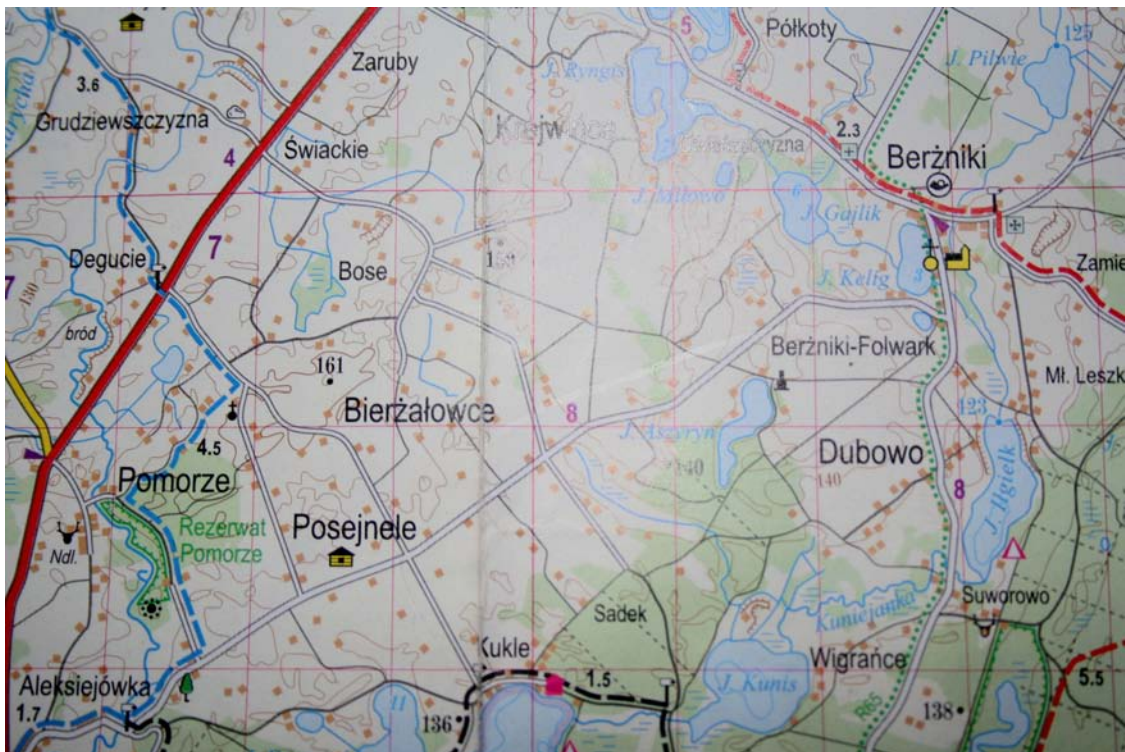


A WALK IN THE PARK?

Masuria, Eastern Poland, 20th September 2009.

A day to ourselves in Poland gave members of the Eucan expedition opportunities in a wide range of activities. Opting out of cycling or water sports I decided to head off on my own on another 'pointless stomp' around the local countryside. It's a habit I've developed on holidays over a number of years. This time I took a map of the local countryside as both a navigational aid and a route planner. My aim was to explore the area on foot taking in as much variety of wildlife as possible. In particular I wanted to end up passing the next lake east of our hotel, Lake Kunis, as the canoeing fraternity had been told that Beavers were present and I was keen to check out its potential.



Leaving the hotel at Kukle around 10am, I headed broadly north and west on a familiar road we had driven many times. I was aiming for the river bridge en route to Giby where it seems possible to pick up a trail to a small, apparently wetland, nature reserve. The roads were very different when travelled on foot. Small birds, particularly Skylarks, Linnets and White Wagtails were far more in evidence than expected. There was, however, no sign of the Great Grey Shrike Andy had seen from the van the previous day. The verge wildflowers were a treat and I was able to stop and photograph all manner of things; a field of Pumpkins, a pretty farm complete with Stork nest (the Storks had

recently moved on and we did not see any in our stay in Poland), and the local cows.



It was whilst photographing the latter that I became aware of a distant Buzzard up above the woods being mobbed by a couple of smaller birds, presumably Fieldfares. Eventually I got around to enjoying the spectacle and was slightly embarrassed and delighted in equal measure to find the 'fieldfares' were actually Buzzards and they were both mobbing an adult White-tailed Eagle, which even at great range showed its white tail superbly. I am more certain than ever that it was this species we saw distantly, like a huge flying barn door, over the Biebrza



marshes.

The bridge over the river at Aleksiejowka showed no signs of Beaver-damaged trees. My attempts to wander along the banks a little way were thwarted by extremely muddy conditions so I retraced my steps and headed for the 'Reserwat Pomorze'. Most of the dog population of Poland joined forces in welcoming me, so no quiet approach to the reserve was possible. In fact the reserve sign showed pictures of Beavers (my Polish language skills not permitting to understand any of the text) but the reserve was clearly a largish block of conifer woodland the opposite side of the track from the river. I didn't go far in but stopped to eat a packed lunch surrounded by the omni-present tapping of Great-spotted Woodpeckers and Nuthatches, which not for the first time that day I saw feeding on the ground. The real bird of North-East Poland in September must of course be the Jay. They seem to be everywhere and even in loose flocks of up to 9 birds. One local man

collecting wild fungi seemed a little startled to see me and scurried off back into the woods.

