje" came up with a number of interesting suggestions, most of which seemed to be unavailable. Why on earth was everyone going to Skopje? People my age remember the earthquake of the 60s, but younger people generally look blank when you mention the place. The various travel agents telephoned had no idea either, but eventually an answer was forthcoming from the Foreign Office website. There, some way below the "Landmines" entry (there aren't any!) was the word "football". Oh well, that accounted for it, and then, using ebookers, I got a good passage with Malev, via Budapest, with car hire at a reasonable rate. Done! Next was the business of maps and a travel guide. Stanford's in London would surely have the goods. They did – just! I bought the only copies of the only guide (The Bradt guide by Thammy Evans) and map (the Hungarian Gizi map). To my relief the guide said the Gizi map was the only good one and that there was a more detailed map of the Šar Planina available from the Tabernakul bookshop in Skopje. This was followed by a warning about the idiosyncrasies of driving in Skopje. Hey-ho!

I left Heathrow at about 6 in the morning on Monday September 4th, with the return journey booked for Saturday the 9th. The worst of the chaos and confusion wrought by would-be liquid-explosive merchants had passed, and with such an early start the queues weren't too bad. I arrived at Skopje airport mid afternoon and soon had my car (a new Opel Corsa) and set off for Skopje. Amazingly I managed to find a parking place and the bookshop without incident – but they assured me they had never heard of the map! At this stage I decided to make for the ski resort of Popova Šapka (Priest's Hat!) in the Šar Planina mountains above Tetovo. This is high (above tree line) and promised plenty hotel accommodation. Except that the hotels were all closed as it was not the season! So, back to Tetovo, where I didn't find the hotels (they do exist, but central Tetovo is a bit of a scrum). However, beside the road back towards Skopje is the "Petrol Company Hotel" which is pleasant and quiet. Having checked in and had a much-needed beer, I asked the receptionist if he thought the bookshop in Tetovo – which I had found – might have the missing map. He doubted

it, but offered to contact his friend who was president of the Ljuboten Mountaineering Club of Tetovo. Yes please! He telephoned and arranged that his friend could call round at the hotel the following evening. Well, at least there was a contingency plan. And Ljuboten is the imposing mountain north of Skopje, and it was here that Livadica Lake was supposed to be – at least according to Wikipedia. Other websites had different versions and one even said the lake was in Kosovo! There is a mountain hut on the edge of Ljuboten, with a track, drivable according to some sources, leading right up to it. That track was on my Gizi map! Tomorrow I would explore it and see how far I could go. I got about two-thirds of the way from the main road to the hut before my car skidded too much on the loose surface and would go no further. I parked it in a forest clearing, photographed it so that at least if I lost it I would know whether I had found the right clearing, and continued on foot. Forty five minutes brought me to the hut, nestling at treeline on the side of Ljuboten. I continued around the southern (Macedonian) side of the mountain, looking for a suitable corrie where the lake might be. No luck, and in front of me was a col which looked suspiciously like the border. And some rather loose scree. Time to turn back. Back at the clearing there was my car and a couple of others belonging to locals who assured me (they understood German) in no uncertain terms, that Livadica lake was in Macedonia!

That evening, back at the hotel, I met Jovan Bozinoski, president of the mountaineering club. A very pleasant and helpful man, a 28 year old veterinary student, who knew what chromosomes are! And a qualified mountain guide. I showed him my pictures on the screen of my camera. Yes, the col was indeed the border, but actually the lake was not on Ljuboten itself, and it was in Kosovo! However, not to worry, they went there frequently, it wasn't a problem. Yes, he could take me there. I asked the price. That was simple – the standard rate in Macedonia for a day trip exceeding six hours is 50 Euros. Then he discovered I was planning to walk in Wellingtons. He was not at all happy. Part of the path had rough stones and my boots would probably be shredded! As I had already blistered my feet quite badly and twisted an ankle, I had to take this seriously. After some thought he suggested another lake, Karanikoličko Ezero (Black Nick's Lake), which might be less punishing. I had seen this on the map, far behind Popova Šapka, close to the border with Kosovo, and it looked very interesting. We agreed on this and that, if I and my boots proved up to it, we would do Livadica the day after. He explained that for this trip we would need the use of a Jeep, and this was duly arranged (€60, well-earned as it happened!), and we agreed to meet at six the next morning. Jovan asked if it would be OK if two of his friends came – of course it would!

