

# Conservation Adventure in Poland

## By Diana Jordan

Dzien dobry or Good Day!

### Our Journey Out

When first hearing of this great opportunity to carry out conservation work in Poland the timing could not have been better. I had just a week or two earlier been told that my job was to be made redundant and it felt that fate had taken a hand, especially as I had just completed 8 long years of studying for an OU degree in Geosciences, part of which had covered environmental science. In fact it was this aspect of my degree that led me in the first place to start volunteer work with the South Downs.

When booking my place back in January it seemed so long off but time flew by quickly during which time I had spent all my energies on setting myself up for a second career. Come the end of July I had just completed a 10 week very intensive course in personal training and could not have been fitter and more ready for this 'holiday'. When the day finally arrived I wondered rather apprehensively what I was letting myself in for and who my companions were going to be for the next 2 and half weeks. One thing for sure was that after travelling across Europe in a mini van, plus jam-packed trailer, for three days we were certainly going to know each other well by the time we reached Poland.



Our own Doctor Who's tardis! How did we fit luggage for 17 people with equipment (chain saw. Brush cutters etc etc) into that trailer?

This trip was part of a number of trips to various countries, including Hungary, Czechoslovakia and France, funded by the Leonardo da Vinci project, which is part of the European Commission's new Lifelong Learning Programme (details below). However this trip to Poland was a first and therefore an adventure for which no one quite knew what to expect!

Our trip out via the mini van meant camping the first three nights, a treat that I had not experienced for a number of years! The start of the journey was a typical English M3 to M25 traffic jam all the way from Fleet services made worse by the fact that we had chosen to travel on the day that all

the schools had now broken up for the summer. We camped in exotic Kent for the first night, sharing a single wash basin and toilet between 8 girls (I can't comment on the guys) and sampling our last typical pub meal for some time, before then catching the early morning ferry to Calais. We drove through Belgium, Holland and West Germany before stopping to camp just outside Dortmund with wonderful views of the power station (well it looked better in the sunset!)



Our lovely view from the camp site in West Germany!

Eventually we crossed over the old border into East Germany where things started to become more interesting as well as warming up considerably. Our third night was spent camping by a lovely lake in Spreewald, where the first thing a number of us did, after setting up camp, was to jump into the lake to cool down. Lovely as it was however, I think my everlasting memory will be being eaten alive by mosquitoes, little realising that was just the start!



Fellow conservationist Cally sitting in the rain with the quintessential English umbrella! Our camp site at Spreewald in East Germany.

Finally on our 4<sup>th</sup> day we eventually reached the Polish border where we were greeted for the first time by a demand for passports by rather a stern young soldier.

My first impression of Poland was the state of the main highway that we travelled on. Initially I thought it was roadworks but from driving on pristine smooth German autobahns we were suddenly merrily (or not) bumping along trying to avoid some of the worst cracks and resorting to

driving in the slightly better outside lane for mile after mile. Eventually we became used to it and taught our bodies to go 'with the flow' of the 'bumps', although one or two managed to still fool us!

My next impression was our first meal when we stopped at a service station and were introduced to 'Pierogi'! (I didn't take a photo as I never really wanted to see them again!) My first thought was they looked like huge pasta with a filling but soon discovered they were huge suet type dumplings, which then rather heavily joined in with the flow along the bumpy road as we continued our journey! They were definitely not my favourite but some in our party were quite partial to them!

So we eventually arrived at our destination in Milicz and with no delay the next day we were straight into the conservation work.

### **So how did the work differ from the work we carry out as volunteers for the South Downs?**

Well the biggest difference was the landscape. On the South Downs we are used to the rolling hills and often find ourselves on the side of the chalk hills clearing scrub in order to preserve the unique grassland habitat. Most of our work in Poland was around the fishponds for which the region is well known. These fishponds, which go back to the 12<sup>th</sup>/ 13<sup>th</sup> Century, were established by the Cistercian monks and are now a site for many species of reptiles, amphibians, birds and mammals including a number of endangered species. They are also an important part of the region's local economy with residents relying on the income from carp production.

