

Supporting conservation action at the Milicz Ponds in south-west Poland by Alex Bush

I have done plenty of conservation work in the past, both in the UK and abroad, and yet it is simply very exciting to be surrounded by new and different species when travelling and working in some of Europe's wilder corners. This trip was organised through EuCAN (European Conservation Action Network) that draws funding from the EU's Leonardo da Vinci fund and Lifelong Learning Programme and sends those of us with enough enthusiasm, to help with conservation work needed by partners in Europe.

Our destination was the Barycz Valley in south-west Poland, specifically the town of Milicz, which is surrounded by a large complex of lakes. These lakes were artificially created carp ponds built by monks in the 12th Century and while remaining in continuous use since, have gradually become a veritable paradise for wildlife. A mosaic of lakes, fen, marsh, meadows and woodland mean 280 birds have been recorded from the area, 137 of which breed here. Consequently the area is designated as a RAMSAR site and part of the Living Lakes network (a global programme to protect important lakes).

The actual Milicz Ponds reserve covers 5000ha, more than some national parks, and is then again contained within the enormous Barycz River Valley Landscape Park (87,000ha) that protects the countryside and landscape in a similar way to AONBs in the UK. Our Polish partners work for the state in developing a management plan for the area, and due to bureaucratic delays approval and funding has been a long time coming. Our work focused on the clearance of invading scrub and reed along the marshy fringes of the lakes, as well as in one case completely clearing an island within the lake. August brought glorious weather, generally well over 30°C, and apart from getting used to very persistent mosquitoes, a good time was had by all.

To detour onto butterfly related interest, I have been doing my best to see as many of the UK's butterflies this year as I could and made it to 36, a respectable tally. In 2 weeks in Poland, bearing in mind that a lot of our time was necessarily focused on the work, we saw 32 species including Camberwell beauty, Lesser Purple Emperor, Large Copper and Swallowtail. However my favourite find was of 20+ Purple Hairstreaks, a species I had put a lot of effort into finding before the trip with no success. Contravening all the general rules of this species habits in the UK, these hairstreaks were active in the middle of the day at head height, on a 10m high oak isolated from any other large trees in a roadside verge.

Moth trapping had to be limited to only a few nights after hornets persistently arrived to ruin it but we still identified over 100 species. Ruddy darters and small red-eyed damselflies were ubiquitous but more exciting records included Brilliant Emeralds *Somatochlora metallica* and a Green Snaketail *Ophiogomphus cecilia*. Other examples of how some of our rarest invertebrates are more widespread on the continent included an adult ant lion *Euroleon nostras*, Field Cricket *Gryllus campestris*, Wartbiter *Decticus verrucivorus* and the Large Marsh Grasshopper *Stethophyma grossum*.

The area has comparatively few tourists, only 16,000 a year of which 90% are Polish and the remainder mostly German. However there are numerous places to eat and stay (from hostel to luxury lodges). The main attractions for the area include the fishing, its scenery for which there are many miles of cycling and horse riding paths as well as a kayak trail along the Barycz River (which I thoroughly recommend). Curiously however wildlife tourism, despite the birds in particular offering excellent possibilities, has not been developed a great deal and it is only recently that a few hides and an observation tower have been built. It is often difficult to view the water in particular unless a road borders part of the lake so it is well worth getting information from the parks service on the best spots to view wildlife if you intend to go independently.

As far as birds were concerned, we had missed both the breeding season and the return of most of the winter migrants but still saw a number of Marsh harriers, White and Black storks, Common cranes, black woodpecker, red-backer shrikes, an osprey and most impressive: the White-tailed eagles. When the lakes are drained to harvest the carp in September and October (the time of the annual harvest festival – a major local event), up to 40 eagles can gather together!

In way of conclusion I would recommend a visit to the Milicz ponds for anyone interested in wildlife as a well-timed visit is guaranteed to produce interesting sightings. The area has a great deal of cultural interest including the recently restored ruins of the Zmigrod palace, the Antonin hunting lodge (3-storey octagonal timber building) and finally the city of Wrocław with enough history and architecture to rival any of the other better known Polish cities.

Finally, if you feel an independent trip into rural Europe is a little bit too complicated alone, and you have the energy to cut, hack and burn in the name of conservation, then you should seriously consider volunteering for next year's range of EuCAN placements (see below).

The European Conservation Action Network was established in 2007 by The Kingcombe Trust, a charity based at The Kingcombe Centre in west Dorset, dedicated to conservation and environmental education (Reg. Charity no. 1054758), in association with the Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation. The project is funded through the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme and has partners in France, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Belgium, Poland and Romania. Further information can be obtained from www.kingcombecentre.org.uk or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559/mobile: 0044.7981.776767.Email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk).