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European Training for the UK



EUROPEAN CONSERVATION ACTION NETWORK*

CONSERVATION VISIT TO EASTERN POLAND

September 6th – 23rd 2009

Both feet in a bog

I'm back from eastern Poland, feet dry and washing clean, but with many memories and my diary and photographs to remind me of a fantastic fortnight during which I believe we achieved some measure of help to our Polish colleagues and understanding of the huge problems they experience in the conservation of wetlands.

In keeping with the environmental ethos of the project, we travelled by train. I had already met some of the dozen other participants before we gathered at St Pancras to take the train to Brussels. Eurostar was an adventure in itself and over lunch and during the journey we got to know better those we had met at the preparation weekend and greeted new friends. In Brussels we enjoyed weiss bier in evening sunshine and in Köln gazed at the awesome cathedral that dominates the station square. Our fourth train was the sleeper to Warsaw with breakfast on the train looking out over a flat landscape with vast areas invaded by golden rod, like bracken at home. The land looked gravely under-utilised.

Although we had a lot of fun, the visit had a serious purpose: we were to participate in practical conservation work and species monitoring in a programme organised by CMok, our local host organisation. On every work day we were on site as early as breakfast time would permit and, with a couple of breaks, we worked until mid-afternoon, usually under a cloudless sky. We would then return to our accommodation and after we had a quick, much needed shower our hosts took us to restricted sites of scientific interest, or birdwatching or on botanic or butterfly hunting walks. We saw a Queen of Spain fritillary and looked for the Scarce Large Blue butterfly, which maintained its reputation and was scarce.

The first site we visited was Bagno Całowanie, south east of Warsaw, near Osieck. I began by clearing vegetation that was overwhelming a board walk leading to a butterfly rich meadow. I then joined the others in brushcutting willow and reed mace which had overtaken this part of the bog. Others raked and stacked the brush, putting it on the roadside to be carted away. Some of this was to be used to fill in a nearby pond.

The following day, with others I cut a species-rich hay meadow. This was when I fell into the fen and put a brushcutter out of action for two days! The hay was raked then taken by a local farmer to a nearby experimental plot overseen by Petter, a Swedish PhD student, whose research project involved taking off a half metre of dryer topsoil with invasive species to get back to the water table which was being seeded with the cut hay. In this way he hoped to be able to demonstrate that the loss of wetland with its unique species can be reversed.



Later we were shown huge fishing lakes that had been illegally dug further along the track. When the owner of the lakes cleans them he drains the water, thereby affecting the water table in the fen. When he refills the lakes the surrounding water table is lowered to a disastrous extent. Local politics have prevented the conservation group from taking any action against this activity.

On our final day at Bagno Całowanie (when we had half an hour of rain – the only rain on the whole trip) we had great fun making a haystack.

Peculiar to Mazowsze region is the custom of first planting a 30 ft pole in the ground around which the haystack is built. A local farmer arrived out of the mist on his tractor with the pole and, after it was sturdily planted, we forked hay up to him as he stood on the ever-growing stack from which he eventually abseiled down. We took turns to work on the haystack besides placing hay on Petter's site and generally tidying up.



Not ours! "Professional" hay stacks near our work place

The following day, Sunday 13 September, we left for the Kampinowski National Park where we were accommodated in a hostel which was part of the park headquarters building. This was to be a cultural day and we travelled by public transport from the hostel into central Warsaw. Ewa Kominiek, a member of CMok, is also a qualified city guide and she took us round the “old” town, completely rebuilt since World War II (when an estimated 10,455 buildings were destroyed on Hitler’s orders) modelled on the city that had been established in the 13th century. The rebuilding, which took just nine years, incorporated many of the original bricks and decorative elements found in the rubble and architecture students’ drawings and early paintings were used as sources in the reconstruction.



It is hard to believe not only in the scale of the destruction and loss of life, but also that the Old Town is not much more than 60 years old, except for two fire-damaged streets, all that remain of the Ghetto: a stark reminder of man’s inhumanity. Fading light added to the sadness of the Ghetto.



Mornings at Kampinowski were similar to those at Osieck: an early run along cool woodland trails for me, followed by a breakfast of cheese and cured pork in many guises. There was also a dish of artery-blocking soured cream: divine! On the first morning we were awoken at 6.30 by a man using a blower to remove imaginary leaves from the carpark below our windows. The President of Poland was due to visit the park to commemorate 50 years since its foundation, so we were whisked off to a meadow at Korfowe where we were to cut back invasive willow scrub to encourage farmers to mow a greater area, so encouraging good grasses and discouraging yet more willow.



We stacked huge piles of scrub which the local farmer's chipper did little to reduce.

One day after work we were escorted by Jan Danylow to a mire which was home to the rare leather leaf (*Chamaedaphne calyculata*, a shrub in the family Ericaceae). The area had been drained under communist rule, when all the land had to be worked, and pines were planted, but the water table rose and killed them. We then climbed through enchanting forest-covered old sand dunes deposited by the Vistula where the conifers are 120 years old. Elk, lynx and beaver had all disappeared but have been reintroduced. To reach this site we drove through the remains of the village of Truscow ("little strawberry") which had been twice destroyed, the second time in 1944 because partisans were in the area. All that remains of this former village of 30 houses and 150 people is four houses left for park workers and the kilometre of cobbled street along which we drove.

