

Poland, September 2009

Saving the Polish wetlands is sometimes a noisy business: chainsaws and brushcutters buzz and shriek producing an enormous amount of hay and willow debris. Hay is heavier than you'd think. We rake it up with pitchforks, piling it onto tarpaulins or stuffing it into builders' bags. Dragging or carrying it from our watery meadow to the ever-growing mound by the side of the lane is hard work. The best job is bouncing up and down on the heap, compressing it so the next load can be piled on. It's hot too in September, even at 10am in the morning. Surely it's about time Ewa turned up with the cakes?

We are in Bagno Całowanie, in the Vistula valley 40km southeast of Warsaw. Our group of 14, range in age from 20 to 60 and from conservation novices to experts. The basic purpose of our work here is to remove nutrients (viz the hay) from the ecosystem so that rare low-nutrient-tolerant plants can thrive without competition from the 'normal' plants. In the past the local farmers would have done this by using the hay, but now it's not worth their while. This area of species-rich fenland is under threat from falling water levels due to the digging of fish-ponds, but although people do fish in them, they are often cover for illegal peat extraction. Peat digging is not new here: in the past it was used as fuel, but the pits were dug by hand and were too shallow to affect the water level. Now they are much deeper, dug with heavy machinery in conjunction with large-scale drainage.



Andy lugging hay

We'd arrived the previous day, after a fascinating train journey from London, via the channel tunnel and a 300kph dash to Brussels, where we just have time to try out a small sample of Belgium's 250 types of beer - I can recommend the cherry-flavoured Kriek. Then onto the next train and through the Ardennes to Cologne and a quick look at the Cathedral or 'Dom', one of the few buildings in the city to survive the war. It's still not quite finished, but that's good, as legend says the world will end when it is. The most exciting bit is the sleeper to Warsaw, stretched out on a comfortable bunk, rattling through Germany in the darkness, the window wide open. The bright lights of Berlin wake me up - it's 4 am and the Polish border is only 50 miles to the east.

Before the war the border was further away. Germany used to extend much further east, right along the Baltic to the outskirts of Gdansk (formerly Danzig). Then there was a small bit of Polish coastline up to the German enclave of East Prussia, part of which is now the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, separated from Russia proper by Lithuania. And in what's now the south of Poland, German territory extended eastward into the important industrial and coal-mining region of Silesia (Poland is still a major coal producer, said to have more miners than the rest of the EU put together). Generally speaking the present border is the River Oder, which we cross an hour later.



Poland-Lithuania border, near Kukle

At last Ewa arrives with the cakes, and we take our Elevenses high up on the wooden viewing platform, looking out over our tranquil marsh with its croaking frogs and darting dragonflies. It's not all work of course. One evening we have a Polish lesson from Paulina: it's a Slavonic language with what seem to be ridiculously long clusters of

consonants but at least it's completely phonetic. We end up with a motley collection of words including 'kleszcz' (tick – the blood-sucking type) and 'sian' (hay, where the ticks live). My three favourites are 'ciasto' (cake), 'Krupnik' (a sweet yellow liqueur) and 'Zywiec' (a brand of beer).

A local farmer and his dog show us how the traditional haystack is made: a long pole is embedded into the ground to form the central support and we stack the hay around it with our pitchforks while the farmer beds it down. After a few hours he is so far up he can barely grab the hay from us, even with his especially long-handled fork. How's he ever going to get down? And what's he shouting? Eventually someone realises it might be 'get the bloody rope!' (Paulina didn't teach us that expression). He ties it to the pole and abseils down. Voila!

Another nice Polish word is 'niedziela' (Sunday), which is a non-work day (that's the literal meaning in Polish – 'nie dziela'). Eva shows us Warsaw, and gives us a crash course in Polish history, which is grim. The country did not really exist as a nation state until after the First World War, when the German, Austrian and Russian empires, which had partitioned the Polish lands between them, collapsed. Another thing I didn't know was that most of the fighting in WWI was in Poland not Belgium or France. The Second World War was even worse of course. Contrary to the impression given by Hollywood, in Europe it was essentially a war between Germany and Russia, with Poland in the middle: around 18% of the Polish population died. The history of Warsaw itself is particularly harrowing: half the population - 800,000 people – were killed, more than the total military casualties of Britain and America combined. Much of the city was destroyed by the Germans after the Uprising in 1944, but the historic centre has been meticulously restored, partly based on 18th century Italian paintings of the city that survived the war. With the German defeat Poland moved 200 miles west: eastern Poland went to Ukraine and German Pomerania became western Poland, with the Oder as the new border.



Warsaw uprising plaque

For our second week we were based in the administrative headquarters of the Kampinos National Park on the north-west fringe of Warsaw - a wonderful place, apart from the man with the leaf-blower in the car park every morning at 6am. The park, a 40km long swathe of pine, silver birch and oak - hence the leaf problem - includes the largest area of inland sand dunes in Europe. We are taken on a fascinating tour of some of the specially protected parts of the park, normally closed to visitors. There are lynx and elk in the forest, but no wolves as of yet.

On our way to our last session in the far north east of Poland, we pass through endless pine forests, often with mushroom-sellers by the road - mushrooms are a big feature in Polish life. We see the impressive Biebrzanski National Park, the biggest marsh peatland complex in the EU. We stop to watch elk in the distance, and see numerous storks nests (empty unfortunately, the storks themselves having gone south for winter). Many platforms have been constructed for them on electricity poles, which looks rather dangerous. However, although some of the young birds are indeed electrocuted, the losses are offset by the difficulties the power lines present to potential predators.

We are shown the site of the proposed Rospuda valley section of the Via Baltica, a major highway that is being constructed to link Russia and the Baltic states with Warsaw and beyond. Not known for their environmental sensitivity, the Polish government proposed sending it straight through one of the most valuable wetlands in Europe, and even started building it despite a court ruling that construction was illegal. Railways meanwhile are neglected. Most of the rail infrastructure in Poland is outdated, with many of the tracks and points dating back to the 19th century. Since the fall of communism in 1991 the situation has worsened and there has been a steady decline in train speeds on most local lines. In many parts of Poland trains now run much slower than 100 years ago.

Perhaps the highlight of the whole two weeks for me was the sudden appearance of a huge 'V' formation of cranes on a lonely country road near the Biebrza river. We stopped and watched them for ages, as hundreds passed high overhead making a strange honking noise and slowly disappeared into the sunset.



Cranes at sunset, Biebrza National Park

Special thanks to Nigel and Kathy for organising all this, and to Andy, Chris K, Chris T, Christina, Daniel, Ewa Kominek, Ewa Jablonska, Di, Heather, Joe, Kaylem, Liz, Louise, Monique, Paulina Dzierza and Rebekah for their company.

Phil McGovern

The European Conservation Action Network (EUCAN) was established in 2007 by The Kingcombe Trust, a charity based at The Kingcombe Centre in west Dorset, dedicated to conservation and environmental education (Reg. Charity no. 1054758), in association with the Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation. The project is funded through the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme and has partners in France, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Belgium, Poland and Romania. Further information can be obtained from www.eucan.org.uk or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559 mob: 0044.7981.776767 Email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk).