



Polska! Milicz, Western Poland 2009

During the summer of 2009 I was lucky enough to secure a place on Eucan's (European Conservation Action Network) conservation trip to Milicz, western Poland. The European Conservation Action Network, which was established in 2007 by The Kingcombe Trust (a charity based at The Kingcombe Centre in west Dorset and in association with the Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation), is dedicated to conservation and environmental education. 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.

When I first stumbled across this programme whilst job hunting on the internet, I was immediately attracted by the great opportunities offered at very low costs. The issue of cost was especially important to myself, having just finished university and being, shall we say, economically disadvantaged! After further review of the website I realised I was too late for the majority of that year's programmes but decided to apply anyway and see what happened. I was delighted when Nigel Spring, one of the organisers e-mailed me to notify me of a cancellation. I replied immediately, was accepted and then had little more than two weeks to prepare! I was extremely excited at the prospect of a first visit to Eastern Europe, looking forward to the practical work, the wildlife and the cultural experiences ahead.

The first few days of the visit were spent travelling, camping and getting to know the other volunteers on the trip. There was even time for some wildlife encounters on the way, including in Germany, a visit to a museum dedicated entirely to white storks and their conservation (complete with stork nest and camera link!).

Upon arrival in Milicz, a small town in south western Poland with a population of around 16,000, after three days of travel the hostel was a welcome site to all. Although first impressions weren't fantastic, once inside we found conditions to be most welcoming. The staff were all friendly and we could not have wished for a more friendly or knowledgeable guide and host in Roman Guziak who greeted us in perfect English (before later going on to give us all our first Polish language lessons!). Once we had all settled in Roman and Nigel explained the links between their respective organisations as well as the ecology of the area and the aim of the practical work we were to be undertaking.

Having secured but not started a position as a Trainee Conservation Officer with the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust based at Rutland Water just days before embarking on the trip, the ecology of the wetland area was of particular interest to me. In the months leading up to the trip I had completed a degree in Environmental Conservation and Countryside Management and although I had some idea of wetland habitat management, the opportunity to gain some practical experience was an excellent and relevant one.

During the next few days of the trip we began the practical work. The fish ponds area, where the majority of our work was undertaken was a great area for wildlife despite being heavily under managed. The area is believed to have been created by monks as early as the 12th century, and was used for the farming of carp. This use continues to be true for much of the area today. The large area of wetland included large expanses of wet grass land, reedbed, some wet woodland and of course many lakes. The importance of the area is internationally recognised, being both a RAMSAR (Wetland of international importance) and also a Natura 2000 site.

Having grown up on a farm and worked on many others whilst growing up I was looking forward to the practical element of the trip. The first task began at the Stawy Gadzinow site. Here, an island in the middle of one of the carp ponds had become completely overgrown with willow and other heavy vegetation. The clearance was aimed to encourage ground nesting birds to use the site. This would include the common black headed gulls, but hopefully also whiskered and common terns, that are now, in fact not so common!

The next week or so was spent at our second and main site, Stawy Polnocny. Again, the work here focused on scrub clearance, this time on a large area of wet grassland. Our arsenal of tools included bill hooks, loppers, bow saws, chainsaws and brush cutters and our onslaught was unrelenting! This work was again intended to improve the area for breeding birds, this time the targeted species including various warblers, particularly the secretive barred variety as well as the corncrake, which has been severely affected by modern farming methods.



Although the bulk of our time was spent undertaking practical work, there was plenty of free time for both cultural and natural encounters. Some of my personal wildlife highlights included daily sightings of white tailed sea eagles and marsh harriers. The visit to the tower hide at Stawy Grabonice also provided the chance to see bearded tits and excellent views of red deer. All of these species being first for me and that's not even mentioning the red backed shrike and red squirrels! The opportunity to undertake moth trapping was also fantastic, something I have continued on a weekly as part of my new position at Rutland Water.

Some of the more memorable cultural encounters included the visit to Raclawice panorama in Wroclaw. This incredible, completely circular art was something completely new to me and is definitely an experience I will not forget. Wroclaw seemed, in general a fantastic city and I would not hesitate to return given the chance. The kayaking around Milicz was also a great experience, giving the group more time to bond, exercise (although whether we needed it after a weeks hard labour is debateable!) as well as the chance to see more excellent wildlife. Some of the less memorable events include the evenings drinking in Milicz and Wroclaw. They were most definitely enjoyable, but I'm afraid I could not describe them as memorable!

In general I had a fantastic experience in Poland with Eucan and would highly recommend the program to anybody. The only assets required would be an interest in other cultures and wildlife and a commitment to a hard days work. I have some fantastic memories that will stay with me for a long time. I am also still in touch with many of the other great volunteers I met and will probably be for a long time to come. The trip turned out to be a perfect introduction for me to wetland habitat and has helped me no end in my new position as a Trainee Conservation Officer at Rutland Water. The experience served as a great stepping stone in my career in conservation and I can only thank Eucan and the Kingcombe Trust for the fabulous opportunities they offer.