

EUCAN VISIT TO MILICZ FISHPONDS IN WESTERN POLAND

Andy Lyon's journal

Prologue

I first heard about the Leonardo da Vinci fund while volunteering at Sydenham Hill Wood for the London Wildlife Trust. Chantal Brown who is the Southwark Ecology Officer and also warden at the woods approached me. She explained that she had been on a conservation trip to France in 2008 with the European Conservation Action Network headed by Nigel Spring. She thought that I might meet the criteria and should apply, she suggested I just google EUCAN and go from there, which is what I did. This was in November 2008 I had recently completed rehab for addiction to drink and drugs and was now returning to the interest of my childhood namely conservation. As a teenager I had volunteered on a local nature reserve on The Wirral called Thurstaston Common while doing The Duke of Edinburgh Award. I got a reply back from EUCAN to say that all the trips were full but I would be put on the reserve list. In February 2009 I got a call from Nigel Spring to ask if I wanted to go to Poland. Before going to Poland I went to the Kingcombe Centre for a preparation weekend. At the centre I was given a course in operating a brush-cutter. We were also given talks by Nigel on the various trips that we would be going on. I camped in the fields by the centre.

Friday 31st July 2009

I woke at 9am. The maintenance guy was at the house tiling the shower room. I made myself coffee, some tea for the tiling guy. Started packing, took bed-linen down to wash and laid everything that I needed on the bed. Drank coffee and listened to the radio. Went to the station to buy the ticket for Ashford, I was relieved to find that I could afford the fare with £5 to spare. Went to the library to check e-mails, in-box empty. Back to house, finalised packing, ate some cereal and left for the station. Felt very nervous. Train to Sevenoaks then changed at Tonbridge for train to Ashford. Texted Nigel to tell him that I had arrived. He texted back saying that they were 1 ½ hours away. Switched on radio to listen to cricket. After about an hour met Alex, felt shy, we didn't talk much at first. Nigel was stuck in traffic so he didn't arrive until 6ish. Mini bus eventually arrived and we drove to campsite. Chatted to Nigel on the way. Set camp and went to Jackdaw Inn for supper. Everyone seems young mostly mid 20s with a few people older. Had pork chops and noodles for dinner. Chatted with Gwyl, Nigel and Catherine about kitchens, beavers and pyramid goats' cheese. Then back to campsite. Weather fine and mild. Feel apart from young things but ok. Set alarm for 5 am then reconsidered and changed to 5.50 am.

Saturday 1st August 2009

Woke at 5.30 to sound of cockerel crowing. Feeling good, weather overcast. Get ferry to Calais at 7.30, hope for a stormy crossing. Crossing very calm, had a very bad cappuccino, tobacco in too high quantities to buy. Now driving to Dortmund currently going through Belgium on the way to Eindhoven. Weather hot and sunny, atmosphere relaxed. Went over bridge painted rhubarb and custard in wavy lines, the most vomit inducing bridge I've ever known. Had lunch just after Eindhoven, a ham roll and a bottle of water. Camped in Hamm, Germany. The campsite is beside the motorway. Had a very nice meal at a Serbian restaurant, a beef pattie stuffed with cheese and had easy conversation about fishing and pop-stars. Afterwards, Nigel, Kathy, Cally and me chatted and they asked about why I wasn't drinking. So I told them that I am in recovery. Feel good tonight one day at a time.

Sunday 2nd August 2009

We drove through Germany. We camped at a really nice campsite by a lake. I pitched tent apart from the group. I forget to put on insect repellent or couldn't be bothered so got really badly bitten by mosquitoes. I really liked the campsite which had a very nice relaxed atmosphere. I went for a walk and saw tree sparrows, 2 red admiral, great-crested grebes and numerous coot. We saw storks for the first time.

Monday 3rd August 2009

We continued through Germany and visited a centre at Vetschau devoted to storks. It seemed to be a personal quest by a local to educate people about the storks and how to protect them as many are killed by power lines each year. The centre was well laid out and we watched a video about the storks. From here we drove to the Polish border where our papers were checked for the first time. We had lunch near the border, and had our first taste of Polish food. Most of us had pierogi, which are potato dumplings with various fillings similar to ravioli. The Polish road was quite an experience compared with the German roads, very bumpy. We arrived at Milicz, the hostel looked pretty drab at first. I share a room with Gwyl and Alex, they are 2 nice guys, Gwyl is about 50, he works with Liz at Natural England, he is quite quiet and I like him. He gets to sleep immediately his head hits the pillow. Alex is a 27ish guy from Bristol. He is really good on insects and is very gregarious. Unfortunately he has got an eye infection so has had to visit the eye-doctor. We were introduced to Roman, George, Sophia and Eva who are our hosts. It was explained to us about the area we were to be working on, how the Baryc Valley was flooded by monks in medieval times to create fish ponds in which to keep carp so that the locals could eat fish on Fridays. This artificial landscape has now become a very important wet-land site protected by the "Ramsar Convention".

Tuesday 4th August 2009

We went to the islands at Stawy Gadzinow which were described the day before. I had my first sighting of a white-tailed eagle, Roman explained the difference between this and a golden eagle in flight, namely the size of the bill in relation to the head and also the shape of the tail. The islands needed to be cleared of scrub which had built up. Trent, Tom and Phil went over first with machetes and the rest of us followed. Kathy and Laura did some brush-cutting. We went out there in a small boat which Roman punted. I felt scared and the memory of capsizing in a sea-kayak came to me. There were whiskered terns flying near the island which Roman explained were one of the species which would benefit from the work we were doing. We cleared 2 islands of scrub. While working Liz wondered what had been eating the vegetation on the island and right on queue we heard a splashing sound and saw a deer that had swum across to the island. I couldn't really find a role so just pottered about. We had to wait for ages to get back as Roman could only take 4 people at a time, poor Roman looked knackered as he had to get the boat through reed mace. So got very hot and bitten. After dinner at the hostel Tom, Emma, Trent and I played a monopoly card game which Trent had brought, it was a good way of getting to know people as I am not so good in large groups.

Wednesday 5th August 2009

We went to meadows at Staw Polnocny which was where we would be working for the rest of the week. This was my first day of brush-cutting for which I had been trained at Kingcombe. Nigel showed us how he wanted it done, working in straight lines leaving 'sausages' of vegetation in our wake. I wasn't particularly successful at this and Kathy complained at the end that I hadn't been cutting in a way which made it easy to rake the material after. I felt a bit disappointed but resolved in my mind to do much better next time. The purpose of the work we were doing was to make the area more suited to ground nesting birds such as snipe. There was also a team of people cutting down willow scrub. After finishing work we stopped at Sulow where Nigel bought us ice-creams.

Thursday 6th August 2009

I started eating the porridge I had bought for breakfast in a little kitchen on the floor where we slept. Felt much better for this as it gave me a little time to myself and also better for having a good breakfast inside me. We went back to Staw Polnocny to continue the work we had started the day previously, I concentrated hard on doing a better job of cutting in straight lines ensuring I left 'sausages' in my wake!. Nigel kept a close on how I was working and gave me advice on how to time my swings and ease off the clutch every 5 or 6 swings. After work we again stopped at Sulow square. After dinner most of the group went to the ornithological station to meet some students. I didn't go and watched Kathy and Liz as they used keys to identify plants which they had collected while we were working.

Friday 7th August 2009

Nigel Spring is the leader/organisor, an absolutely fascinating man with an encyclopaedic knowledge of nature. He has a very school teacherly manner about him which is of no surprise as he used to teach. He is very gregarious and inquisitive, quite short with a big mop of straight brown hair and big glasses. You can't get away with saying anything inaccurate to him as he listens to every word and wants to know in detail what you mean. We continued the work that we had been doing the past few days. I drove back with Nigel, Greg, Evalina and Łukasz. Anyhow we drove back to Milicz and dropped off Greg and Evalina at Sulow so they could catch the bus. Then Nigel, Łukasz and I went back to the hostel. I had a shower then washed my clothes and hung them on the line. Łukasz asked if I wanted to go to the shop with him, I needed some more porridge so went with him. Łukasz is a nice tender young kid he seems shy but in fact is quite bold. He talked about how he planned to study IT. The supermarket didn't have any porridge so I bought crisps and nuts. When we got back the others had returned from the meadow. Philip and I walked to the shop after tea to buy cigarettes. Everyone apart from Nigel, Kathy and Liz went to the bar in the town. Tom asked if I wanted to go and I said no. I wish we were working again tomorrow. I feel like I've got the rhythm going now. But tomorrow we are having a 'cultural' day.

