

Golden Leaf Competition a Half a Century Old

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On 20–25 June 2022, the jubilee 50th National Round of the Golden Leaf natural history competition took place. Not many youth competitions can boast of such

a respectable age, so it is a good opportunity to have a look at its past and present.



What is the Golden Leaf?

Golden Leaf is a competition for teams of primary school children with interest in nature and its protection, conservation and management. The organiser is the Czech Union for Nature Conservation (CUNC). It is co-organised by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, which means that schools are recommended to include the competition into their activities.

Golden Leaf is however more than a competition. It is not only about comparing each other's knowledge and competences but it also wants to be a gathering with an experience. The goals, as mentioned in the Golden Leaf competition rules, therefore not only include *offering children the opportunity to test their knowledge and motivate them for further development or enabling children to present their activities in public and formulate acquired knowledge*, but e.g. also *arranging gatherings of teams of children and youngsters with similar interests and orientation, inspiring children and team leaders to develop other types of activities in and for nature and offering children an interesting and meaningful accompanying programme in addition to the actual competition*. As for schools, the goal of *involving schools into systematic activities beyond normal lessons in natural history with an overlap in ecology and nature conservation* is important.

The competition consists of primary rounds, regional rounds, a national round and voluntary tasks.

Primary rounds usually start in April. They are mostly organised by schools, Children and Youth Centres and CUNC Local Chapters (Ecocentres), but do not take place in all regions. Their content is not bound by strict rules, so they differ in content and form depending on local customs and the possibilities the organisers have. Traditionally, most primary rounds are held in the Olomouc Region (11 in the year 2022).

Regional rounds take predominantly place during the month of May. They are mostly organised by Children and Youth Centres and the CUNC, exceptionally by other entities. In nine regions, the organisers have been organising Golden Leaf regional rounds for many years or even decades, in the remaining ones they permute. The only region where no regional round has been organised in the past few years is the Karlovy Vary/Carlsbad Region. In the Olomouc Region, only winners of the primary rounds can participate in the regional ones, whereas contestants in the other regions can take part in regional rounds directly despite the existence of several primary rounds.



On the competition trail, contestants demonstrate their knowledge of various natural science disciplines, e.g. invertebrate identification (national round 2022). © Jan Moravec

Regional rounds usually last two days. Its contest part consists of the so-called nature trail, a route set out in the field with at least seven stops at which experts test the contestants' knowledge in various fields of natural sciences or practical nature conservation. At one stop, the contestants must present their year-round work for nature. It is desirable (not mandatory) to support the talk with some documentation, e.g. a chronicle or photographs. The accompanying programme of regional rounds is very diverse, ranging from scientific lectures and field excursions or small exhibitions to 'social' activities to deepen mutual contacts, e.g. various games or a campfire.

The real culmination of each year's competition is, not only formally but also factually, the national round. It is a five-day long gathering of regional round winners and the winner of the voluntary tasks (see below), held each year at another site in the Czech Republic at late June. The programme is full of special activities (in 2022 e.g. various methods of trapping invertebrates, veterinary autopsy, identifying mammalian skulls, catching and ringing birds, geological excursion, bryology, etc.) organised by a team of dozens of experts and volunteers, often former Golden Leaf contestants. The contest part is similar to the one at the regional rounds with the difference that the national trail has at least ten stops and that the presentation of activities for nature takes place separately, off the trail. Year-round activities are

presented in front of a professional jury and PowerPoint presentations have become a matter of course.

There are four voluntary tasks during the year, which are announced at two-month intervals from September to March at the competition's website (www.zlatylist.cz). The tasks aim at observing nature (e.g. tracing ants, elaborating sound maps, observing the night sky, monitoring animals in a particular habitat) or encourage to do interesting experiments (soil infiltration rate, germination of seed in saline soils, obtaining dyes from autumn leaves, etc.). Current and former tasks, which may be of inspiration for activities with children in the field, can be found at the competition's website.

The different tasks are performed by the entire team and also the poster presentation is developed by them collectively. The research results (all four tasks of a year) must fit on an A1 poster. The jury selects the best of the delivered posters in two categories. This provides the team of the winning work the so-called wildcard allowing them to pass on to the national round without winning a regional round, however on condition that they participated in a primary or regional round that year. The voluntary task is not reflected in the competition in any other way.

All children teams can compete in Golden Leaf, from groups, clubs of Children and Youth Centres



The Golden Leaf national round is a five-day event with a rich technical/expert programme. A group of participants dealing with spiders. © Jan Moravec



The competition trail of the national round of the 50th year of Golden Leaf had ten stops, at each the participants could get a maximum of ten points. © Jan Moravec

and other entities to schools. Teams consisting of two patrols of three children compete with each other. In the primary and regional rounds, a team may include more patrols, but it must be clear in advance which (triple) patrols make up which team.

Golden Leaf currently distinguishes three age categories: the youngest (primary school years 1–3), the young (years 4–6) and the older (years 7–9). The youngest category only has primary and regional rounds, there is no national round. If a team consists of children of different age categories, they compete in the category of the oldest member.

Around 3,000 children take part in the competition every year.

Historic retrospective

The idea for the competition came up among the editors of a magazine named ABC of Young Technicians and Natural Scientists in the early 1970s. This followed on its efforts to involve youth into nature conservation, just like science-oriented book reader clubs (Nature Conservation Patrols) or the Nature Detectives readers contest, but particularly on a correspondence competition of children's teams named Know and Protect Nature, which took place in 1972. A first proposal of the competition, then named For the Golden Leaf, came out as a supplement of the ABC magazine in 1972. Its deputy chief editor at the time, Karel Dunda, is considered the spiritual father of the competition.

