

European Conservation Action Network

Visit to Zdanice, Czech Republic August 6th – 23rd 2008

Magic Moments by Geoff Jones

The Golden One

One of the moments I particularly enjoy when going to a ‘new’ country is waking up on the first morning, coming round and just listening. On some occasions this has been a moment of wonderment, a little like waking up early as a child on Christmas Day.

The first visit to the States involved a sleepy late night drive from the airport to a relations house in leafy suburban Orlando. Waking up in this recently converted swamp in Florida, it was the song of the cardinal that introduced the new auditory world followed by the long mournful siren of an everlasting freight train. Almost 20 years later that moment stays with me. Later on, on my first stroll around the block, I discovered the cardinal, mockingbirds, grackles, Carolina wood duck, comical woodpeckers destroying telegraph poles some fantastic butterflies, and the railway line.

In Zdanice five thirty was too early to wake after the surreal dreamlike folk festival the night before. Or perhaps, as a semi vegetarian, I shouldn’t have attempted to eat a sausage like I did and make impolite gestures with it to chilly Maori performers leaving on their coach. Or maybe its being middle aged on the top bunk again. Dunno, but the attempt to get back to sleep was dashed when a bird started its unknown jangling call .. jangling, followed by long fluting notes. Do they keep or have parrots in the Czech Republic?

Had to get up and go. Dressed and crept out quietly leaving gargoye like open mouthed colleagues in various contorted positions of repose....sweet. Outside, I was the only person up; a little vulnerable and self conscious as a foreigner in a strange land. The long liquid calls were coming from a flock of birds in or around the tall poplar trees on the far side of the football pitches. So it was up the track alongside the allotments, stopping to take in the abundance of wonderful vegetables and fruit in amongst colourful huts (do they say the British have a thing about sheds?), and a couple of woodpeckers that I could almost reach out and touch, then through an entrance to the pitches.

I walked along the edge of the pitches towards the trees, heart shaped leaves fluttering a shiny green against the pale blue sky. Midway I turned to see the village rising above me and a few figures inside kitchen windows. I became aware of eyes, and becoming a part of early morning conversations.

“Who’s that down there”.

“Down where?”

“On the football pitches; there’s a bald bloke behaving strangely with some binoculars.”

“What’s he looking at?”

“He’s looking up here but not with his binoculars.”

“He’s probably a harmless pervert darling don’t worry”.

“No, no, no he’s lying down and looking up into the trees.”

“He’s got to be one of those Brits then who are staying down at the club.”

“Well that accounts for it: they’re all bloody barking, the Brits ... come on where’s the coffee, we’re going to be late.”

I knew something about a relationship between a particular species of bird and the poplar tree so was quite excited and hopeful that this really could be it. Living on the South Devon coast with a good number of poplar trees in the low lying wetter bits, I’ve hung onto the fantasy of realising a childhood dream, seeing these exotic birds in a freak migration across the channel. Allegedly they are an ‘irregular visitor.’ But this bird to me was equally exotic on the continent: it had always reminded me of something smuggled in from Papua or the lost headwaters of the Niger.... a bird of paradise.

I’m not a big birder but have always enjoyed just spending time taking in what’s around me and finding myself in places that feel special. However, there are some species, if you are vaguely interested in nature, that you may have known about from childhood and that can take on almost mythic status. It was, for example the most exotic bird in the happy family style ‘Birds of Europe’ game we had and the wall creeper was the weirdest. A possible 180 point hit, I reckon, in an I–SPY book of those days.

If I was right, it was these showy birds that were calling but not showing themselves. An askance glance in the direction of the kitchen windows and I sat down on my man bag, risking the short dew covered grass and dug in, adhering to the old maxim of wait and they’ll come to you. With the clanging loud overhead I rocked back and caught a glance of one dullish green crow sized bird moving across to the next tree followed not unnaturally, by a golden and black male; but there were more and they piled mob like, across to the next tree and the next. Golden orioles. And at moments like this you want to shout yes for as long and loud as you can .. and that’s what I was doing inwardly....running round the pitch in an exulted state however, may have proved just too much for good folk looking down from above! I lay back in the warming sun, under the poplars, parrot squawks above and lingered on my golden oriole moment and wondered what else this country would have to offer.

The books describe a loud fluting (maori like) ‘weela – weeo’ and various harsh notes, something I tried imitating throughout the rest of the trip but failed miserably. ‘A bird of the treetops, very secretive and hard to see in the open.’