Saturday 8th August 2009

Today we had the day off to visit the surrounding area. We went to a woodland near Stawy Krosnickie. As soon as we got off the Nigel was able to identify a number of birds. We split in to three groups, the first headed by Alex were concentrating on insects, the second which I was with were concentrating on birds, and the last (Kathy, Liz and Phil) were looking at plants. Caroline thought she might have seen a black woodpecker which Nigel had heard earlier. On a personal level I was really pleased to see a tree-creeper which Marie sighted. Also Nigel sighted a marsh harrier on its perch that he had got it on his telescope, it was great to have some time to look at this bird as previously we had only seen them in flight. After this we drove to an old hunting lodge at Antonin where the composer Chopin had spent some time, it is now a hotel and there was a wedding party there having photographs taken. The lodge was octagonal with terraced floors looking over the whole space, there was a central chimney with two fireplaces. I ate a really nice cherry pie with ice-cream though my order for double espresso caused some confusion, when it arrived though it was fantastic. While the others were eating I went outside to the gardens and saw a spotted flycatcher feeding, which was great. In the evening we were celebrating Roman and Greg's birthday, we went to Ostoja which was just outside Milicz, a local had created some ponds quite recently on his land, he told us that there were purple herons here but unfortunately we didn't see any, we had a barbeque there. We ate the birthday cake first as it would not stand the heat for long, after this we ate bigos which is a dish of meat cooked with saurkraut it was delicious and I asked for the recipe the next day. We also ate sausages cooked over the fire on a circular plate which swung over the fire. The group drank shots of 'mad dog' which was composed of vodka, raspberry syrup and tabasco As a gift for Roman, Sophia had arranged a performance by some re-enactors showing costumes and sword-fighting from the middle-ages between a peasant and a knight of the Order of Saint John from the Crusades. I went for a walk around the lake followed by the Konik ponies, I'm quite wary of horses so was a bit nervous but they seemed friendly enough. A few of us walked back to the hostel after and some stayed on to drink some more.

Sunday 9th August 2009

Today was another day off. I felt like carrying on working as I had got my rhythm going. Any how we went kayaking which was another chance for me to get over my fears around capsizing. When we got to the point where we were to start up river from Milicz we organised ourselves in to pairs. I paired up with Łukasz which I was pleased about. We were given instruction on how to row in unison which was easy in practice but we were soon to find out that it was quite tricky. At various points along the river launch points have been built. So Łukasz and I attempted to get down the river in one dry piece. We went down the river like a pin-ball, hitting first one side then the other in a zigzag. Łukasz lost his patience with me a bit as I was in front but gradually with the help of a few songs I taught him we managed to start going in a straight line. It was really nice to see the Barycz from the point of view of being in a boat. At the other end we got out, cleaned our kayaks and returned to the hostel. That evening we went for a meal in Milicz, we walked via a park next to the forestry school. There were many old trees in the park and Gwyl showed us a tree that had been struck by lightning then colonised by beetles, Nigel used his method of aging an oak tree where we

circled the tree with arms out-stretched and using the total length in inches we worked out that the tree was indeed quite old! The meal at the restaurant was very nice, with a soup to start and then carp which had been baked.

Monday 10th August 2009

Today we went back to Staw Polnocny for what was to be the last time, it was the same work as we had been doing last week, cheese roll/ham roll getting a bit boring now. In the evening Roman gave a talk on the work and vision for the Barycz valley. After this Nigel, Kathy, Alex and I went to the site where we had celebrated the birthdays on Saturday. The gentleman who owned the site was very hospitable and had laid on tea and coffee and snacks. We set up the moth trap and pitched our tents. Unfortunately hornets were attracted to the trap and we were treated to a macabre show as the hornets gorged themselves on the moths, so much for conservation. Sheik joined us later and took some video of the moth snuff show. It turned out to be a very wet night but I slept well as I always do when in a tent.

Tuesday 11th August 2009

I woke up to find a shivering Nigel looking forlornly into his trap. We collected the moths which had survived and returned to the hostel. The rain was set in for the day so we did not go out to work today. Instead we split in to three groups, one identifying moths, the others identifying plants and helping Roman with tourist literature about the valley. In the afternoon it dried out a bit so we went to a hide tower which was on three levels. The views over the lake were fantastic, we watched marsh harriers hunting over the islands. We heard penduline tits but unfortunately did not see any.

Wednesday 12th August 2009

Today we went to work on a new site at Grabownice. We were met there by Professor Witkowski who explained the work we were to do which was to improve the area as a habitat for corncrake and barred warblers. The site was to wet for tractors to cut the meadows so we brush-cut, me on tip toes as I hadn't brought Wellington boots.