Golden Leaf used to have three parts: an 'entry task' documenting voluntary work, a 'specific job', and 'natural history quizzes'. The entry task was strongly determined by the time, as the official ideas of what to do 'for nature' rather resembled socialist commitments (including pest control, help with harvesting agricultural crops and collecting medicinal herbs). Working hour reports with stamps of relevant institutions were important, but from the beginning, clubs also engaged in real nature conservation activities e.g. protected area management. The specific job was a year-round scientific task documented with a written report. Very interesting activities appeared there, such as making nature trails and monitoring sites of natural value. The natural history quiz took place on a route in the field and was initially a real quiz where the correct option out of three had to be ticked. Many attributes of the competition were however basically the same as today: two categories (formerly defined by age: the 'younger' (8–12 years) and the 'older' (12–15 years) and proceeding rounds culminating in a national round lasting several days. The very first national round was held at the end of June 1973 on the bank of Kamencové jezero Lake near the town of Chomutov (northern Bohemia) and was won by the Tuláci/Rovers team from the township of Budišov in the 'younger' category and by the Stopaři/Scouts team from the town of Osečná in the 'older' category.

In the course of time the quiz changed into a nature trail as we know it today, and the word 'for' was left out of the name of the competition. Organiser of the competition was the Pioneer Organisation, but it was practically mostly organ-

ised by natural history divisions of regional Centres for Pioneers and Youth. In the 1980s, the CUNC Local Chapters became more and more involved in the Golden Leaf competition as experts, sometimes also as co-organisers, especially at the local and district level.

The Pioneer Organisation had fallen apart in 1990 and Golden Leaf lost its official organiser. However, it continued, practically on its own, thanks to the enthusiasm of many people from all over the country who had helped organising the competition in the previous years. Naturally, this caused many problems. It was clear that this situation would be unsustainable in the long run and that the competition needed some umbrella. In June 1992, the national round was held at the seat of the Nezmaři/Tries club in the municipality of Vrané nad Vltavou, one of most active clubs at the time. On that occasion, people from all over the Czech Republic worried about the fate of the competition had a meeting at which they agreed to ask the CUNC to take the competition over.

And so the Association of Young Conservationists of the CUNC became organiser of Golden Leaf, renamed to Green Trail - Golden Leaf, in the school year 1992–1993. District rounds were cancelled and the year-round 'specific job' left out. The activities for nature did not have to be documented and emphasis was now mainly placed on its meaningfulness (the contestants knew why they had done these activities – not because somebody had said "rake it up just here"). As a whole, the core of the competition was shifted from year-round activity to the actual competition trail.

Probably the most essential change was opening up the competition for schools, after it had been exclusively designed for clubs and specialized groups. The inclusion of schools was probably also influenced by putting Golden Leaf among competitions co-organised by the Ministry, as mentioned above. Within a few years, schools started to prevail in the competition. The most successful team of the past decades is the Gymnázium Jírovceva/Jírovec Grammar School from the city of České Budějovice/Budweis. Out of 26 participants in 2022 national round, 18 were school teams. However, winners in both categories were no school teams. Lid Medvědiho potoka/The People of the Bear Brook, a classic club under the banner of the Olomouc Children and Youth Centre won in the 'younger' category, while Šípy biologickým tempem/Arrows by Biological Rate, a group of children quite untraditionally falling under a start-up named Bene Meat Technologies, was the winner of the 'older' category.

The latest changes to the competition were made ten years ago, when the Association of Young Conservationists staff was complete altered. The new members brought new ideas and new energy into the competition, which had been running rather routinely in the previous years. The competition got its historic name back (most people had called it 'Goldie' for twenty years anyway), 'voluntary tasks' were devised to support the year-round activities, more emphasis was put on the communal dimension of Golden Leaf (the broadly conceived goals of the competition were included in the rules), and the 'youngest' category was added.

One of the hardest times Golden Leaf went through was the COVID-19 pandemic. Epidemiological measures made it impossible to run the competition in its classic format, and so it had to be moved to virtual space two times (2019–2020 and 2020–2021) except for some primary and regional rounds organised randomly when measures were eased or released. In the spring months, Golden Leaf took place in quarantine, which included ten online natural history tests compiled by experts cooperating on the national round every year. The aim of the tests was not so much to verify how much someone knows, but to maintain the contestants' favour. Everyone who completed all ten tests received a small reward.

Conclusion

The competition could not have taken place without the financial help of a number of entities. Special thanks go out to NET4GAS, which has been supporting Golden Leaf for many years at all



Competition trails are also held in regional rounds. 'Medical herb stop' on trail in the St. Prokop Valley, Prague round 2005. © Jan Moravec

levels, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, the Ministry of the Environment, Lesy České republiky/Forests of the Czech Republic State Enterprise, but also to many Regions and some municipalities.

No less thanks go out to those who help organise Golden List every year, many of them as volunteers or for just a symbolic reward. Thanks to them, the competition has lived to the age of 50 years. ■



A specific element of competition trails in regional rounds is the 'activities for nature' stop. Contestants present their activities supporting nature during a year (Prague round 2006). © Jan Moravec