RBS

I was walking up the track beyond the football pitches that led to the surrounding ploughed fields (no trouble with the harvest here ... Atlantic 1,000 km away) and the low wooded hills. This was my first trip to a central European country and I had a few sketchy preconceived ideas about what it would be like. I hadn’t done any research

before leaving the UK partly intentionally, partly through laziness, as I was happy to go and be surprised. A quick squint at Google Earth told me nothing. The Republic was in the EU (was it?), Prague was a destination for Brit lad stag dos and I was old enough to remember the 'Prague Spring' and Dubcek, and that was about it.

I did think the countryside and agriculture would still be in transition: that ex communist bloc countries would still be 'catching up' with intensification of Western European countries. I may be lucky and just capture a snapshot of a bucolic shangri la prior to the arrival of wall to wall green deserts and monoculture; country folk on donkeys, dancing around the village well, a Breughellesque scene with a few great bustards in the background.

Well everything, ignoring buildings, at first glance was like Britain and I thought North Essex in particular. The countryside I was walking through and had travelled through to Zdanice, was as intensively cultivated by enormous modern machinery as anywhere in the UK. The steeper bits were uncultivated or had dilapidated grapevines on them and the hilltops were often wooded, but other than that, rolling countryside, big fields, ploughed earth. Not a particularly beautiful or characterful landscape. Strangely the area was devoid of animals so the steeper valley sides where the pastures lay, and the butterflies flitted, were scrubbing up.

So back to the track. Ploughed fields with stubble on my right, a shrubby hedgey area grading to woodland on my left. There were deer in the distance, surprising given the number of deer towers around, but this walk was to be my red – backed shrike (RBS) moment. In Italy years ago, I may have seen one after drinking too much home made liqueur with monks at a monastery but that was so long ago and quite possibly I may have imagined it....a vision perhaps.

Unlike the oriole the RBS was happy to allow you to get close and look it full square in the eye. To me the first male I saw seemed almost cartoon like with a large eye, exaggerated by the black piratical eye stripe, a dapper grey crown and stout hooked beak. It struck me that the slightly quizzical look was reminiscent of the well known C19th Martinware ceramic bird, but please write this off if you wish, to my over excitable imagination. We did though have quite a lengthy staring competition and it seemed as interested in me as I was interested in it.

It was a great looking bird and one that sensibly flew to tropical Africa or NW India for the winter. It is well known as the 'butcher bird' for impaling its prey on thorns and creating 'larders'. According to superstition, RBS only feeds when it has killed nine creatures hence its German name neun moder. Its Latin name Lanius refers to the verb lanio meaning 'I tear in pieces' ... great!

It is practically extinct in the UK and apparently, a Bird of Conservation Concern Red List Annexe 1 of the EU Birds Directive. That said, I saw females, juveniles and another male that morning and others at sites visited over the duration of the trip. An RBS hotspot perhaps, but apparently it is in decline in 19 European countries. The RBS was once widespread throughout England and Wales but there has been 'a drastic decline since the mid C 19th ' and no confirmed breeding since 1989. Before WW2 RBS nested in almost every English and Welsh county and by the late 1960s

there were 150 breeding pairs. A lone male, (bird not person), summered in Scotland in 2006.

Nobody really seems to know why RBS has declined so rapidly. In the UK the egg collecting craze of the late C19th early C 20th took its toll as the birds eggs are particularly attractive and variable (one bird collector had 900 RBS eggs in his collection), but increased use of pesticides and the associated reduction in prey are likely to be the main cause. Research is underway in neighbouring Austria to guide habitat management in the UK. The BAP target in the UK, to re-establish RBS as a regular breeding species, is described by the RSPB as 'very aspirational.' Climate change may also be a factor .. so will it really be worth spending £xxxx on getting a bird back which clearly doesn't like the UK anymore.

Better to think European and concentrate on keeping the birds numbers stable in their strongholds, say I. Perhaps we should be thinking more imaginatively and pan European with our conservation work. Don't spend £30 million on saving the lesser dweep on the very margin of its range in the UK when they are undermining houses in their millions in Italy. Allocate the bulk of resources to something which is about to be lost to Europe.

Walking back down the lane, enjoying the sunshine and returning for my first football club breakfast, I reflected again on how similar the countryside and wildlife habitat was to that in the UK and played spot the difference. I'd been to Africa and seen some wonderful birds there, but seeing such delightful creatures as golden orioles and RBS in this more understated setting was particularly memorable. Thankfully there were many more surprises and magic moments during the following 10 days of the visit. A great bunch of fun loving and hard working colleagues, friendly local people (who were the best) but a special mention must be given to Dick the praying mantis and the tree frog in the garden at the top of the alleyway who always guided us, or at least most of us, safely back to our bunks.