Thursday 13th August 2009

We returned to Grabownice to continue the work we did yesterday by now the rakers were getting a bit fed up with their lot so Tom, Laura and I did some raking instead of brush-cutting, forming haystacks, we had quite a good time it made a nice change from waltzing our brush-cutters. In the evening I went to camp at the ornithological station, it was a beautiful night and the sky was full of stars I was hoping to see golden orioles which we had heard on a visit to the station a few days earlier. During the night I had an intense pain in my wrist, it felt as though I had broken. I realised that I must have been bitten by a horse fly, I'd never experienced this before.

Friday 14th August 2009

I woke earlier and went for a walk at sun rise along the lake by the ornithological station I was rewarded with a beautiful view of two cranes taking off in to the sun rise, it was one of the best sites of my life. Unfortunately the orioles were a no show. Nigel arrived to take me back to the hostel and we thought we might have seen a honey buzzard as we drove back. As for work some of us went back to Staw Polnocny and some went back to the islands at Stawy Gadzinow to burn the material that we had cut on our first work day. It felt like the last day of term while we worked and we finished quite early with all of us raking the remaining material.

Saturday 15th August 2009

We had breakfast at the hostel and then went for a tour of various nature reserves in the area. We first went to some woods that were quite swampy. It felt very humid. We then went to some small ponds where there were lots of people fishing. It was a national holiday for the Poles so it was very busy. I explored round the perimeter of the ponds and thought I saw a Great Reed Warbler which was quite exciting. I then joined the others who were exploring the town besides the ponds. We saw tree frogs in the gardens of the town. We then got back in the mini bus and went to some of the bigger ponds where at one we saw a grass snake swimming, Cally also spotted the best white-tailed eagle I saw while here with full beautiful markings. In the evening we went to a quite modern restaurant with incredible murals that were a wonder to behold?!

Sunday 16th August 2009

Today we went by public bus in to Wrocław. The journey took about one hour. When we got to Wrocław we first checked the times for buses back to Milicz in the evening. Roman was to be our guide for the day he explained that he wasn't really meant to do this as you need a licence to be a guide in Wrocław. We went for coffee in a shopping mall before going to see the famous Raławice Panorama. The visitor centre is very impressive and is purpose built to house this magnificent painting. As you enter you are guided in darkness round and asked to be silent so that you can get the most of the scene which you are about to see. The panorama shows a battle between the Poles and the Russian armour in the 19th century in chronological order. We were given handsets with a narration in English describing the battle, it was an incredible experience and the Poles are rightly proud of this masterpiece. After this we went on a cruise down the river. Next we went to a fantastic restaurant where they served us a beautiful range of lamb, we were each given a hot iron plate with aromatics which then flavoured the meat, beautiful. Nigel asked people to share there experiences of the trip and Liz read a poem that she had written, it was very moving. After lunch Roman guided us through the city to a park to look for red squirrels. Sheik managed to spot one. From here the group split with some if us going to the station to catch the bus back to Milicz and the rest staying to spend the evening in Wrocław.

Monday 17th August 2009

This was our last day in Milicz and we spent the first part of the day exploring the town, had lunch in the restaurant that we went to on Sunday and then packed up to catch the train to Poznan from Zmigrod. We had a group photograph and then said our goodbyes to Nigel and Kathy before getting on the train. We travelled to Poznan where we transferred to the night train to Cologne. I shared a sleeper cabin with Sheik and Alex, some of the others joined us for a while and we chatted and laughed the night away, I realised that I might actually miss this bunch. As I woke I realised that I'd had my leg dangling out of the window for part of the trip. I got off the train thankful that I was still bipedal.

Tuesday 18th August 2009

We were now under the care of Gwyl who was handling the tickets. We waited at Cologne in the early hours I watched the German commuters on their way to work. We got on the train to Brussels which was very luxurious compared to the Polish trains, from Brussels we transferred to the Eurostar bound for England. At St Pancras we said our final goodbyes and went our separate ways.

Epilogue

It has now been a couple of months since my trip to Poland and as I reflect on the experience feel that it has been very rewarding. It taught me a number of things about myself and what I want to do next with my life. On returning from Poland I have been able to utilize the skills I learnt with my voluntary work at the London Wildlife Trust. It has also opened future job opportunities for me as I now have a brush-cutting licence. Writing this report has been challenging but necessary as I hope to start a foundation degree at Birkbeck University, London in January. I hope to continue working in conservation in the future and would like to thank Nigel and Kathy for giving me this wonderful opportunity.