

***EUCAN
EASTERN POLAND
SEPTEMBER 7th to 23rd
2009
Heather J Brown***





The Journey **St Pancras to** **Warsaw**

Hello or Goodbye?

Several people standing by a large pile of rucksacks came in to view as I made my way up the stairs in St Pancras station. "That must be them!" I recognised a few faces from the preparation weekend but, to my embarrassment, could not remember their names. So, as we re-acquainted ourselves with one another and the new people were introduced, we began to swap stories about our trip so far.



The 9 metre bronze statue called "The Meeting Place", by Paul Day, loomed over us whilst we ate our lunch at St Pancras. I couldn't help wondering if the couple in an intimate embrace, were saying goodbye or hello? Definitely, goodbye, I thought. What time do we leave?

Who's got the tickets?

Chris Thain, or "Big Chris", as he would come to be known, had taken on the unenviable task of looking after all of the Euro star and Sleeper tickets. As part of his commitment and dedication to this task, he also led our motley crew through the network of train stations, platforms, information boards, beer, toilet and feeding stops from London to Warsaw with a unique and admirable flair that only he could demonstrate. Mainly a dry wit, a sense of inevitable doom and the love of a good pint (or 0.4 litres to be precise).



Beer in Brussels

Our short stop in Brussels, prior to boarding the train to Cologne, meant that we could sit in the sunshine outside the station and enjoy some real Belgium beer. Ahhh!

Suddenly, one of the group discovered that the platform from which our train to Cologne was to depart had changed. Mild panic set in when we got to the new platform, only to find that the train was in complete darkness with 2 minutes to go before it was due to leave. This quickly turned in to a frenzied tussle between rucksacks, EUCAN participants and about 100 normal passengers as the lights came on and everyone realised that they had about 90 seconds to get on the train, find a seat and avoid squashing a variety of commuters, young children, elderly citizens or an assortment of dogs in the process.

Don't lose a leg!

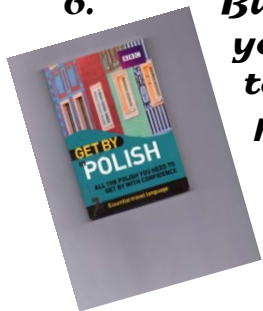
The final stage of our journey was one that we were all relishing the idea of. I was particularly looking forward to having a bed to sleep in-much better than trying to get rest in one of those reclining seats.

It was six to a couchette. We were stacked like luxuriating sardines in a speeding tin as follows: Kaylem, Becky, Dan, Monique, Liz and myself. As the evening wore on, we became aware of an intensity of heat coming from the wall of the train that was equivalent to that of a Swedish sauna. We tried to solve the problem:

- 1. Turn the dial clockwise- hot.***
- 2. Turn the dial anti-clockwise- still hot.***
- 3. Open the window- still hot with the added bonus of noise from the engine and tracks.***
- 4. Drink water and wipe your face with a wet cloth- still hot and slightly damp.***
- 5. Lie very still on your bed- even hotter***

6. But Kaylem had it sussed....lie on your bed with your feet sticking out of the window just enough to prevent your legs being amputated as you pass through numerous stations and under railway bridges- Zzzzzzzzzzz!

7 AM! Time for breakfast in the buffet car - at last I get a chance to practice my Polish.



The Work Osieck, Kampinoski and Kukle

Dzien' dobry!

Delicious scents of baking bread greeted the group as they disembarked from the train in Warsaw. The station was a myriad of small shops selling fresh bread, meat, newspapers, fruit, vegetables and souvenirs. Emerging from the station in to the warm Autumnal sunshine and blinking as our eyes adjusted to the light, we spotted Kathy and Paulina with her babe in arms waiting to greet us. You made it! Welcome to Poland!



Wellies, Willow and Weddings -Osieck

The first area that we were to work on was a wetland habitat about three quarter of an hours drive from Warsaw and near to a small village called Osieck.

