

VIII Congress of the European Society for Evolutionary Biology (ESEB)

20 – 25th August 2001, Aarhus, Denmark

The VIII Congress of the European Society for Evolutionary Biology (ESEB) was held at Aarhus, Denmark in August 2001. This biennial conference had it all. An international array of plenary speakers, twenty-five diverse symposia, a beautiful venue and a good supply of Carlsberg beer. The invited speakers included David Haig, Nancy Moran, Michael Donoghue, Andrew Clark and Andrew Read. Deborah Charlesworth gave an excellent address as the new president of the European Society for Evolutionary Biology, after her introduction by the former president, Godfrey Hewitt. An inspiration to all research students was Alexander Badyaev who was unanimously awarded the John Maynard Smith Prize, an award that is given to the best recent PhD candidate. He presented a lecture on the paradox of rapid evolution of sexual size dimorphism in *Carpodacus mexicanus* (house finch) that clearly demonstrated his remarkable achievements.

The symposia ranged from functional genomics to population genetics and from sperm competition to social evolution. With five parallel sessions and a broad range of topics, all interests were catered for. I personally enjoyed the opportunity to gain an insight into fields of research that I had not previously experienced. There was a fascinating symposium on the evolution of non-coding DNA which included discussions on the origins and evolutionary constraints of introns. Susan Ptak (Stanford University) had used computer simulation to subject known *Drosophila* sequences to insertions and deletions, and Genscan (an algorithm that determines the location of exons

and introns) to determine the effect on splicing. This had revealed that introns were not truly neutral sequences. Daniel Jeffares (University of Copenhagen) proposed that introns arose in the RNA world before the exons that surround them and were spliced out of an RNA genome by the precursor to the modern spliceosome.

Although the five days were completely filled with lectures, plenaries and poster sessions, there was an afternoon's respite during which the hosts had organised excursions of the local region. Our mini-tour included the ascent of the Himmelbjerget ("Sky Mountain") (one of the highest points in Denmark at 143m!), a visit to a very contemporary museum of art and a trip along the Gudena river. One personal highlight of this trip was collecting grasshoppers with the very able assistance of two professors and a multitude of helpers.

I felt very fortunate to attend this conference as applications far exceeded the number of places. When ESEB comes to Leeds in August 2003 there will be the opportunity for 950 people to attend but even this number, we fear, may not prove sufficient for the rapidly growing field of evolutionary biology. Preparations in Leeds have already begun: see <http://www.eseb.org>

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