Much of the grassland around the ponds is wet and in parts quite marshy. We also visited wooded areas where some of the streams have a reddish tinge due to the underlying turf iron or Ruda darniowa, which is then used locally in the architecture of the local houses and barns.



Reddish colour to the stream caused by turf ore (ruda darniowa)

The people of the area have been using the local geology since the iron ages. They used to dig up this turf iron, which was then often just left lying around before then being used in buildings. As it was never

transported, much of what you see in the houses will be local to where it was found which makes it then very unique to that area.

Our first day was spent on one of the man made islands on the fishponds in Stawy Gadzinow. Being an island meant we had to be ferried across, an experience in itself as it was only a small punt that could take 4 of us at a time (as you can see from the photo!) Nor was it a simple punt across, as our host, Roman, had to fight his way through the extremely thick reeds and not only that, but with approximately 21 of us to ferry over, he had to make this journey and back several times! It must have taken a couple of hours and repeated again at the end of the day so it was not surprising that Roman looked completely exhausted!



Our transport to the islands at Stawy Gadzinow for our first day of conservation!



Our host Roman punting his way through the reeds on his way to collect us workers!

Our aim on the island was to clear away all the scrub covering the area so that it opened up the site for the nesting birds. One big difference that helped tremendously was the use of the brush cutters. This meant not having to get stung by nettles or scratched by bramble, although the bites from mosquitoes and horse flies plus horrible red ants, which crawled inside your clothes and made their presence felt through little bites, more than compensated!!

We only spent one day here, managing to complete the job early afternoon, although some of the group came back at the end of the trip to burn the rubbish, after receiving the necessary authorisation to do so. On that subject we only received the authorisation for all the conservation work we carried out as we were getting ready to go home! So you could say that bureaucracy is the same everywhere!

Most of our time was spent on wet meadowlands at Staw Polnocny near Niezgod. The grassland was alive with butterflies with lots of meadow browns and painted ladies but also clouded yellows, various whites,

common blues, brimstones, Queen of Spain fritillaries and a brown and white marbled white. Other wildlife we saw were deer (red and roe), sand lizards a couple of times, lots of bright blue dung beetles and wasp spiders. As for birds the most majestic sight was the white tailed eagle, which unfortunately I was unable to get a photo of, although my camera would not have been up to the task.



White marbled butterfly that looked brown and white!



Sand lizard



Small Copper Butterfly



Wasp Spider



Brimstone Butterfly

Again we were clearing scrub but as we didn't have the go ahead for fires we were instead having to pile it high. Working in teams my team decided to call us 'The team' although apparently in Polish there is no word for 'the' so we were just 'Team' and to give a bit of interest to our piling we made up our own den thinking it would be a lovely little haven for a rest. Unfortunately it didn't give much respite from the blazing sun and what was worse it definitely seemed to attract the mosquitoes and horseflies!



'Team' posing in 'The Den'!

The bites from the horseflies created massive mounds under the skin, which were incredible and very itchy! One good thing when comparing to the South Downs, or in fact two good things, there were no brambles to get ripped by (but the question was - is that better than covering up the arms and getting oven baked by the sun, or to leaving them exposed to bites? Possibly!) and we were working on the level. On the negative side the terrain was so rough and pitted with wet holes that it was easy to find yourself sinking into a very wet muddy hole or twisting your ankle if you were not careful. Having to wear wellies didn't help as it meant you didn't have the same solid protection under your feet, or at least not with mine. The other difference is the fact that we always burn the stuff on the South Downs but in Poland we didn't have the go ahead and secretly I was glad. As we are normally clearing scrub in the winter at home a roaring fire is a welcome bonus but in Poland we were already working in temperatures exceeding 30°! Lunch time we all struggled to find the tiny bit of shade thrown by the mini van and although the grass always looked dry we always found that by the time we stood up to carry on work we had slightly damp bums!



