

Andy Guy – article for Around Ashburton.

I must admit that when I first saw the e mail about EuCAN trips to Europe I thought 'it's too good to be true, there must be a catch'. Try as I might I have not been able to discover the catch. Yes the food could've been better, I'm still not sure what some of the things I ate were but there was plenty of it. Yes the accommodation was less than luxurious; we were three, four or even five to a room at times. Yes the work was hard, very hard at times if you were that way inclined (and I am). But for these minor inconveniences I got to travel to the East of Europe, somewhere I'd never even thought about going to before, on a guided natural history tour for free. Yes you did read that right, free. You don't get that kind of deal very often these days.

Being an environmental venture we avoided the plane and were transported to Warsaw on a huge sleeper train 40 carriages long. The journey was a great adventure in itself chugging right across Europe with a stop in Koln and coffee on the steps of the beautiful cathedral there. Once in Warsaw we were met by our hosts and guides and taken to the hotel that would be our first lodgings.

We then spent three days doing the sort of thing that nature conservation volunteers in the UK will be very familiar with – scrub bashing. We cut willow scrub and made hay by hand on a fantastic old fen meadow. We worked with old Polish men, who clearly thought we were bonkers, making big conical hay stacks in the Polish fashion.

In between sessions slogging in the bog we were taken to marvellous sites to see birds or butterflies which, sadly, you wouldn't see in this country any more. Butterflies like the large copper and birds like the great grey shrike or common crane. Our hosts were always keen to share the delights and problems of Polish life and Nigel and Kathy, the organisers, had a wealth of natural history knowledge to impart.

We travelled to two more fabulous sites and did more scrub bashing and haymaking to the immense gratitude of the Polish conservationists who were looking after us.

Poland has not long been free of the yoke of communism and doesn't have a well developed Non-Governmental Organisation network like we do in this country. Think of how many members the RSPB and National Trust have to support their valuable work. The Poles have nothing of the sort and few sources of funding and volunteer labour to draw on.

What they do have is a wealth of fabulous wildlife like Elk, which we saw in Briebzsa Marsh, wolves and Lynx, and a great enthusiasm for the natural world.

EuCAN also organise trips to other EU member states like Hungary if you're feeling adventurous or even France if you don't like long train journeys.

If there IS a catch it's that you can only do it once.

For more information go to <http://www.eucan.org.uk/>