Organised by Adam Petrusek from Charles University in Prague, 21 PhD students, two Master students and one recent MSc graduate, two postdocs and seven of the students' supervisors gathered at Svatý Jan pod Skalou, west of Prague in the utterly beautiful Czech Karst, Český kras. And “pod skalou” (= below the rock) it was indeed - under a spectacular rock, in fact. The former Benedictine monastery, now a college for teacher students greeted us with an unusual treat: the lectures took place in a room with a ceiling fresco and a large wall painting.

This time no funding was sought before, so we did not need to come up with a fancy title and it was simply the ‘PhD student meeting in animal evolutionary biology’. Although the participants were affiliated to no more than four Czech and German universities (Prague, Berlin, Dresden and Brno), they originated from no less than 16 countries (double from last year!), including Canada, China, Egypt, India and the USA. And while that is impressive, it is perhaps even more impressive that nobody actually cared. This year, groups from the ecology department in Prague and Sophie Armitage’s lab in Berlin joined the meeting anew. Welcome!

On Thursday, some people started the meeting off with examining the local surroundings, peregrine and black woodpecker included, others attempted to get onto a local wi-fi (which, in fact, only became functional next day). On Friday after lunch, the talks started. PhD students had been guaranteed a talk but all participants could present if they wished, as there were enough slots. Talks were ca 20 minutes with further 10 minutes for discussion. PhD students chaired the sessions – thanks to Bin, Jana, Tereza and Barbara for excellent time keeping of the sessions.

Altogether, there were 16 talks (not including two keynote lectures). As last year in Bautzen, the talks covered a wide, but not too wide a range, including ageing in birds, phylogenetic analyses in fish and chitinase genes in Drosophila, to diseases in wild bees and in termites, hybridisation in mussels, predation-driven trait diversification in dragonflies and a number of talks on sex chromosome evolution. The order of the talks was thematically randomised. And this worked very well - no competition by the frescos to the exciting talks.

By a tradition that is as long as the meeting itself, there were two outstanding Invited Speakers - Michal Vinkler from Prague’s Charles University (Molecular evolution in avian immune defence) and Sophie Armitage from FU Berlin (Insect immune strategies: resisting, tolerating and remembering infections).

Again, and I keep saying that ‘again’, quite a few of the participants were giving their first talk outside their own lab and everybody did very well. As a novum, some students did not present. There also were seven posters. Following the student feedback from last year’s meeting, every presenter received specific feedback in one-to-one discussion with one or mostly two senior scientist. This was much appreciated and suggestions arose to retain that for next year’s meeting but also expand it to the posters. As another novelty we had a quick elections among seniors as for the best student talk. This went to Master student Hannah Davis from Berlin, runner-up was Sofia Mazzoleni from Prague. Many congratulations!

People from different labs were often mixed in the accommodation rooms, as well as for lunch and in the evening. The evening discussions took place in the former chapel room of the monastery and Adam had organised a barrel of beer from Beroun. Very tasty, slightly on the ale side. Impressively, the beer tap was owned by Adam’s department. Perhaps the number of people was slightly on the high side as judged from the signs that people seemed to somewhat separate by lab. So a tiny bit less than 2017’s ‘extended lab meeting’.

To me, the meeting concluded with something unheard of, but something that characterises the friendly, social, interactive atmosphere: the two invited speakers, Michal and Sophie, were both seen on Sunday morning in the kitchen washing and drying the dishes!

Just for the records, the costs were again kept low: 85 euros for those who stayed since Thursday evening, 75 for Friday arrivals (food, drinks, seminar room and all included). A bargain for such a feast.

Rumours have it that the next meeting will be organised by the Otti lab in Bayreuth. See you there.

Klaus Reinhardt (TU Dresden)
(with additions from Adam and Sophie, and photographs by Reda Ahmed - thanks to all!)