

# **Leonardo Da Vinci Conservation Project – Milicz, Poland**

## **Introduction**

I first heard about the Leonardo Da Vinci project when I was scouring the Internet searching for volunteering opportunities that would help to occupy my time during the summer holidays as I am currently employed in the education sector. Furthermore, since graduating with a degree in Rural Development in 2007, I have made a number of attempts to secure employment in the environmental industry, which have, thus far, been in vain. I attribute this to my lack of experience in this area coupled with the fierce competition the sector seems to attract. With this in mind, I decided to embark on some volunteering, and I was particularly keen to undertake this abroad as I am a keen traveller and am fascinated by different cultures, landscapes, and architecture.

After seeing the Leonardo da Vinci advert on [www.environmentjob.co.uk](http://www.environmentjob.co.uk), I contacted Nigel Spring, one of the scheme's founders, and signed up for the Western Poland project.

## **The journey there**

I met the majority of my travelling companions outside Basingstoke train station, already having lost my mobile phone, which was an unfortunate start to the journey. Everyone's luggage was loaded onto the trailer, which to me seemed too small to accommodate everyone's belongings, but Nigel's expert loading soon allayed that concern. We then boarded the minibus, where we would spend what remained of the current day, and the three days thereafter, travelling to our destination. Our first stop was Selsted in Kent where we would set up camp for the night. We unloaded the luggage, erected our tents (a first for me!), and then went for a delectable supper at the Jackdaw Inn, a homely local pub not far from the campsite. After supper, we were all rather weary from the day's travelling so we bedded down for the night.

The next day we had an early start (aided by the resident cockerel) in order that we could fit in the next lengthy lap of our journey - to Dover, where we boarded the ferry to Calais. We then proceeded to Dortmund, West Germany, where we spent another night camping at campingplatz Uentrop. Nigel was not enamoured with the campsite due to its' proximity to the motorway, and was keen to go in search of an alternative, but we took a vote, and voted in favour of the not so picturesque retreat. Personally, I didn't relish spending more time in the minibus than necessary and we were all feeling pretty ravenous and worn out. As it turned out, I was suitably impressed with the campsite's clean and ample showers. Furthermore, the nearby motorway did not prove any noisier than the previous night's village campsite, but there was some disturbance from the neighbouring power station.

The following day we resumed our seats in the minibus and travelled across the country to the Spreewald region in the former East Germany. We stopped en route to ask directions from a customer of a roadside gherkin stall and Nigel couldn't resist a couple of bags of the local fare. The evening's campsite at Neu Lubbenau was very aesthetically pleasing and we pitched our tents (I was becoming a dab hand at this) right next to a beautiful lake, where a number of the group donned their swim wear

and had a dip before dinner. Dinner was very pleasant and very well received despite the fact it was pot luck what we were served since the menu was entirely in German.

We managed a partial lie in the next day, and had a leisurely morning where we took a short stroll and engaged in some wildlife watching. We subsequently went to visit a stork museum in a charming village called Vetschau and took some photographs of a pair of white storks positioned in their nest. After our visit to the museum we set off in the direction of the Polish border. The border Police seemed to spend ages scrutinizing our passports and at one point an officer with a steely countenance even walked off with them. Luckily they were returned and we crossed the border with no further ado.



We arrived at our destination around 6pm and met our host, Roman and the other Polish people we would be working with over the course of our stay. We had a relatively early night to prepare ourselves for the following day, when we would begin our practical conservation work.

## **Practical conservation work**

The practical conservation work took place on three separate sites located in the Barycz Valley, which hosts the largest pond system in Poland and Europe and is important for species such as Marsh harrier, Red necked grebe, and Whooper swan. The sites included two adjacent 'manmade' islands at Stawy Gadzinow, a meadow called the 'old pond' in Staw Polnocny, and a second meadow at Grabownice. We spent eight days on practical activities, and one day on interpretation and moth identification tasks when heavy rain interrupted our outdoor activities.