The area was called Bagno Calowanie! or Kissing Swamp -presumably because when you walked through the swamp you were more than likely to get stuck. This resulted in your wellies making the sound of a sloppy kiss as you struggled to pull them out of the mud.

Task:

Conservation management of wetland areas.

Aim:

- 1. Cut willow, reeds and grass.*
- 2. Remove biomass and transport it to a dirt track for the farmer to remove from the site.*
- 3. Use willow free biomass to sprinkle on the surface of the wetland thereby helping retain moisture, prevent peat degradation and re seed the area with seeds and spores from appropriate species.*



**Horse and
Cart, Osijek**

4. Construct a haystack with Janek, a local farmer, like so:



The limitations and challenges:

Hot, heavy work on uneven, wet and boggy surfaces. Trailers and tractors were not able to reach sites where we were cutting due to the risk of sinking in to the swamp. As a result, all the cut biomass had to be carried out by hand using tarpaulins which often got caught and tore on willow stumps.

Successes

We worked together as a fantastically efficient team to finish the job in four and a half days.

We learnt about local wetland conservation issues thanks to Paulina's patient approach to her English colleagues.

We were invited to one wedding and a garden party at the hotel but unfortunately we were all too exhausted to attend and went to bed early!



Cut biomass

Paulina



The Lunchroom

Leaf blowers, liquid elevenses and lichenologists- Kampinoski

AWWW! NO!

It was 6am in our new abode- the headquarters of Kampinoski National Park and the grounds man had started up his petrol driven leaf blower again. If only he would get a brush, I certainly wouldn't mind slowly waking up to the gentle swish, swish of bristles upon paving stones.

It soon became clear that all the early morning cleaning activities were due to the fact that the President of Warsaw would be arriving at the Park headquarters today. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Kampinoski National Park. Everything was certainly sparkling clean and fit for a Presidential visit. Leaves were cleared. Floors were washed. Washing was removed from balconies and there was even an especially clean wash room prepared just in case the President needed to freshen up during his visit.

However, we had work to do so we couldn't hang around to meet the dignitaries of the day.

Aim

Hay meadow management.

Task

Cut and remove willow and scrub.

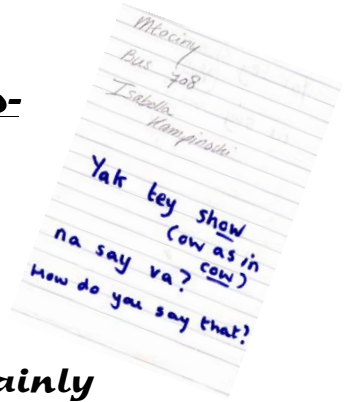
Convert all cut willow and scrub in to wood chippings.

Limitations and challenges

Most of the willow we were cutting had sprouted from previously cut willow that had not been removed from the site. This had resulted in the willow rooting and young shoots sprouting up from the piles. This made it really difficult to cut.

The hottest day so far- I think it registered 28 °C on the thermometer.

A temperamental chipping machine that blocked up at regular intervals.



Successes

The Polish Forester was particularly pleased with the work we had done.

Some of the group impressed our Polish host Camille and his farmer friend so much with their skill on the chipping machine that they were offered liquid refreshment in the form

of vodka at 11am in the morning. NB: DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME!

Half of the group showed monumental stamina and kept working when the other half of the group's short bird watching trip "accidentally" extended to the whole of the day. Mmmm, a likely story!

Getting a free drink from as many of the twitchers as possible who felt sufficiently guilty about the extended bird watching incident.

An excellent evening spent with Lukasz and his friend Piotrek educating us about:

A. The highly specialized world of lichenologists.

B. Polish sayings about unusual places that dogs can bark from.

C. The procreational frustrations of Polish bison.



Monique, Phil and a local Polish farmer successfully chipping the willow.



Heather, Kathy, Kaylem, Chris, Joe, Andy, Nigel. The Farmer, Monique, Liz, Phil, Di, Becky, Dan, Louise and Chris.



