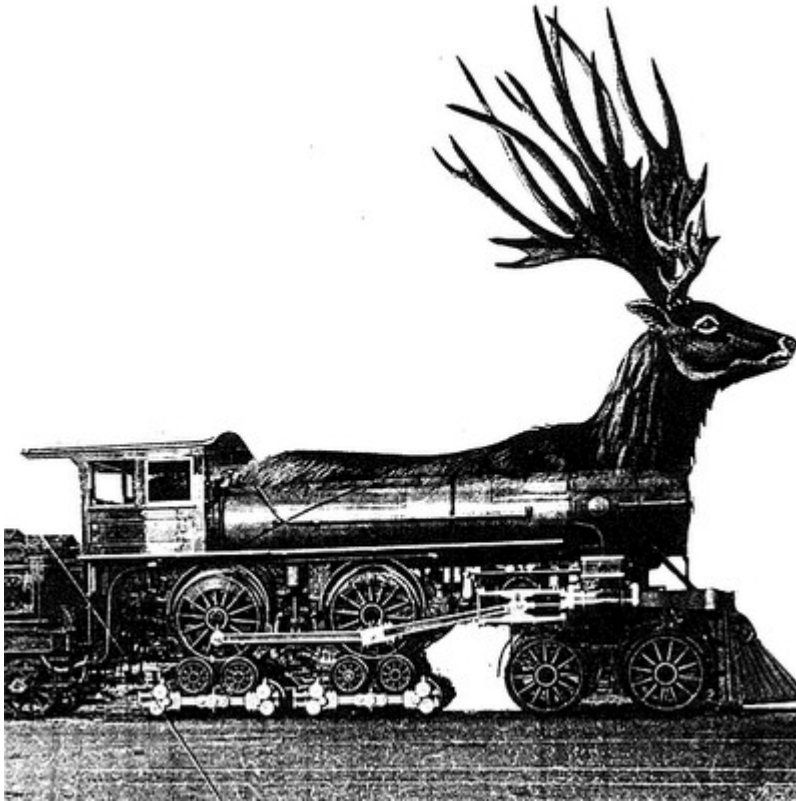


Of Fens and Fantastic Fours

Jelle Cauwenberghs



We left the black cathedral of Köln behind us and we ignored the glass shout of Berlin and went back to sleep, hoping to wake up in Poland. We had sausages and tea, a hilarious undertaking. We drifted through endless doors and squeezed past an infinity of silent families before reaching the end of the train where an exhausted attendant stood scratching his hair, wondering about the sudden appearance of these aggravated Englishmen. The bunks were narrow and it felt a little like lying in a coffin with your feet kissed by the breeze, stacked in threes. We left the window open and through the snores, I was lulled to sleep by the steady rattle of the train. I loved this night on the train, the billowing curtains in the cramped compartment as I listened to the soundtrack of a rail journey, the coughs and the empty station calls. Next station. Warszawa.

In the morning, the fog dissipated to reveal golden fields and reaping rows of women with headscarves in the fields, followed by watchful Storks that moved like dancers, their beaks a bright orange against the blistering blue sky. Some villages looked like they had never recovered from a war that had never

started. They were pockmarked by a past that was still under construction, some painted pink with the concrete raw beneath the skincolour.

We would find during our trip that construction in Poland is random, a whimsical waltz within the beehive of Polish administration. Everything is possible, even conservation.

The shock of space. A radiation of room and the clouds gave me a sense of the vast horizon that reached all the way to the Ukraine, and further. The breadbasket of Europe. Eastern Europe has a pulse of potentiality that is so vivid it felt like a frontier that hadn't scarred completely. The absence of anything enduring in the wake of crumbling communism has left a wasteland and the traces of a possible wilderness. This mark of consistency comes with a footnote. What damage will development wreck upon a country that thrives like a hiccup in the throat of Europe? The Soviet Union has withdrawn and the West is hesitantly seeping in. Old practices survive. However, the yearnings of a conservationist aren't those of a countryman, and the visions of men plowing the land with big horses and the rainbows of women in faded dresses picking potatoes could be visions of bliss if they weren't such searing manifestations of a lack of choice. A land of opportunity for those who left. The land itself was expectant.

Any effort to conserve the land is twinned with an intention to sell it. The tension of our times. We always walk a tight rope. I noticed the presence of French and English supermarkets in the suburbs of Warszawa and wondered what happened to the profit they generated. Did it go to Poland? How would Poland keep these corporations in check when their investments were the very threads of an expensive new coat in a time of crisis?

We emerged from the underground train station. It was hot. We walked past a mall and a few boutiques and then abruptly stumbled across broken tarmac, gazing at the towering Palace of Culture and Science, a vestige of the Soviet past. To some Polish, a bitter landmark of the Warszawa skyline, the sore thumb of past tyranny. Stalin's gift to the people. Its size was immediate, its significance simmering under the surface. Here was history. The heat intensified the impression of imposition.