Finally, on our return to the car park, we visited the cemetery where 2115 people are buried, mainly civilians from Warsaw killed by the German army in World War II. Their mass graves had been reforested to conceal them, but they were identified by forestry workers who had hammered bullets into trees so that they could be found. In the dusk it was very moving and it is our good fortune in Britain that we live on an island which protected us from invasion such as Poland experienced.

After work on our third day at Kampinowski, mostly tidying up what we had already cut, some people were birdwatching, others went horseriding while Nigel and Andy stoically fed the chipper till it finally gave up. I had an adventure on public transport, returning to Warsaw to buy amber for my daughters and Zakopower CDs — sort of ethno-pop with gypsy fiddles and a lot of shouting (ask Google) — and other souvenirs for myself and others in the group. The journey home was much shorter and easier but when I got back the bar closed as I approached it so there was no beer for me!

We left Kampinowski for Kukle on Thursday 17 September. The weather was dull but not cold. Ewa Jablonski was to be our guide and leader for this the final part of our visit. We drove north east, taking the opportunity to stop in Biebrza National Park in the Narew River valley where we saw a dairy farm that had drained the marsh under communist rule, and other unspoiled parts where we gazed at the far horizon looking for distant elks. We saw stork nests on posts and stopped in a bizarre “hunting lodge” for lunch, where we enjoyed a splendid, convivial meal of local fare.



Dwor Dobraz lunch stop. Clockwise, from top L: Heather, Liz, Monique, Ewa, Phil, Di, Dan, Becky, Kaylem, Chris (just seen), Joe, Kathy, Nigel, Chris, Andy. Louise took the photo.

During our journey we heard, then saw, huge flocks of cranes flying south to warmer climes for the winter. It was a wonderful, unforgettable sight.



At Kukle, as in our other placements, I was up early to run in the misty moisty morning, which I hope helped ward off the effects of ham three times a day.



Milking by hand near our hotel at Kukle

Our new work site was 500 metres off a vehicular track, down forested sand dunes to a meadow which we were to clear of reeds, sedges and small trees, mostly birch. The meadow was bounded by woodland which was marching steadily towards the home of the fen orchid, *Liparis loeselii*, whose habitat we were endeavouring to restore. There is, apparently, enmity between the foresters and the wetland conservationists and we were initially asked to carry out the cut material the 500 metres *uphill* to the road where it would be collected. Fortunately common sense prevailed and we cut tracks into the woodland and left our huge piles of biomass at intervals on the forest edge. Although we were not supposed to fell trees, we considered every cut birch to be a small victory for the fen orchid.

After work that day we visited Rezerwat Szerokie Bagno, ("Broad Marsh" created in 1984, 76.73 ha) and Lake Nozegary, in the forest outside the village of Berzniki. It was a beautiful lake surrounded by trees, with floating mossy islands. Unfortunately a few people disturbed a wasp nest and were stung several times. We then realised we were only a couple of kilometres from Lithuania so we had a brief trip to the unmanned border and took photos on both sides — strictly against the rules!

We returned to the same worksite on two further days and when we had finished working on the second afternoon Ewa took us to an undisturbed mire at Rospuda valley where the peat is three metres deep and still forming. It is an old, deep glacial valley, fed by ground water, with a sand dune on one side and the river on the other. It is the home of rare species, including carex and early marsh orchids, and Ewa showed us where she is monitoring water levels by taking samples at various depths. It is a Nature 2000 site, part of the ecological network of protected areas in the territory of the European Union. There had been a huge battle between conservationists and those wishing to build the Augustów relief road across the mire as part of Via Baltica, as route E67 is known for 600 miles between Warsaw and Tallinn. It is the most important road connection between the Baltic states and the planned new motorway route was to take it through several areas in Poland of great natural value. Most controversial was the Augustów bypass, taking the route through the wetlands of the Rospuda Valley, the last area of its kind remaining in Europe. Building work costing 50m zł.(£11m) had already started before the battle was won and there is a short section of road going nowhere. The contractors are seeking compensation.



Ewa Jablonski with her fungus collection. We saw several people collecting fungi when we were working in the woods and I met quite a few while on my early morning runs. I believe this is not really allowed in the national parks.

Our second day off, Sunday 20 September, was spent running, biking and boating followed by a sauna. The plunge pool was the nearby river. It was all great fun.

Monday was our last working day, by the end of which we had cleared about a quarter of the fen of scrub and our bit looked good.



There were huge piles of brash and other biomass at the woodland edge to show for our work, with which Ewa was pleased. Later we celebrated the end of our labours with a Polish stew, cooked on a campfire and eaten outside, with a few beers. Ewa joined us, as did Paulina Dziera, with whom we worked at Bagno Całowanie, and her family and we had a very happy evening.

Leaving was a wrench – is it not always so? – but on 22 September we were off at 7 a.m. to Augustów to get the first of our many trains home. Once more we gazed at Köln cathedral, this time over early morning coffee and croissants at Starbucks. Yes, we were back in the west.

But what had we learned? Wetland conservation in eastern Poland is an uphill struggle undertaken by a small group of dedicated environmentalists. Lack of funds and political clout conspire to make the safeguarding of these precious areas a fight against apathy and corruption. Poland is a country not long freed from the effects of war and communist rule; perhaps conservation and environmental education are luxuries only achievable in the immediate future in countries with a more settled past?

Liz Green

Eastern Poland, September 2009.

*East meets west:
Communism and capitalism juxtaposed
in Warsaw*



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