

EuCan Trip to Eastern Poland 2nd to 18th August 2010

On the 2nd August 2010, I started a journey that would take me almost to the other side of Europe on a conservation placement with EuCan. Following a very enjoyable preparation weekend with some of the participants, as well as participants on other EuCan trips a few weeks earlier, I was looking forward to the trip immensely. After meeting the rest of the working group at St Pancras, and having a pub lunch, we started our long journey to Poland. We spent the journey talking and getting to know one another, while also trying not to get lost or get on the wrong train.

After a successful train journey we met with Nigel Spring and Kathy Henderson, who were leading the trip and headed from Warsaw to the site of our first accommodation, the Pod Sosnami at Osiek for a much needed shower.

Bagno Calowanie and Torfy Oronskie

Our first site was at Bagno Calowanie or 'The Kissing Swamp' in English. This is a site which had been worked on the year before by the previous EuCan group who visited Eastern Poland. Much of the site is under threat through lack of management such as mowing or grazing, leading to dehydration of the peat, as well as several other human interventions such as extraction of peat and sand and changing of the hydrology of the fen through digging large fish ponds! Here we continued the good work of the group from the previous year, by removing willow and other biomass from an area of wet grassland on the fen, preventing succession from reducing the growth of rare fenland plant species.

The days were hard work, in temperatures up to and exceeding thirty degrees centigrade but were incredibly satisfying. Everyone worked amazingly hard and there was a great team ethic, people helping each other and sharing the workload and getting stuck into a range of tasks such as brushcutting, dragging, forking, chainsawing and my personal favourite, work site photographer. The change in the site in just a few days was quite amazing and gave me a great sense of achievement.

Our next site was Torfy Oronskie, another fen relatively close to Bagno Calowanie, which was surrounded by woodland. This site appeared not to have public access as Bagno Calowanie did, and was much more overgrown. We cleared alder, alder-buckthorn and many reeds from the site using brushcutters. On our second day of work here, we were joined by some Polish volunteers, Magda and Ola from CMok (our host organisation), who got stuck in and helped us achieve a huge difference on the site, in seemingly ever-increasing heat.

Torfy Oronskie
Before



After



After a very humid day at Torfy Oronskie, we experienced an amazing thunder storm back at the hotel, unlike any I've seen before. The rain absolutely poured down, and the wind was extremely strong blowing down many trees in the area. The rain managed to blow sideways onto the terraces, and drench our almost dry socks. It was really atmospheric and we eventually made it to dinner, when the storm had died down enough for us to brave the jog through the gardens to the dining area of our hotel. After dinner, the storm had completely stopped and we were able to spend a very pleasant evening in the bar, and were even able to sit outside in the latter part of the evening.

The following morning we had planned to get up extra early to help the excellent, though somewhat eccentric hotel owner, by removing fallen trees and branches from the hotel. The hotel had two wedding parties booked for the evening, and the gardens and pathways were a mess from all of the fallen trees, branches and leaves. We were lucky enough to experience the very unique style of chainsaw work from a local man removing a tree from the roof of one of the out-buildings of the hotel. This involved hanging off of a ladder in footwear along the lines of flip flops on. We were rewarded for our work with the promise of a horse ride through the local woodland.

After our clean up job, we went back to Torfy Oronskie to finish the clearance of the site. The difference we had made to the site in three days was amazing and we were all very happy to have made such an impact on a site which had experienced very little management in recent years.

After a few days of hard graft, it was time to experience a bit of Polish culture. This involved travelling to Warsaw, where we were treated to a walk around the town by Łukasz Kozub who works for CMok and had given us a tour of Bagno Calowanie and Torfy Oronskie when we started work at the sites. We also went on a fantastic boat trip through the Ja Wisła foundation where we were treated to a tour of the river in some very variable weather! We ate a lovely lunch in a traditional polish pierogi bar, which filled us up for our walk around the old town part of Warsaw. The buildings were beautiful and we learned a lot about the Polish uprising during the second world war, and this sparked a lot

of deep conversation between participants and made us think about the dreadful conditions the Polish people endured during this time. We finished a great day with beer and pizza in the town centre before heading back to the hotel.

In the morning, we headed back to our first site, Bagno Całowanie before having an early finish to visit a local church. When we got back to the hotel we were treated to our horse ride in the beautiful local woodland on a carriage pulled by two huge shire horses. The views were great and it was amazing how the horses managed to pull a carriage with us all in across some very uneven sandy paths. We were also presented with two crates of free beer for our work at the hotel. It was a great experience and one which we all enjoyed immensely.



Sarnetki

The following morning we had an early start for our journey further North West to the Biebrza Marshes where we met the director of our host organisation CMOK, Filip who met us near Długa Luka where we walked along the boardwalk on an impressively huge reed bed. Here we were lucky enough to spot a White Tailed eagle and after driving further along the road to an observation tower we were able to see and take snaps of an Elk, which are relatively common in the area.