There were Polish women sunbathing in the main square, dressed in bikinis, contrasting brightly with the grey surroundings. To me this was Poland. The chuckling in spite of the chest pains or perhaps, the growing pains. After all, in Poland, like anywhere, each generation has its own grievances.

We drove to the hotel and a few of us went on a brief exploration of the surrounding pine forest. A Queen of Spain Fritillary fluttered by and provoked great enthusiasm among those who hadn't been floored by the scorching sun. We drove to the first site of the project with Lukaz, a very enthusiastic botanist from Warszawa with a legendary laugh. The name of the site, Bagno Calownie, meant "The Kissing Swamp." Lukaz introduced us to the basic ecology of the site, the fundamental principles of fen hydrology.

A fen is wetland fed by surfacing groundwater, as opposed to peatbogs which are fed by rainwater. Lukaz explained the effects of drainage on the ecosystem. Shrinking wetlands became islands of isolation for specialist species. Birds would disappear from these areas in search for more suitable habitat and rare plants such as fen orchids would vanish. This first site was a fragment of a greater area included in Nature 2000, a network of protected areas within the European Union.

The EU Conservation Action Network contributes to the conservation of some of these areas by punctually participating in local projects of rehabilitation and regeneration in conjunction with national directives.

I noticed some black redstarts in an abandoned tower block. As we explored the marshes, we saw a Montagu harrier fly low as a razor over the reeds. Lukaz showed us a rare species of dwarf willow. Crickets sang and by the side of the road, Angelica grew, tall as a man. There were giant haystacks in a field full of yarrow and valerian. We drove back past tethered cows in fields without fences.

It was my birthday on Wednesday. The group gave me a card. I was touched that they made it themselves. I gazed at the stars for some time. Purple Hairstreak, our pagan priestess, brought them at arm's length.

I counted the 26 leaves of an odd life on the floor, barely a whisper in the general rustling of reality all around.

We put up a moth trap the following day. For me, the moth traps sum up my state of mind as we progressed through Poland. This project was initially not unlike a box in the night with a torchlight inside it. I had no real grasp of what the project entailed. I knew we would do "practical" conservation but I realized afterwards that more than experience, we collect anecdotes when we participate in nature projects. We get to know points of view. And so it was with the moths. Gradually, they emerged from under the empty eggboxes, sometimes discreetly drab and sometimes incredibly flamboyant. Come to mind the Garden Tigers, the Alder Kittens and the Hawkmoths. The names were wonderful. As I browsed through the many guides, some in languages I didn't speak, I pursued them across the pages. Maiden's Blush and Scorched Carpet. Blood Vein and Scarce Hooktip. What did these names reveal? An entire nocturnal repertoire of silent song. An empire of soundless silk.

The interruption of incredible thunder. I sat on my bed scribbling in my notebook and suddenly, I saw a tree erupt in sparks. We witnessed rain as thick as sparrows flood the grass within minutes, the lightning lizardlike, later illuminating the restaurant where we ate by the flickering light of candles. The ravage after the rain was enormous; entire trees had been felled by a furious fist. We helped the hotel clear some of the wreckage.

In the morning, we woke up to the chant of a golden oriole but no sign of the elusive yellow bird.

The work on site involved a balancing act. A patchwork of boardwalks. We initially cleared the passageways with brushcutters so that we could access the marshes. The work at the Kissing Swamp consisted in the removal of birch and willow (other than the rare species) and the reduction of reeds to allow for the regeneration of small wetland plants. We felled a few trees which we stacked for firewood. The threat of trench foot was always upon us and the horseflies harassed us but the weather was mild and we forked without respite. We dragged big bags of biomass across the creaking boards, avoiding the small green frogs and the black lizards.

On the third day, we went to the second site. The forest was denser there and the site a wonder world of creepy crawlies. There were wasp spiders and other stunning web weavers. Our work on this site had for main focus the creation of a wildlife corridor. We would lace together several swamps and open up a space where the sunlight could shine on smaller plant species. There were acidic stumps stubbed with pine and juniper, clustered by colonies of ants. We found sundew growing on some of these. Since we

wanted to prevent the formation of woodland we cut most of the alder and the birch but we left the pine and juniper.

Conservation is complex and is therefore full of imperfect considerations. When a bird's nest is accidentally destroyed and reveals the presence of wildlife now forced to vacate the premises, it is easy to blame the blunt brush cutter. Though we see immediate interference, the consequences are not so immediate. Indeed, we are part of a dynamic that we don't see the end of. As we stopped by the river Wisla, we saw the evidence of fierce floods and the resulting recurrent erosion, the changing hydrology of the country.

We noticed ringed plovers on a strip of sand in the current. Common terns hovered above the water, then plummeted.

Poland is a land that still remembers the small things. The shops and farms were of a graspable size. We went to pick up two Polish biologists, Magda and Ola, and I saw many old men on bikes with wrinkles as deep as many winter snows. How long are the days when you keep the land from shrinking?

I went on a botany walk with Kathy. The distracted scribe was told the difference between grasses and reeds: the fringes of hairs, the sheaths and the square stems. I could discern with some difficulty the families some plants belonged to but their names were new to me. Soaked in sweat, I was drenched in a divisive dictionary of names.

Devil's Bit Scabious, Arrowglass and Gipsy Wort. And the dragonflies, emeralds and emperors, whirring everywhere.

On Sunday, we went to Warszawa. After locating the riverboat departure point with some difficulty, we learnt about Ja Wisla, a local foundation dedicated to the promotion and conservation of the Wisla. The river was reviled, sluiced with sewage and casually ignored by a city gradually estranged from the stream that gave it memory.

The main mission of the foundation is to reveal the state of the river by taking visitors on guided boat tours. Before the tour, we wandered into the green heart of the city, an astonishing collection of tall trees and sudden views of amphitheatres and an old palace guarded by a cat. After passing the statue of a brooding general, legless but nevertheless with the obligatory walrus moustache, we heard piano music and I was pleased to find a recital of Chopin taking place beneath the composer's statue. We had to hurry to meet the other group near the Catholic University. After jumping in and out the underground, we found them near an original nativity scene entirely made of wood, even a magpie painstakingly painted in black and blue, perching on the shoulder of a saint.

We saw shrines everywhere in Poland. Bright ribbons on marginal Mary's were subtle signals of a flowering community belonging to a fading faith.

Is there a sense of community in a Catholic society? Coming from Belgium, a Catholic country, I'm inclined to dismiss the possibility of true community in a church that demands the immaculate. In a society in transition, community is the first thread that frays. Can a fossil reinvent itself? Catholicism seemed to unite many Poles but which future would it preach? I had a feeling the Catholic Church could act as a buffer between the old and the new; or it could silence the new altogether.

We left the solemn church audience and the mournful voice of the priest and walked down to the river where we embarked upon our riverboat adventure. It wasn't long before there was a torrential downpour. Peering beneath the dripping rim of my hood I could see black terns, lean little birds. I learnt that the symbol of Warszawa is a siren, a suitable name for a city so waterlogged. The story behind this symbol was a tale of fishermen capturing a siren and a child punished for releasing her. There were more stories: of two men perishing after jumping off a bridge to escape the Gestapo, of smugglers tied to trees on an island called The Island of Wolves. I thought that these tales helped consolidate heritage as much as the underlying facts of history, if not more so for their stimulation of the imagination.

The old town seemed made of gingerbread. It was pretty but I couldn't shrug off the feeling that I was on a film set. There were street performers painted gold and silver smoking cigarettes with sly grins, a man selling hats made of fox fur and an old clown with balloons. There were children dressed like soldiers in cardboard tanks and an entire reenactment of the 1944 Uprising. We walked past a bleak monument, stone soldiers crawling into the Earth with hollow eyes. The houses were decorated with beautiful stencils of unicorns and ships. This part of Warszawa full of glitter and glory.

On our way back to the van, we saw a protest. We later discovered that the president had died in a plane accident not long before. Stranger than fiction.

A glimpse of a sparrow hawk resized my reality. The next day, we completed the work on the first site, the squelching swamp of kisses. We were treated to a carriage and horse ride by the hotel owner, an old-fashioned Swede who walked like a general. We all sat sipping tea and rum behind a driver with glasses the size of jar bottoms whilst the tasseled horses trotted down sandy lanes in the shady woods. I noticed many nest boxes.

The next day, we packed up and drove to the last site near Augustow. After a brief break in one of those truck stop cafes lost in a time of stale cakes and black coffee, we met Philip, a bear of man. I saw cranes for the first time of my life. We drove to a big marsh. We saw an eagle. It was very warm. Most of Philip's explanation of the importance of this specific site failed to seep into my sizzling brain. Aquatic warblers were a target species.

We had lunch in a hunters' lodge with boar skins on the walls. More rain, a black redstart on the fence. We drove on to Kukle but got lost for some time. We stopped in a town where I could hear two mumbling men in a garden. We couldn't locate the van and the van couldn't locate us. What to do? Phone conversations ensued. A woodpigeon joined in with the two mumbling men. We met the van near the junction after we triangulated the van's position.

Relentless rainclouds firmly anchored, we drove on. Philip was a well of little-known facts about the frustrations of a young conservationist in Poland. The burden of bureaucracy, the locks on the budget and the senior scholars steering a course of constant criticism.

He also mentioned the Polish dilemma of satisfying eager furniture manufacturers such as Ikea and a European directive to have a woodland cover of 30 percent by 2025. In Poland, fortunately, there seemed to be an abundance of forest. Beneath this Northern region, according to the news, a massive block of ice, a remnant of the last ice age. This, Philip said, was the reason why the nights were cooler in Kukle.

Formation of the Fantastic Four: Wisechris, Nightcrawler, Dormouse and Gazelle commence their cohabitation. Their forking was the stuff of legend. Aided by Marauder Mary, Pipsqueak and Purple Hairstreak, they forked. They felled. They fought.

Peach Blossom, Clouded Magpie, Figure of Eighty. More moths. We saw a mind-blowing flock of storks in the sky the next day, hundreds of white dots spiraling in the sky. Most of the work on this final site was cutting reeds and chopping pines. There seemed to be some debate as to the precision of the fence lines but we wrangled with the farmers and obtained full annihilation of the trees. We saw fritillaries and meadow browns, a very near Marsh Harrier, inquisitive. The work was tedious at first. We plodded through ankle-deep water, armed with forks, raking the severed reeds like there was no tomorrow. There was. We raked the tomorrows too.

There was a brief episode with the border police. One morning, we were pulled over and promptly fined 500 Euros each because we didn't have our passports with us. Luckily, Philip sprang into action and haggled with these hopelessly hostile policemen and we got away with a 100 Euro fine. Supposedly, there's a lot of smuggling between Lithuania and Poland but I suspected a case of borderline boredom.

We went to a sauna in a little village. The sauna was tucked away behind an apple orchard and was a dive away from the river; we had a blissful evening flitting back and forth between the slow river and the sauna, watching a lady catch a fish for her cat in a rowing boat.

Later that week, we drove to Lithuania and we concluded that Lithuania was protected by magic spells after doing so many U turns on a single straight road that we began to wonder whether Lithuania existed at all. We stopped in a village owned by white-haired children on bicycles. There was a statue of a revolutionary heroine called Emilia Plater, a legendary lady of the November Uprising of 1830. Some young people drove by in a vintage blue Chevrolet – Lithuania felt a little like an open-air museum. An old man kept speaking to us but none of us understood what he was saying and the white-haired children gently sent him on his way home, still softly muttering. On the way back to Poland, we paused by a lake and watched a few grebes on the lake, as well as a Gadwell Duck.

We had a brilliant night when a group of builders joined us with a battery of Wodka bottles. They ended up singing gipsy songs, bleary-eyed, growling in their bristly moustaches while a man played the accordion with fingers nigh faultless to the uncertain ears of an accordion appreciator. Somewhat melancholy thanks to the music and the muse of Wodka, World War II came up in the conversation and a big builder blubbered with great distress that England had betrayed Poland! I found it all very hilarious since I gave this choked-up and doubtlessly drunk colossus a big hug and told him we were all friends; being Belgian, I realized, was often about being the little diplomat singing the anthems of other countries. Minus the moustache, a Hercules Poirot comme toujours. The following day, we got up for an early bird walk but I must confess that the Wodka from the previous night still clouded my perception of local wildlife. The next day, I saw a Kingfisher skim the surface of the little river that connected the two lakes near the hotel, a little tremor of turquoise, always a gift.

On Sunday, Nightcrawler and I got into a canoe and paddled to the other lake. We didn't see a Bobr but were perplexed to find a White-Tailed Eagle in a tree, news that was later received with much suspicion, especially after we mistook a Marsh Harrier for a Black Kite, mainly due to my common delusion that all the birds of the world may converge in one place, the one where I happen to stand with the adequate pair of binoculars. We also went on a bike ride during which I managed to cover myself in as much mud as I could possibly soak up from the puddles. Nightcrawler, Dormouse, Pipsqueak and I,

Gazelle, stopped by the lake of doom where the carcasses of a thousand lost bikers could be found wrapped in the vanishing light of day. I thought it would be great if we were lakes and we could simply capture all these good memories like silt and sediment. We cycled back past open fields and once more, the blue sky was baffling. That night, we slept on the jetty under the stars.

There were names scratched in the wood. Luigi 91. I wondered about all these generations succeeding one another and leaving very small traces of themselves in distant destinations they might never return too. What did they take with them? Perhaps very small slivers, inklings of an immense country. What did I take from Poland but more continuity in my path through conservation and the bites and bruises that would soon heal? Conservation is accumulative: nothing can be accomplished without a sense of the collective. An effort alone is a shout and a sorrow, a name scratched into the beam of an unfinished house. As conservationists, we certainly contribute to our own histories by adding stories and spotted species, but mostly, we contribute to a common history, the river that runs through it. When we can see Poland as an extension of "our" own intimate England, we can begin to define what Europe can be. On the bus to Tallinn, I thought of this trip as a trail, a personal (re)collection of a growing Europe, a fountain and a fen, and the storks were there to confirm it.