Using the map I navigated across open rolling farmland for a number of miles in fairly intense mid-day heat. Ravens and Hooded Crows were the only common birds here but as with the rest of the country the air was alive with the sound of chirping crickets and grasshoppers. One huge cricket in the road was more or less instantly familiar as a Wartbiter. In fact I felt the need to check the status and distribution with Nigel as I couldn't quite get over seeing one in such a commonplace setting. In the UK I had undertaken a considerable expedition to the Sussex Downs to be shown one on a National Nature Reserve by an English Nature Warden. That day I had been bitten (though John had worked hard to make the insect bite) which to this day I consider a great badge of honour. I couldn't make the Polish Wartbiter bite me and took some dismal photos of it instead. Otherwise insects were proving rather few and far between. Butterflies were less numerous than I would have hoped.



I had begun to doubt my map reading abilities as I took a wrong turn into a farmyard. However I realised that some of the tracks marked were going to prove very small indeed on the ground. I passed along woodland edge, feeling rather lost as the wood didn't tally with the map. I was in fact in exactly the right place but feeling hot, blistered, and weary. Two lads on a scramble bike and no helmets nearly ran me down, but otherwise there was virtually no-one else to be seen on my entire walk. As usual wildlife came to my rescue. I watched a flock of Chaffinches and surprisingly the only Black Redstart of the day, a female, and then on the track in front of me I saw a Camberwell Beauty butterfly. This was a species we were all on the look out for and which had been proving surprisingly elusive to that point. I took some nice photos though on a dead stem and watched it for a while sugaring briefly on a variety of plants. It was quite a well-worn specimen. On returning to the hotel I was happy to hear Joe had also encountered one that day. Later on

I finally caught up with decent views of Queen of Spain Fritillary but couldn't get a worthwhile photograph.



The walk took me down to Berzniki-Folwark. I failed completely to work out what the tower-like symbol on the map was for as I saw nothing by way of a landmark. However there was the lake Aszyryn to pass. Typically there were small fishing jetties all around and, it being a Sunday, several people using them. I correctly took the first turning to the right down past the lake and into some fantastic looking woods and then, because I was comfortably on track to get back for the sauna trip, I sat on a large timber pile in the woods and watched and waited for wildlife. Nuthatches, Jays, Marsh Tits, Crested Tits and Siskin were around me, and a short while later a smallish flock of Crossbills went overhead. I had been thinking that the whole area looked absolutely perfect for Hawfinch and Woodlark (there was quite a bit of fenced young plantation around) but didn't see or hear either. I went down to the lake as quietly as possible hoping to see some mammal life but all was quiet.

Quite where I got lost I think I have now worked out. There was one tiny forest track that with hindsight I am sure I was supposed to take. Later, working back from lake Kunis I realised how pathetically small this marked track actually was, and doubt I would ever have recognised for what it was. So now I was heading in the wrong direction, vaguely aware of the fact but also not sure where I was going in relation to the map. I turned up on the 'main' road north of Dubowo. I walked through the hamlet and watched a Great White Egret flying purposefully over lake Hgielk (second one in 2 days) and desperately wanted to avoid taking any more wrong turns. I was now certain to have missed the sauna trip so decided to wait until dusk at Lake Kunis when I got there. The last bit of forest was delightful. Being that much later in the day bird life had picked up and I was hoping to see all sorts of nice things, especially Nutcrackers. I didn't but was happy with some of the noises, deciding that I had at least heard another Black Woodpecker and then rather fancifully deciding that a whirring of wings from out of a spruce could only have been a Hazelhen. I waited an age but heard and saw nothing more.

The lake was beautiful in the evening light and despite the presence of a few fishermen in boats looked absolutely perfect for Otters or Beavers, or both. There were lots of fish, some splashing around in the reedbed edges fooling me for a while that they were indeed aquatic mammals but the only wildlife I saw for the first half an hour or so were Great Crested Grebes, a single female Goldeneye and 150 trillion billion mosquitoes. Then came one of the finest sights of the trip. 3 Cranes flew low the length of the lake in perfect late afternoon light calling as they went and apparently heading straight for supper at the hotel. They returned a few minutes later and settled in the furthest reedbed / carr edge of the lake. They were out of sight but occasionally calling and much later, towards dusk, 3 more flew in from the North-East.



I walked back the last kilometre or so to the hotel in near dark conditions without seeing anything else significant. I did, however hear a Tawny Owl and was struck by the fact this was the first I could recall in Poland. I was badly blistered, had walked about 5km further than I had intended and was tired and very happy. I walked in on supper, which was great, to find everyone else had enjoyed themselves immensely doing their own things and all were in excellent spirits.

The walk had been a fantastic experience. Even better it was undertaken the same day as the annual 'Hardy Hike' fund-raising event back home in Dorset and I estimated from the map it was a similar distance (something like 21 – 22km). The lake at sunset was too good to miss and the following evening I returned for half an hour and at the bridge over the road bisecting the lakes, watched a Beaver silently swim 6 feet or so below me. Magical.