We had an amazing lunch at the very picturesque karczma at Dwór Dobarz which included local potato cakes, steak or a range of delicious dumplings. We then arrived at our second hotel near Kukle, which overlooked a stunning lake and had decking and swimming areas which we were all looking forward to having a dip in the following week.

After a (relatively) early night, we were refreshed and raring to go the following morning where we went to Sarnetki where there was a fen site in need of clearance as similarly to our previous sites it had become encroached with surrounding woodland and

some of the reeds had grown so big they had started to affect the hydrology of the site and block the emergence of the rare fauna on the site. Upon arrival at the site, we were treated to the amazing site of well over 100 white storks flying above us in a truly memorable moment. We worked hard brush cutting, chain sawing and forking/dragging the biomass where we stacked it in piles on the edge of the fenland during the high humidity and heat. We were treated by being driven to a beautiful lake in Wigierski National Park where we had a lovely swim in the warm(ish) lake followed by drinks and ice creams at a local cafe.

After arriving back at the hotel we had a great evening of eating, socialising and sampling a few more of the local beers. Some of us stayed up long into the night taking in the amazing scenery on the decking and were joined by Filip and two of his volunteers Ewa and Magda, who arrived at the hotel in the early hours of the morning.

After a hearty breakfast of largely pork based products, we started off to Sarnetki for another day of reed cutting and forking. Our morning journey was rather rudely interrupted by the Polish border police. Owing to our close proximity to the Lithuanian border, we were stopped and asked to show our passports. The fact that we were heading out to do some fieldwork at a wet site, most of us weren't carrying our passports. Thankfully after some difficult negotiations by Nigel and Filip, we escaped with a relatively small fine compared to the excessive amounts we were initially told we would have to pay for failure to produce a passport. This was a pretty surreal experience, and we were all thankful to arrive onsite to get started on the work, and a mid morning cup of tea! The work on this site was starting to make a real difference, and after the morning of clearing a huge amount of reed from one side of the site, the people brushcutting started to disperse cutting bigger scrub on another sections of the site each with a designated forker, before swapping roles later in the afternoon.

After a very productive day, we were treated to a fantastic evening in a sauna owned by a local lady. It was a glorious evening and we had a great time using the sauna and swimming in the river at the end of the garden, alternating between the hot sauna and the cool river. After our sauna and swim we had a cold beer by the river and watched the sunset. It was an amazing experience, and one which we all very much enjoyed.



Following another stargazing session on the decking by the lake at our hotel, and another magnificent thunderstorm we were ready for another day of work at Sarnetki. It was exceptionally hot, but we all enjoyed getting stuck into the task though we did get through a lot of water! Afterwards we stopped at a nearby shop to cool ourselves off with a much needed ice cream. That evening we experienced a very Polish experience, as we socialised with some Polish contract workers who were having a BBQ, campfire and music at our hotel. After an initially quiet start to the evening, we started chatting and joining in with their festivities. It wasn't long before they started to share their copious supplies of Polish vodka. This resulted in a relatively early night for most of us, and was a driving force behind us having the following morning off for free time such as sleeping, swimming or for the more adventurous of us a 05:00 dawn chorus bird watching session in the local woodland, which needless to say only had a few takers on this particular morning!

A day of rest the following day proved to be an excellent but quite a tiring one. The group divided in two, half doing canoeing and the other half cycling in local woodland in the morning, then we swapped after lunch. This was a day of great fun. In the morning I went canoeing and enjoyed a trip along the lake by our hotel, through fairly thick areas of reed and past a beaver dam into an adjacent river where I went for a swim jumping out of the canoe and enjoying the cool water. The afternoon was equally as enjoyable taking a sandy track through the woods with great views in local woodland, and experienced some great views over the surrounding lakes.



Our last day of work started early. We tidied up the site, and finished the last bits of brushcutting, while the chainsaw users worked flat out to clear some parts of the encroaching woodland. After dragging the logs and brash into piles in some more extreme heat, we said a fond farewell to the site, before heading to a nearby station to purchase our tickets for the start of the journey home.

What more could you want after a hard day of sweating? More sweating! After our wonderful experience at the sauna a few days earlier we were lucky enough to be able to use it again, and once again had an amazing time and watched the sun set before heading back to the hotel for our final night in Poland (excluding sleeper trains!). We had a great evening and it was a fitting end to a wonderful trip. Some of us spent the night on the decking, sleeping under the stars for a memorable last night.

We started our long journey back to England, leaving Augustow in the morning, and having the afternoon for a second experience of Warsaw, where we ate and picked up any last minute souvenirs. We then commenced the long journey back home on the night train to Köln then to Brussels and finally London. The journey gave us a long time to reflect on the trip and recall the events that had occurred during the previous few weeks with great affection. Tired but content, we arrived back in London and went our separate ways having gained many new friends during our Poland experience.

I couldn't recommend these trips more. In three weeks I learned so much about conservation, Polish culture, other people and a lot about myself. It may not be the most relaxing trip you'll have but it will certainly be one of the best.

By Chris Coombes

The European Conservation Action Network 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.kingcombcentre.org.uk or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559/mobile: 0044.7981.776767.Email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk).