

Conservation volunteering in Eastern Poland  
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From 7<sup>th</sup> September 2009, for 16 days I was lucky enough to take part in a conservation placement to Eastern Poland, funded by the Leonardo da Vinci project with the Kingcombe Centre. I worked at 3 reserves, each in a different area of Poland.

The journey started in London St Pancras, where I met my fellow placement volunteers, and ended in Warszawa two days later: after 3 trains and a sleeper train from Köln. I spent the journey staring out the window watching night time Europe fly by and the stars whiz over the train. Upon arriving in Warszawa we were taken to our first site in the Mazowian Landscape Park called Całowanie fen.

Całowanie fen is one of the largest peatlands in the Mazowsze region and lies next to the Vistula River, which runs next to Warszawa. We were given the task of helping to restore the fen and wet meadows by removing the biomass from various areas around the Całowanie fen. This is because the lack of mowing along with encroaching shrub is among the major threats to Polish fen and wet meadows. As well as



helping to maintain the existing fen I was also involved in restoration of further fen; I encouraged the establishment of fenland target species by transferring “good hay” to areas lacking fen related vegetation, allowing the seed to re-colonise. The majority of the hay vegetation we removed was stored in traditional Polish hay stacks. A local farmer helped us create these stacks, and although none of us spoke Polish the jolly farmer continued to talk to us throughout the day in Polish! Wonder what he was saying? The sheer diversity of wildlife on this site was spectacular, endless types of insects were being found as well as a Northern Birch Mouse (*Sicista betulina*) and large numbers of interesting fen vegetation and all sorts of bird life.

The second site we visited was the Kampinoska National Park, where we helped to maintain dry grassland habitat by cutting back Eared Willow (*Salix aurita*). We took care to leave all Alder buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*) as it not only supports a large proportion of the brimstone butterfly (*Gonepteryx rhamni*) diet, but they also use it to lay their eggs on. The grassland site extended well into the horizon and contained a rich diversity of meadow species.

During our stay at the Kampinoska National Park we had a guided tour around Warszawa and had a chance to learn about some of the history of Poland. A visit to the Warszawa Uprising museum opened my eyes to the Warszawa uprising during World

War Two and the degree of destruction the town suffered from the retreating German army after World War 2. The degree of building rubble left in their wake resulted in new buildings being built on top of the rubble because there was too much of it to move. This day trip also allowed us to experience a traditional polish goulash and polish beer (picture 2); in fact the beer was experienced several times over. During the stay at Kampinoska National Park we were lucky enough to have a guided bird tour around some other reserves around Warszawa in which I saw several buzzards (*Buteo buteo*), sparrowhawks (*Accipiter nisus*), marsh harriers (*Circus aeruginosus*), grey shrikes (*Lanius excubitor*), little grebes (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) and amazingly a black woodpecker (*Dryocopus martius*).

After one of the days work at this site we also visited a breathtaking pond in the middle of a boreal forest on the border of eastern Poland and Lithuania; easily the most stunning landscape I have seen. On another afternoon, we also went on a butterfly survey hoping to see a scarce large blue (*Maculinea teleius*), but they aren't called scarce for nothing!

The last site we stayed at involved a 4 hour mini-bus ride across Eastern Poland. The journey was made less, however, by more gorgeous Polish goulash, and polish beer. This was only surpassed by seeing 200 cranes (*Grus grus*) flying into the sunset and an elk (*Cervus Canadensis*)!

The third and final site was involved staying at a hotel next to a lake in Augustowska. The work involved clearing biomass from a wet meadow and cutting back encroaching birch growth. The site was unique, and spectacular; it seemed we were the first people to see it in decades. The area was so nutrient poor, due to it being unbrotophically feed, that everything grew very slowly.



Pine trees were only 1 meter high with around 20 branches, suggesting in was over 15 years old. The sound of crested tits continuously called from the boreal pine forest around us as we worked. The wildlife diversity of the area was capped off on the last day when a white tailed eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) flew over us, the sheer size of this eagle was mesmerising.

The accommodation at Augustowska had a lake we could swim in after a hard days work and a pub to watch the sun set over the lake. On our day off I went kayaking around the lake and the river which lead to another stunning lake. We were lucky enough to pass a beaver dam on the way, though unfortunately no beavers were in when we carefully floated by. Although, a fellow work colleague did spot them an hour later, lucky bugger! The last night of the trip involved a traditional Polish goulash and more polish beer and a bit of a sing along around a camp fire.

The experience to eastern Poland was fantastic and I would not hesitate to do it again. Thank you so much to the Kathy and Nigel for providing me with the opportunity to study and work in Poland, and all of the Ewa's that showed us around Eastern Poland, and to Chris from Brownsea Island for introducing me to the gumbo bean system, they have it in France too? If you are interesting in joining them in Poland next year, or any of the other countries they will be working in throughout the summer months next year then take a look at their web site: [www.eucan.org.uk](http://www.eucan.org.uk)