Pate, Purgatory and Pool -Kukle

Pitch black- we arrived at the hotel in Kukle after dark. The hotel had an eerie feel to it- extensive polished stone floors, 1970's décor and a chill in the air. Becky recalled a similar hotel in a story she had read in which the guests were made in to pate!

It wasn't until the next morning when we opened our curtains, looked out of our windows and saw a spectacular view of vast dark, green pine forests, a sparkling lake and a staggering expanse of azure sky that we knew this was going to be a very magical place to explore.

Aim:

To protect the Fen Orchid

Task:

*Cut reeds and scrub.
Remove biomass from site.*

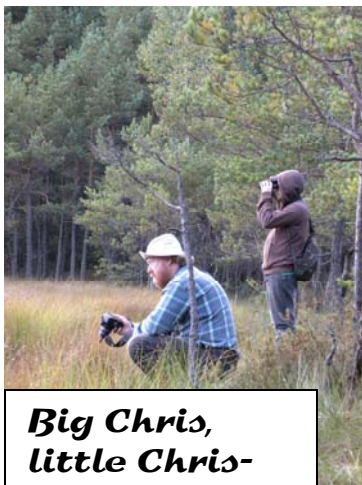
Limitations and Challenges

This was a very wet place and the mosquitoes were large!

The site was 0.5 km down a steep and narrow forest track. We initially thought we would have to carry the biomass up this steep track. This task would have been almost impossible and I think I would have felt like I was in purgatory in the true sense of the word. However, Nigel suggested that we cut paths in the reeds and placed the biomass within the adjacent woodland- thank goodness!



Ewa mushroom picking.- "Penny buns"



Big Chris, little Chris- watching.

Successes

Yet again the amazing EUCAN volunteers got the job done whilst smiling, laughing and squelching around a soggy, Polish fen for two and a half days.

We discovered a Pool table at the hotel and enjoyed an evening challenging the locals to a game.

On Saturday night the bar opened, the music started and I think we invented a

***HB- enjoying
the lunch
break.***



new dance. It involved skipping at high speed across the dance floor and catching the nearest person by the arm. After that you should suddenly, but randomly, veer in another direction whilst narrowly avoiding a head on collision with other whirling couples. We were able to spend the day exploring the lake and forest and taking some time to enjoy the tranquillity of this stunningly beautiful

part of Poland.

After all our hard work we were treated to a sauna in a local back garden. As we sat and let the grime seep from our pores and our aching muscles rest a while, we slowly began realise that the end of our trip was near.

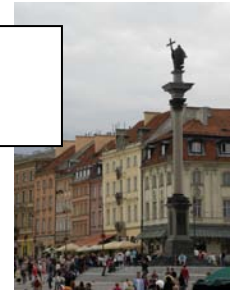
***River dip after
the sauna.
Brrrrrrr!***





Horse drawn cart, Warsaw

Main Square, Warsaw



Culture

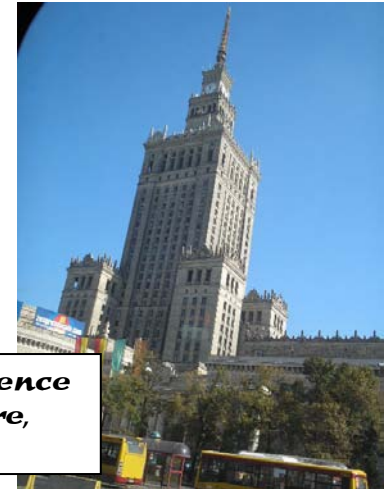
Sunday 13th September

Warsaw, Ewa Kominek

The Palace of Culture and Science, Warsaw

This is the tallest building in Warsaw. The building was originally known as the Joseph Stalin Palace of Culture and Science but the Polish people removed Stalin's name from the statues in the lobby after destalinization.

Polish people have many nicknames for the building such as the Russian wedding cake, Stalin's syringe and the clown.



