

Western Poland 2009.

## **Why do we need to manage habitats?**

By Caroline Fowler

### **Introduction**

On the 31<sup>st</sup> July I was one of 17 enthusiastic volunteers starting their travels to Milicz in Western Poland for two weeks of practical conservation work and unique cultural experiences. This project is organised by EuCAN (established in 2007 by The Kingcombe Trust) and funded through the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme. We were all from very different backgrounds and had varying levels of experience in conservation, but we were all keen to find out exactly what work we would be doing and to learn more about this area of Poland. The first question that many people asked upon my return was why do you need to manage habitats? Did we really make a difference by cutting back vegetation for just over two weeks and are why are there no Polish volunteers to do the work instead? In this report I aim to answer these questions and explain the benefits of this EuCAN project which has similar partnerships with conservation projects around Europe including partners in France, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Belgium and Romania.

### **Where were we?**

We were based in the small town of Milicz in the Barycz valley which is an area managed and protected through the United Nations Development Programme. The area covers approximately 870 square kilometres and includes the Milicz ponds which is a Ramsar protected wetlands area and the base for our practical conservation work. The ponds were manmade in the 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> centuries to house fish species for eating (particularly carp), these ponds are emptied annually and the fish removed before refilling and restocking to continue the cycle. These ponds are still managed in this way today, but are now also recognised as an important habitat for wetland birds. Natura 2000 has designated this area as an important habitat in Europe and is internationally protected. We were not working in strictly protected reserves, as much of the area is privately owned but this protection ensures that important species and habitats survive.



**Recreational fishing**



**Our transport to the islands**

### **What did we do?**

We worked in two locations one was on islands within a pond and the second on the edge of a pond next to open meadows. It should be noted that these ponds are actually very large and would be described as lakes in the UK. The islands are created from the mud dug up from the bottom sediments of the lakes and are home to nesting terns (including the whiskered tern) and gulls. The sediments are very fertile and vegetation grows fast on these islands particularly willow, nettles and bramble. Gulls and terns are ground nesting birds and require open ground for nesting, so removing all vegetation on these islands is necessary to encourage a higher breeding success. Unfortunately this work can only be done using man power; it would be costly to introduce measures to reduce vegetation growth, although this may be considered in the future. All vegetation was left in piles to dry out and then burnt on our last day.



**A break from cutting down willow**



**The area we were clearing by the ponds**

We spent most of our time at the second site on the edge of a pond (that we never actually saw because of the amount of reeds between us and the edge). This pond was surrounded by meadows and large patches of woodland. We saw roe deer several times and evidence of the elusive wild boar, it is also an area used by hunters with several shooting platforms. This was hard work, our task was to remove several patches of willow, that if left would turn into an established wooded area. We also removed reeds to improve access from the meadows to the ponds for birds.

### **Why do we need to manage habitats in the Barycz valley?**

The meadows around the ponds attract ground nesting birds such as snipe (which we observed flying out of the grass near where we worked), redshank, godwits, curlews and lapwings. These species do not like bushes or trees that could hide prey species (we saw marsh harriers at all ponds) and pairs need a large area of open ground.



**The meadow near where we worked being cut by machinery**



**Cutting the wet meadow by brush cutting and piling the grass by hand.**

Removing vegetation by hand is very hard work and also takes a lot longer than if you used machinery, but the area around the pond is very wet and not suitable for vehicles. However, why are we interfering with natural succession, why not let nature take its course? Traditionally, meadows would be grazed by cattle and deer which reduced the growth of scrub and trees. Cattle prefer to graze grass and deer prefer weeds, shrubs and trees. So, maybe if there was less hunting and a more managed system of culling there would be more deer grazing in open areas and less growth of invasive willow. Another alternative is the introduction of a managed grazing system using cattle in fenced areas as a way of maintaining the meadows around the ponds and preventing the succession of vegetation. This would require organisation, manpower and funding as someone would be needed to manage the cattle and money would be needed to erect fences. This is not something that would directly benefit current landowners and only would have to be implemented as part of the conservation and biodiversity plan for this area. So, for the moment volunteers are crucial for maintaining these habitats.

### **Conclusion: What does the future hold for conservation in Poland?**

At the moment, habitat conservation, species protection and volunteer networks are still a relatively new concept in Poland and volunteers from other countries are a vital resource for getting practical work done as well as offering the benefit of sharing knowledge and skills.



**Visiting nesting white storks near Milicz**



**A species of long horned beetle**

Alongside practical work we all assisted in creating species lists for butterflies, moth, insects and plants. We were lucky enough to have an expert botanist on our team, so the plant list is extensive

and surveys areas that had not been looked at before. Unfortunately moth traps were attacked by hornets, so our moth surveys were not as extensive as they could have been.

Another solution to Poland's lack of conservation awareness and funding is tourism. The area of Milicz has a lot to offer visitors interested in nature and outdoor activities. Visitors can go horse riding, canoeing and of course bird watching. If the ponds become a tourist attraction for nature enthusiasts and ornithological holidays, there will be more need to protect these areas and encourage greater species diversity. Due to the higher than normal density of fish in these ponds, they attract a lot of fish eating birds and can probably sustain a greater number of breeding pairs than other lakes or ponds. We saw a large number of white tailed sea eagle and it could be predicted that with a reliable food resource this species can successfully rear more chicks here than elsewhere. This species in its self would be a large attraction for wildlife enthusiasts from other countries. It is hoped that more people will hear about this area of Poland through our work and by reading our reports, and will want to visit and experience the Barycz valley for themselves. This increase in tourism would bring much needed income to the area and encourage more research and species monitoring in the areas that need protecting. For example the white stork has suffered a large drop in numbers over recent years and it is only through monitoring, research and investment that this situation can be identified and an action plan produced.

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. It is hoped that the relationship between The Kingcombe Trust, EuCAN and our Polish hosts will be further developed in regular return trips to the Barycz valley. The habitat management and surveying that we started can then be monitored and we will hopefully hear of an increase in nesting birds, species diversity and breeding success in the area.

Further information can be obtained from [www.kingcombecentre.org.uk](http://www.kingcombecentre.org.uk) or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559/mobile: 0044.7981.776767.Email: [nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk) ).