So next morning we set off in the pre-dawn gloom. Through Tetovo, up the road to Popova Šapka, and on to the rough tracks. This was fascinating, through hilly terrain with some mixed woodland with glorious flowers including the Willow Gentian which I grow in my garden, and finally down into the valley of the Tetovo River at Lešnica (a wooded place), where the walk started. We crossed the river, followed the track up through the forest till we reached treeline, and then turned up a side valley. The scenery was superb, a bit like the Spanish Cantabrian mountains round Riaño. The climb seemed to feed on itself (it's not just in Scotland that you struggle to the top of the bit you can see only to discover more hillside stretching ahead into the distance!) and at one stage I began to seriously wonder if I would make it. However, Jovan and his friends knew how to keep me going and suddenly we crossed the ridge and there was Black Nick's Lake lying below us. Not a corrie lake as I had imagined, but set some small distance from the head of a high valley, where it had been dammed by the ice. We had lunch on the lakeshore, and then, having ascertained that I would like an hour for collecting, Jovan enquired if it would be OK for him and his friends to

nip up to the top of the adjacent mountain while I did my collecting. What a splendid idea – they had really earned that!! And just before they set off I showed them that the beetle was present in the lake. Smiles all round!

The beetle fauna of the lake was ridiculously simple. Only the *Stictotarsus*. It had to be *macedonicus* – and some at least of the beetles were small. Apart from that there was an abundant *Sigara* (Corixidae) (I think only one species) and one large *Corixa* (presumably *C. punctata*), moving swiftly in deeper water. By the time the others returned I had netted and stashed more than 100 beetles, so we set off back in triumph! It was mainly downhill but quite a trek nonetheless. I was knackered! So were my feet. I had to admit that Livadica Lake the next day was unrealistic. So we had dinner together at the hotel that evening, then parted company. It had been a most enjoyable and highly satisfactory day.

I decided to use the remainder of my time in Macedonia to visit the Pelister National Park, near Lake Prespa. The guide book showed two high-altitude lakes, poetically named Big and Little. There was a picture of the Big Lake (Golemo Ezero) and it looked very much *griseostriatus* habitat. Perhaps there would be another species there, possibly even David Bilton's Big Bulgarian! The Pelister mountains are home to a forest of the Molika pine, endemic to the greater Macedonian region, and there has been a serious attempt to develop eco-tourism. This means there are hotels and also maps and way-marked trails. Thursday was a gentle day – driving down to Pelister, finding a hotel (the Molika!), getting a map and making quite sure I had found the right track for tomorrow. That and letting my feet recover a bit!



Above Black Nick's Lake, Jovan on the left Victory parade at the Lake, Jovan on the right.

Friday dawned bright and sunny and I set off up the trail in good sprits. Progress was slow but steady; up through the Molika pine forest, then on above treeline to the Big Lake itself – this time a more normal corrie lake. The lake was floored with large jagged boulders as well as smaller stones, so that I was anxious not to tear my net. The beetles, to my surprise, were not the *griseostriatus* group, but a small black *Deronectes*, apparently identical with one David Bilton had found in the Rila mountains of Bulgaria – either *D. platynotus* or *D. mazzoldii*. On the way up to the lake I had noticed two smallish pools on the shoulder of the mountain and, hoping that they might have some "*griseostriatus*", I cut my losses at Big Lake and went back to investigate these. Not a riot! Abundant *Agabus bipustulatus*, a few *Anacaena* and one female *Helophorus flavipes*! It was time to limp back to the car!

And that was that – another enjoyable day on the mountains, and I did have the "*griseostriatus*" from Black Nick's Lake. And what of this beast? Is it *macedonicus*? Probably. Black Nick's Lake is only about 20 km from Livadica and appears very similar to it. The beetles themselves range in size from 3.9 – 4.3 mm, with most specimens about 4 mm long. Chromosomally they are a distinct species. They are,

however, just that bit bigger than the Livadica material, and for that reason I remain anxious to get the real thing. I hope to return to Macedonia next September! Macedonia is a great place. The scenery is fantastic, the people – especially Jovan – are very helpful, and I returned from the trip refreshed as well as somewhat shattered, having had the time of my life.

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