Palace of Science and Culture, Warsaw

Uprising Memorial, Krasinski Square



Uprising Memorial, Warsaw

The Warsaw Uprising was an armed action against the Nazi occupation of Poland. It started on the 1st of August, 1944 and lasted 63 days. The Polish Home Army soldiers used home made weapons which can be seen represented in the Uprising Memorial Sculpture. A network of underground sewers were used by the Polish Home Army to move around the city. The Uprising cost the lives of 18,000 courageous Polish Home Army soldiers. Unfortunately the uprising was not successful and after the event 85% percent of Warsaw was destroyed by the Nazis.

Kampinoski Cemetery

Tuesday 15th September

This is a transcript of the talk given to us by our guide, Jan, in Kampinoski National Park.



We have the graves of over two thousand civilians, mostly inhabitants of Warsaw and the surrounding villages, which were killed in mass shootings by the Germans. The locations were both here and in some other locations in the forest but all of them close to here. The Germans did their best to keep these executions secret. They tried to camouflage the place. They tried... they planted the forest just after burying the bodies...

... and actually the fact that we do know about what happened here was mostly thanks to the foresters which worked here. They marked the area. One of the most popular ways of marking was they hammered gun shells in to trees... in to tree trunks and later they could find simply the places of execution.

After the Second World War, the bodies were exhumed and all of them were buried here. You can see that most of the graves are of Christian people, some also Jewish people. The tombstones are different so that's quite visible. We have the few bigger graves that you can see. We have, for example, different politicians here, a gold medallist from the Olympics in Los Angeles. So not only were there regular people also a few more famous people here as well.



Is the yellow and red glass significant?

No, I think the fact that yellow and red is simply for to have nice... nice colours but the fact of burning small candles on graves is a very typical Polish custom.



Why were these people killed?

It is thought that simply they could potentially be, maybe in the future, leaders of uprisings, maybe revolt for example, that is why we have some politicians here and for that... but otherwise they were maybe thought of as being spies, thought of as beingwell maybe collaborating somehow... maybe with other.....with the Polish army.... or maybe with the western army. Actually, most of them were quite regular civilians and some of the graves you can see their profession. Most of the bodies are still and will be not identified, but they weren't soldiers, they weren't soldiers. They were civilians... they were civilians.

They would kill people in reprisal I suppose-the Polish resistance?

Probably, also ...but I think those executions wouldn't be kept a secret. Those would be public and very much make aware of what could happen if you are not doing what the Germans are expecting you to do at that time. And these were definitely... very much.... tried to be kept a secret.

Was the Forest here a centre of resistance?

Yes, yes it was but actually it was a centre of resistance after these executions. These took place mostly in 1939, 1943, and in 1944 that is when we had the biggest accumulation of soldiers in the forest here and, as I already mentioned, even part of the forest was considered independent because you had so many soldiers here the Germans were afraid of...of moving in.

You have even a small monument in the Forest- The Independent Republic of Kampinos, that is what it's called. During the Warsaw Uprising, these soldiers went...some of them went from the forest to help Warsaw in their battle- of course most of them getting ...getting killed.

Was it a mass grave that was here?

Yes, there was one mass grave here but there were several others in the Forest around here but here was the biggest one... that is why all the bodies later were brought here in this one big cemetery.

Flora and Fauna: **Heather's Favourites**

Vole:



Longhorn Beetle:



Migrating Cranes:



Upland Bush Cricket:



Wasp Spider:



Pies Polski:



Grass of Parnassus:



Queen of Spain Fritillary:



The Journey Home Augustow to St Pancras



Augustow
Station



Weary in Warsaw

It was at 6.15am that we made our way downstairs to face our final breakfast in Kukle.

This consisted of a bowl of cereal and a broccoli with mayonnaise concoction. Delicious, as I am sure it was, the broccoli part of the meal was something I was unable to face at this early hour, so I gave it a miss.