The practical tasks ranged from brush cutting to cutting scrub with loppers, bow saws, and chain saws. The majority of trees we cut down were willow, which responded well to the loppers and bow saws. We also cleared rushes and grass. Scrub clearance is a fundamental part of conservation site maintenance as it prevents invasive species

encroaching and taking over habitats; and in this instance, it was intended to provide a more open space for nesting birds.

The surroundings were very pleasing visually and abundant with flora and fauna. We were fortunate to have an opportunity to observe the wildlife around us and encouraged to take photographs and identify what we saw. Many of the group were professionals in the field of conservation and were skilled at handling and identifying the various creatures we happened upon. Before the trip, I had little knowledge of insects. However, my know-how has been significantly enhanced as I was introduced to a multitude of different species; and I am now confident identifying numerous butterfly and moth species from Green-veined Whites and Brimstones to Common Blues and Meadow Browns. In fact, the enthusiasm of some members of the group has given me the impetus to further increase my knowledge of these striking insects. Moreover, I have already assisted a West Berkshire countryside ranger with moth trapping activities.



## **Culture**

Our cultural activities took place at the weekends due to the country's strong religious traditions. Some of our spare time was spent exploring woodland areas and fish ponds and doing a spot of wildlife watching. On our first Saturday, we were also taken to a spectacular hunting lodge at Antonin which was built in 1822-24 and designed by the famous architect, Karl Friedrich Schinkel. The building is also linked with Fryderyk Chopin, who visited the lodge in the autumn of 1829 when he worked on some of his compositions. The lodge is now a high class restaurant and conference centre and while we were there we tucked in to some of the restaurant's scrumptious ice cream and cake.

That evening we attended a lakeside BBQ, set in stunning surroundings at Ostoja, where we celebrated Greg and Roman's birthdays. The venue was also home to some local Konik ponies. We were served a delicious Polish stew called 'Bigos', which consists of cabbage, pork, sausage, and sauerkraut; and traditional Polish sausages which were cooked on an open fire. There was no shortage of beverages, which ranged from beer and Polish vodka to the more hard core 'mad dogs' (shots of vodka and Tabasco). I, myself had consumed too much of the latter the previous night to contemplate any more of the stomach-churning concoction.

The following day we got to go kayaking down the Barycz River, which was fantastic fun. We split up into two groups – the more experienced among us made up one group, and the novices, the other. There wasn't a great deal of wildlife to see on the route with the exception of brightly coloured damselfly nymphs, but we all enjoyed ourselves immensely and found it very refreshing.

The following weekend we visited the city of Wroclaw, which is Poland's fourth largest city. Our first stop was a coffee shop in a new shopping centre, where we had tea and coffee - and cake to die for! We then made our way to the Raclawice Panorama, a panoramic painting illustrating the battle of Raclawice between Poland and Russian in 1794, which was won by Poland. We took a boat ride along the river Odra and had tea in a quirky traditional Polish restaurant in the main square. In the afternoon we visited Szczytnicki Park with the objective of finding red squirrels. After searching high and low for them, I believe a few members of the group caught a very quick glimpse of one.



## Conclusion

I am very grateful I had the opportunity to take part in the Leonardo Da Vinci project as it was an excellent experience all round. I got to visit a new country I wouldn't necessarily have visited otherwise, and met some very interesting people. I also gained experience in practical conservation work, and learned how to competently identify a number of butterfly and moth species. Furthermore, I now have a strong desire to learn even more about these creatures as I am captivated by their delicate loveliness. Since the trip I have done some volunteering for West Berkshire Council, where I have been able to employ my newly acquired scrub cutting skills, and I have also assisted with a local pond dipping event. The Leonardo Da Vinci project has shown me that conservation volunteering is enormously rewarding as it enables you to meet like minded people, feel a sense of achievement and comradeship, and experience satisfaction from knowing that you are making a tangible difference to the natural environment and community in which you live.

*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](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) ).*