

Poland Conservation Trip 2009

Laura Sanderson recalls an all expenses paid trip to Poland to undertake conservation volunteering this summer.

'Free conservation holidays to Eastern Europe' I read. 'Free?' I thought.

If there's one thing my father ever taught me, it's that nothing comes for free. There is always a catch. So I nearly deleted the email from my inbox without even reading it. I'm so glad I didn't.

As it happened there was a catch, and that was that I would have to work pretty hard and live in what some might consider less than ideal conditions for two weeks. But I had to work hard in a beautiful location in Poland with lovely hosts and pretty good food, and I got to learn a lot too.

The deal was that I had to pay a £100 returnable deposit (returnable provided I coughed up this report and did some conservation volunteering back home), attend a training weekend (at which I was taught how to use a brushcutter and plied with wonderful food), and then agree to work as a conservation volunteer in Poland for 2 weeks.

I expected that this sort of trip would largely attract middle-aged hippy types, and the training weekend did little to relieve me of this suspicion. There were at least two women clad head to toe in rainbow colours. But in fact most of the people that I got talking to at that weekend, and everyone that came on our trip to Poland, turned out to be really interesting, lovely people from a wide variety of backgrounds.

I joined our trip at a service station off the M3. A three-day minibus trip across Europe was not something that I had looked forward to, but it gave the 15 of us and our two leaders a chance to bond and by the time we arrived at our concrete tower block in Milicz, Poland, we had all got to know one another pretty well. Yes, that was a concrete tower block, we were to stay in the lovely town of Milicz surrounded by beautiful countryside, yet the actual accommodation arranged for us was pretty dire. Three showers and three toilets between the 17 of us, our Polish hosts, plus a few random Polish builders took a bit of getting used to! There weren't too many people to a room, three of us in mine, but the beds were made out of bus seat material and the sheets provided were too short even for small children. Although this was all a bit disappointing, in fact I quickly settled in and became accustomed to it.

The work that we were to do consisted largely of clearing vegetation from a variety of habitats to improve their suitability for wildlife. The countryside around Milicz contains a matrix of fish ponds, created in medieval times to provide fish for the Catholic peasants. Over time the ponds have become hugely important not just for the fish but for the birds, mammals, invertebrates and plant communities which they support. The ponds, located in the Barycz Valley, are now considered internationally important and are collectively

protected by law as a Ramsar site, Special Protection Area (SPA) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

Our first job was to clear several islands of encroaching scrub. These islands were formed from the arisings of pond dredging, and they provide fantastic, safe nesting sites for ground-nesting birds. In particular, the rare whiskered tern makes use of these islands for raising their young. Over time, however, the fertile silty soil of the islands had also provided the ideal habitat for willow and other scrub to grow, which rendered them much less suitable for birds.

Once we had got onto the first island (which took a while with one person punting groups of four across in a little boat), it was amazing how quickly we cleared the vegetation. By the end of the day, using only a couple of brushcutters, some hand tools and a lot of elbow grease, our group had completely cleared two islands of scrub.

As an ecologist I was also excited to have seen the whiskered terns for which we were doing the work, a young deer swimming away from the island and a black vole which is Poland's equivalent of our water vole.

Over the following two weeks we then cleared two separate marshy meadows adjacent to some of the ponds which were also becoming encroached with sallow scrub and reeds. As one of only a few members of the group to have been trained in brushcutting, I spent a large part of my time using this machinery to cut through the reeds. Although it seemed at first like hard work, I quickly began to enjoy my role and attacked the reedbeds and smaller bushes (and luckily not my colleagues!) with vigour. I also spent some time helping to clear the larger bushes by hand and raking up the cut reeds into neat piles. This last job was definitely the hardest and the one most complained about!



Lunch break under a make-shift shelter

Clearing these wet meadows made them more suitable for use by ground nesting birds and waders, and allowed smaller reed species to grow, which are pulled together to create nests by birds such as warblers. Due to the wet nature of the ground, it was not possible

to use heavy machinery to undertake this task and so the areas had been left for a long time and were greatly in need of the work that we undertook. Unfortunately grazing, which would be the ideal management method for this area, no longer occurs due to meat being more cheaply produced indoors, and because it is often imported from other countries. Although this area is the home of Konig ponies, currently the most fashionable of conservation tools in the UK, the amount of money that would be needed to fence the areas to make them suitable for this kind of grazing is prohibitively expensive to the Polish conservation bodies.

My final working day was spent going back to the pond with the islands we had cleared. Whilst some of our group set about burning the scrub we had cleared on the first day, myself and another brushcutter cleared the reeds and other vegetation from around the banks of the pond.



Hard at work

When we weren't working we were taken on several enjoyable excursions to explore the local area. With such a large group of natural historians in such a biodiversity-rich area, it was inevitable that we would never get anywhere quickly, and indeed several of the 'walks' that we intended to go on ended up being short potters looking at most every living thing in the area! Whilst frustrating at times, this gave me the opportunity to learn a lot of new species, and see and photograph a wonderful variety of animals and plants.

We also got to go on various cultural trips and visited a hunting lodge, a castle in which Poland's first bat mitigation project had been carried out, and the city of Wroclaw. Of course cultural trips in Poland wouldn't be complete without being given a taste of the local nightlife, and our hosts took us out on various drinking forays. We were introduced to Polish beer and shown how to drink their Zubrówka bison grass vodka, either with apple juice or with Tabasco and raspberry syrup as a lethal but delicious shot. Our hosts, in particular the wonderful leader Roman, were incredibly welcoming and friendly and really made the effort to integrate us. We even picked up a decent amount of the language by the end of the two weeks.

Highlights of the trip for me included a kayaking trip along the Barycz River, seeing a captive pygmy owl in rehabilitation, and

This trip forms part of a series of conservation trips to Europe organised by the European Conservation Action Network and all are led by the jovial Nigel Spring and his partner. They are funded through the European Union, and will run throughout 2010. If you have an interest in conservation and want to enjoy a trip to a seldom visited part of the world whilst getting fit and meeting new people, why not sign up for one of next year's trips?



The journey home

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).