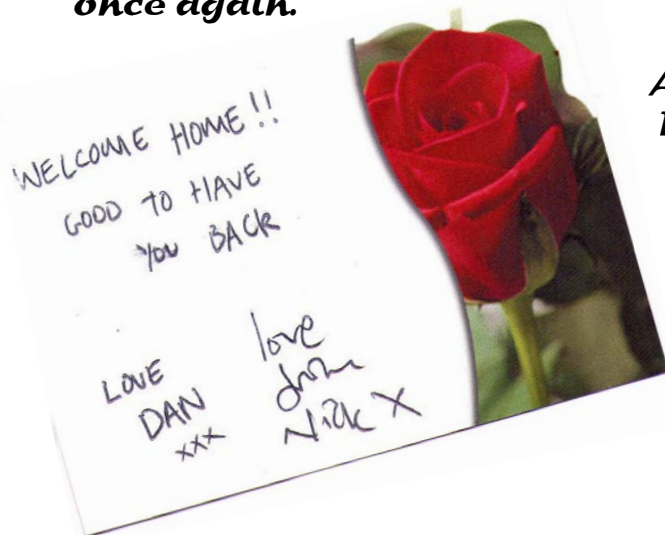
Augustow station was a welcome sight with the usual collection of commuters, students and travellers that you are likely to see on any railway station at this time of the day. And so it was that we said goodbye to Kathy and Nigel who were now to face an unenviable three day journey back to the UK with the van and equipment.

Apart from a huge meal at the Hard Rock Café, Warsaw and a night of cards and the last of the Polish beer, the journey home passed uneventfully.



At last we pulled in to St Pancras, only to see Paul Day's Meeting Place sculpture looming over us once again.

Actually, I thought to myself, I think I was wrong..... those two are definitely saying hello!



Acknowledgments

Nigel Spring and Kathy Henderson:

Thank you to you both so much for all your hard work, patience and never ending enthusiasm about meeting new people, seeing new places and sharing your incredible knowledge of the natural world with us.

Paulina Dzierza

Your determination to protect and understand the threats to the wetlands of Poland inspired me to learn more about a country I know little about. Sharing the Polish songs with us around the flickering campfire on our last night in Kukle was a magnificent end to our trip and an experience I will never forget.

Wiktor Kotowski

I have never seen a man carry so much hay on his back. Thank you for explaining the origins of the magical, glacial lake in Kukle.

Ewa Kominek

Thank you for being our guide around Warsaw. It was wonderful to hear such passionate explanations about the history of the city.

Antek

I enjoyed our bird watching trip to the Vistula River- thank you.

Petter Hedberg

I wish you well with your studies- hopefully you will have found a new technique of conserving the wetlands of the Bagno Calowanie

Lukasz Kozub

I learnt so much in such a short time thanks to your vast knowledge of local flora and fauna. Thank you for taking the time to share it with us.

Plotrek

Despite your disappointment at not being able to show us some of the lichen species of local interest, I must say we all enjoyed your company immensely that same evening. In future, if anybody ever says to me that lichenologists are a dull breed I will certainly put them right!

Jan our Kampinski guide

Thanks to your talk I have a much better understanding of the troubled and tragic history of your country. I found the visit to Kampinoski cemetery a deeply moving experience.

Ewa Jablonska

How lucky we were to spend the last few days in such a beautiful place with your help, guidance and local knowledge. Organizing a sauna and river dip for us at the end of the trip was the icing on the cake. Thank you.

Liz, Monique, Christina, Becky, Kaylem, Lou, Joe, Dan, Big Chris, Little Chris, Andy, Phil and DI

Couldn't have done it without this lot -you guys are the best! Thanks.

And finally.....

A POEM!

This poem is a result of being in a EUCAN White Van for too long. It is about Polish Wetland Conservation issues and booze. I send my sincerest apologies to any real poets out there!

***The water drains in to kinda
rhynes,***

***In the land where the Fen
Orchid is dying,
Why?***

Animal lovers cry,

“Fish on a line is our prize!”

***Some sigh,
Who’s lying?***

Nine chimes,

It’s time,

The daily bind,

Glasses shine at mine...

As we drink fine, pine wine.