Lunchtime – trying to find any bit of shade!

Our biggest danger was our polish co-helpers or most specifically the male polish co- helpers who were keen to hack away rather vigorously using the bill hooks. Although I would try and start in comparative safety some distance away from those thrashing billhooks, unfortunately with 20 plus of us working the same area most of the time there wasn't much room to keep that distance!

This particular site took most of our days but on the last day we felt a great sense of achievement as we all joined in to rake up the last bit of hay left by all the brushcutting carried out. The brushcutters were a real time saver and made a big difference to the size of the area we were able to cover.



Hard at work raking the last bit of hay.



Site Number 2 at Staw Polnocny beyond Niezgod. Look what we found hidden in amongst all the scrub - old farm equipment!

The main aim of this site had again been to open up the habitat for birds such as snipe and redshanks so that they can spot their prey and protect their nests.

A couple of days were spent on another site at Grabownice, the aim here being to improve the habitat for Corncrake and Barred Warbler. It was doing pretty much the same thing as before, that is clearing scrub and also birch trees, although this time we piled up the rubbish over the ditch. As explained by Roman, our host, this would have a threefold effect, to make a den for nightingales so that their nests are protected from magpies sitting overhead in the birch trees, it also meant that the grassland was not covered by the scrub cleared so it retained it's natural habitat and thirdly it would stop the ditch from drying out.

With regard to the amazing wildlife we saw, one particular species I have not yet mentioned, and to me one of the most amazing sights, was the storks and the sheer size of their nests. It put a whole new meaning to when people complain here about having birds nesting IN their chimneys, as you can see from the photos. Often these nests were found sitting on top of chimneys.



Now that is a nest! A Stork's Nest to be precise and a very common sight quite often sitting on top of chimneys or, as in this case, on top of electricity pylons!



Stork's Nest with a couple of storks sitting on top this time.



Stork flying in the air about to land on the nest.

As already mentioned, to me the other incredible sight was seeing the flight of the white tailed eagles. They were magnificent and their wingspan so massive. They truly were a beautiful sight. It was lovely to see the vast amount of butterflies in the meadows. On one of our days off we saw loads of tree frogs but the cutest experience was seeing a pygmy owl which had been rescued with a hurt wing. The last I heard was that the wing was healing well but it needed to practice flying in captivity before it could be released.



Green tree frog minding his own business.



Does it get much cuter? Pygmy owl that was rescued with a damaged wing.

It was not all work as we had the weekends off during which our Polish hosts organised kayaking for us, a whole new experience for me and very enjoyable. We also had a lovely trip to the city of Wrocław, which has an incredible history. In fact the history of Poland is incredible and it is amazing that throughout all their troubled history of various partitions and occupations there is an extremely strong sense of being Polish and retaining their unique identity. Roman, our host, was a vast mine of information, not only is he extremely knowledgeable in wildlife, particularly birds, but he also was our guide in the city providing us with a detailed history.



Main Square in Wrocław



St Andrzej Bobola – This is actually in Milicz where we stayed and is a photo of a 300 year old church originally built as a protestant church in a predominately catholic country. Consequently they were only allowed to build it providing it could be pulled down. It, therefore, lacks nails!

## The End

And so we came to the end of our experience. The thought of my own bed and even better my own bathroom was certainly something to look forward. Having spent two weeks sharing 3 toilets and 3 showers with 21 of us (male and female) plus some polish builders certainly taught us to be accommodating! I definitely wasn't going to miss our daily lunch of a cheese roll and a ham roll which never varied the whole time, although we did learn to try and add a bit of variety from the breakfast table. That said my overall feeling was having had a great experience, met some lovely people both within our group and our polish hosts and seen such a diversity of wildlife.

It is something I would recommend to anyone so if you are interested I believe more trips are being planned next year.

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